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Solidarities on the move between the Horn of Africa and Italy: Somali migrants' disconnection and networking practices in the 2010s

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ABSTRACT

Through the reconstruction of the de-activations and re-activations of solidarity in different phases of migration trajectories, this article analyses transnational migration from the Somali territories during the 2010s. Somali migrants who arrived in Italy between 2011 and 2017 provide the ethnographic basis for a historically situated, socio-cultural theory of transnational migration from below. The article addresses the moral, social, economic and political milieu within which the migrants defined their intention to travel to Europe and assembled their trajectories. The analysis focuses on the interaction between the all-pervasive presence of networks of smugglers and traffickers in the Horn of Africa and their capacity to respond to the practical necessities and aspirations of young individuals. The second object of analysis is the transformative and productive dimension of the journey. The migrants re-adapted their theory of practice of solidarity and social networking to very specific circumstances imposed on them during the journey. Finally, the paper addresses the creative readaptations of ideas and practices of solidarity in Italy, under the combined pressure of inherited moral codes, the emotional and socio-economic effects of the previous steps in the migrants' trajectories, and everyday life in a securitised and precarious context.

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This article documents and analyses the solidarity and social networking practices of transnational migrants between the Somali territories and Italy between 2011 and 2017. Data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior show that the number of arrivals from the sea of Somali nationals increased sharply between 2007 and 2009, then a second wave of increase started after 2011 and continued until 2017.[1] The volume and directions of migrations outlined by these statistics invite us to analyse these trajectories as part of a specific phase, that started in the late 2000s and consolidated after 2011, of Somali migration history. This phase is epitomised by the term *tahriib*, as undocumented migration to Europe is called in the Somali territories.[2]

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I will analyse the discourses and practices of Somali migrants around social networking and solidarity as creative adaptations to historical conjunctures. Their migration trajectories encompass series of acts of disconnection and re-connection within transnational networks of solidarity; networks which the migrants have inherited because of their membership in a kinship group or in broader social categories, such as ascribed status groups, or which are forged extemporarily during different phases of the journey. The argument highlights the imbrication of these acts in the 2010s broader reconfiguration of the infrastructure of undocumented migration in the African continent and of mobility and asylum regimes in Europe. Migrants are adapting to local, regional and transnational factors, responding to practical needs before, during the journey, and after arriving in Italy, and participating actively in this 'emerging connectivity of spaces'.[3] In doing so, they also act as productive agents of socio-cultural transformation producing specific 'social worlds'.[4] During the 2010s, the migrants' selective disconnections from social networks[5] and the renegotiation of repertoires and practices of solidarity manifested in forms which I will address by discussing three groups of ethnographic cases. The latter correspond to crucial phases of the migration trajectories: the departure, the journey to and through Libya and the daily life in Italy.

The ethnographic material analysed was collected between March and November 2019 and, more irregularly, during phone interviews, informal conversations and interviews conducted until December 2020. The research took place in the Italian region of Lombardy, mostly in the cities of Milan and Bergamo. The interlocutors were consulted during semi-structured interviews or long sessions of informal conversation in public spaces such as bars, restaurants or public gardens. The area of Piazza Maciachini, in the north-western part of Milan's downtown, was a crucial geographic hotspot in the research; Somali migrants in Italy call it the *Somali Istaag* of Milan, the 'place where the Somalis stop', a socially defined geographic location of the kind that can be found in numerous regions of Somalis' diasporic displacement all over the world. *Somali Istaag* is where the Somalis go to meet other Somalis for a range of different purposes, such as accessing specific services provided by a Somali-owned shop, obtaining financial or information support, or spending leisure time chatting with somebody. Each *Somali Istaag* is a geographically emplaced and socially reproduced institution re-created through the daily uses which the Somalis who go there make of it. I interviewed around 30 individuals, most of them on several occasions, almost entirely young men aged between 19 and 35 (I managed to interview only three women). More than half of the interviewees were from southern Somalia, almost entirely from Mogadishu, while the rest were from Somaliland, the Somali region of Ethiopia and Yemen. The bulk of the sample, 25 individuals, consisted of migrants who arrived in Italy between 2014 and 2017.

Social networking and solidarity as practices

The approach adopted in this study follows the critical revision of conceptualisations of social networks in migration proposed by several scholars. Starting from Granovetter's[6] analysis of weak ties and that of social capital by Bourdieu,[7] Schapendonk[8] has invited migration scholars to study social networks in migration as practices; this approach allows us to avoid considering networks as somehow 'grid-like' and as a 'social given' shaping the migration trajectories of individuals, and to grasp their dynamic

configuration. Bakewell, Kubal and Pereira have underlined how the analytical emphasis on the role of migrants' social networks is not often accompanied by a clear definition of these social networks or how they operate concretely.[9] Caarls, Bilgili and Fransen have underlined the utility of the life course perspective in studying the dynamic combinations between migration trajectories and transnational networks.[10]

The study of migrations within or from the Somali territories has explored, especially after the early 2000s, the plurality of configurations and the profound implications of mobility for the Somali groups' ideas and practices of solidarity. A transversal element to much of this vast tradition of studies is the emphasis on Somali migrants' capacity to adapt inherited social institutions and cultural norms in order to produce transnational social networks and collective forms of mobility governance tying together different generations of migrants, to maintain infrastructures which mediate the relationship between migrants and origin, transit or settlement contexts, to expand and organise transnational networks of mutual support. The mass movements of refugees that started in the late 1970s after the Ogaden War has had deep consequences on the crisis trajectory of the Somali state, on the socio-economic re-composition of local groups and the formation of new political entities such as Somaliland, which Ciabarri epitomised as the 'productivity of refugee camps';[11] the socio-cultural experience of life in Kenyan refugee camps is linked to the consolidation of transnationally dispersed networks, and the imagination and organisation of future mobilities.[12] The war and the collapse of the Somali state accelerated a process of expansion of already existing trade and financial networks linking the Somali territories to other African countries, the Middle East, East Asia, Europe and North America; these networks required internal coordination and mutual trust which were based on the infrastructure and idioms of kinship solidarity.[13] This dynamic has evolved towards the constitution of economic hubs such as Eastleigh in Nairobi – in which religious affiliation is being added to kinship relations in the consolidation of business networks[14] – and of expatriate commercial communities in other African countries, such as Uganda, developing out of migration networks which are economically and politically connected with the local context and the Somali territories.[15]

During this history of transnational dislocations, remittances have mediated materially and symbolically the transformations of social structures such as gender roles, kinship networks and the relations between sending and receiving subjects.[16] Nauja Kleist has underlined the impact of the political mobilisation of expatriate Somalis who claimed for themselves the collective identification of a 'diaspora' and built on it their moral commitment and ideas about regional development.[17] Recent studies have analysed narrations of mobility and the construction of geographies of mobility which recreate interrelated transnational social spaces,[18] the symbolic and material dimensions of clans and gender roles in diasporic contexts such as Finland[19] and the United Kingdom,[20] the crucial role of specific destinations in shaping the religious, cultural and social tools activated by Somalis in the diaspora,[21] and collective mobilisations in relation to bureaucratic, security, cultural and socio-economic environments of European countries.[22] Moret's study outlined the post-migration mobilities and the transnational social fields created by the Somalis in Britain and Switzerland.[23]

In the rest of the article, I will expand the ethnographic base of these debates by contextualising the migrants' solidarity and social networking practices in circumstances revealing the fragility or the crisis of their solidarity milieu. Glick Schiller argued for

the conjunctural and multi-scalar study of migration, and the integrated understanding of processes marked by identifiable crises and sets of contradictions as well as interdependent, mutually constituted socio-spatial spheres.[24] The activations and deactivations of solidarity by Somali migrants are historically framed by multiscalar sets of local, regional and transnational factors. These factors will be unpacked in the next section as part of a 2010s infrastructure of migration. Migrants are adapting to them by adjusting inherited repertoires of mobility and by responding to practical needs before and during the journey, and after arriving in Italy. In doing so, they act as co-producers of the historical conjuncture.

The 2010s infrastructure of migration

The majority of the interviewees underlined the direct role played by micro-scale violence in the inception of their migration trajectory. Political and military instability in the Somali territories are local dynamics which social units confront locally, for example by activating themselves through political structures such as the system of clan elders.[25] Violence is experienced as a temporally circumscribed crisis of a delimited settlement, or specific household, i.e. the local socio-economic network of the individual to-be-migrant, which re-orients individual and family trajectories.

Regional factors have had a periodising impact in the history of transnational migration from the Horn of Africa. During the 2010s, transnational migration across the Central Mediterranean Route became a widespread phenomenon and the term *tahriib* was consolidated as its common designation in the Somali territories. As Ali[26] summarised effectively, post 2011 *tahriib* acquired specific features that marked its difference from previous historical layers of migration phenomena from the Somali territories. Departures from Libya started to decline after 2017 but never stopped. The interlocutors I met during this research underlined the fact that the collapse of the Libyan state coincided with an important change: the evolution of human trafficking and smuggling towards a more sophisticated network of coordinated segments. This manifested in the consolidation of the 'deferred payment scheme' which made it attractive and easy for individuals to leave the Somali territories without having to negotiate their mobility aspirations with other family members.[27] The individualisation of migration projects has been observed during the same period in other parts of Africa[28] and is strictly related to the organisation of sophisticated transnational networks of smugglers and traffickers, working in a coordinated way across different countries and capable of using recipient facilities located in Libya as the collection point for migrants heading to Europe.

The oral accounts collected during this research showed that during the 2010s these transnational networks reached a high level of efficiency. The smugglers and traffickers had to practically manage large groups of migrants crossing several national borders, mediate the relationship with different national police forces, for example when migrants were caught and arrested, and organise the final transport onwards to Europe. A crucial word in the lexicon of *tahriib* is *magaafe*, which Ali translated from Somali as 'the one who never misses';[29] Ali described this figure as the trafficker that holds the migrant hostage at a certain stage of the journey, usually in Sudan or Libya, and requests a ransom from his/her family in order to allow him/her to continue the journey. The

interlocutors I met during this research used the word *magaafe* as a general term for all the facilitators who managed the various stages of their mobility trajectories. Not all the migrants undertook the journey entirely controlled by a coordinated chain of traffickers but even those who did not had to deal with the all-pervasive presence of these networks within sending and transit contexts.

Among the transnational factors, the mobility regime set up by European countries and institutions is crucial. Andersson has provided one of the most comprehensive arguments about the direct connection between the last three decades' expansion of a European politico-legal apparatus to combat migration and the complexification of the phenomenon which it was meant to control, i.e. so-called irregular migration. The transformation of migration between North Africa and Europe into a permanent emergency and the construction of a securitised European border is feeding an 'illegality industry' which benefits a plethora of political and economic actors (military and security enterprises, NGOs, international organisations, media etc.) and which expands on its own failures. At the same time, deaths along the routes, increasing numbers of entries and the very consolidation of international smuggling and trafficking networks are another counter-product of this European approach.[30]

In the first group of ethnographic case studies, I will discuss how disconnection from kinship networks immediately before or during the trafficking experience manifested as the necessity of leaving the context of origin because of a sudden direct threat which prevented the mobilisation of the network of solidarity. As underlined by Al-Sharmani, transnationally dispersed Somali families share resources and obligations but present internal asymmetries in terms of access to resources and decision-making power; this generates tensions and conflicts which the individuals try to renegotiate.[31] Under such kinds of family frameworks, as shown by the last case discussed in the following section, disconnection could coincide also with the young aspiring migrant's resolution to force the kinship network to accept the migration project without any preliminary negotiation with family heads or decision-makers.[32]

Micro crises of solidarity networks and departures

The first two cases discussed in this section are linked to violence and to political contexts which played a direct role in the assemblage of the migrants' trajectories.

Cabdi is a young man in his late 20s from a village in the Afder Zone of the Somali Region of Ethiopia. He is the last son in his household: his elder brothers migrated abroad or worked in the state apparatus away from the village and his sisters lived with their husbands elsewhere in the region. Cabdi's father moved to Kenya to carry out his profession and social role of religious leader; only his mother was living in the village, where she ran a general shop. In 2013 Cabdi was enrolled in an Ethiopian university hundreds of kilometres away from his village when his mother telephoned him and told him that the Ogaden National Liberation Front's (ONLF) men had attacked the village; her shop and house had been robbed and burnt. The episode was one of the frequent ONLF raids aimed at imposing their control on the population, punishing people they considered to be collaborators of the Ethiopian government and capturing resources to continue their struggle. Cabdi had no choice but to return because he had to assist his mother and he depended on her for the costs of his university studies.

After two weeks, when he arrived in the village, his mother had already left for Kenya. Mobile phone connections were interrupted by the authorities in the region, but Cabdi was able to contact his father, who told him to wait for him in the village; transport was difficult because ONLF attacks along the rural roads were frequent. Cabdi found hospitality in the compound of a relative in the village and awaited his father's arrival for four months. One day, the ONLF entered the village looking for people employed by the Ethiopian government; they came to his host's house but the family head was not present and they found only his wife, their children and Cabdi himself. The armed men threatened Cabdi and tried to force him to reveal his relative's whereabouts; Cabdi did not know and they took him captive. They put him on a truck, tied him up and took him several kilometres outside the village into the bush. Cabdi was beaten, whipped with electric wires and kept tied up for long hours. He was forced to work for the small group of armed men, to fetch water and prepare meals. He was with two other young men being kept prisoner and spent five days in the bush with them; the guardians never slept and continuously chewed *khat* until, one night, the *khat*[33] supply was interrupted and they all fell asleep. Cabdi was not tied up and was convinced by one of the other prisoners who had their hands and feet bound to free them. The three of them managed to run away, encountered a car along the road and found a way to contact one of the other prisoners' brother, who came to pick them up. The three young men decided to go to Addis Ababa in order to recover from their terrible experience somewhere they considered safe; in fact, Cabdi did not know how or where to go to join any of his family members. Once there, the three boys found a place where they could spend the night; one of them had some money and bought some *khat*. Then a member of the group received a phone call from a friend who had just started his trip to Libya, who gave him the telephone number of a *magaafe*. Cabdi believed that going to the village was impossible, and he had no news about his father who, theoretically, was travelling to reach him there. He commented on what happened after the phone call to the *magaafe* as follows:

> I had never heard about *tahriib*, not even with my friends at the university. […] My mind was confused, partly because of the *khat*, and the person I was with called the number of the *magaafe* which he had just received from his friend on the phone. The *magaafe* asked us where we were and on the same evening he came to us with a car. He told us that our problems were over, he paid the bill at the place where we were sleeping and told us that he was going to take us to a much more beautiful place. I was scared; I thought, "This guy wants to bring us to Al-Shabaab," but I also thought: "Where else can I go? I don't have any money and nobody will help me here in Addis. I cannot go back to my village." The *magaafe* kept telling us that we didn't have to worry about a thing. The friends I was with were saying that going to Europe was easy, and things like: "Today is the first day of our beautiful life". Then, I followed them.[34]

In Cabdi's words, *tahriib* was anything but a decision: rather, everything happened in a matter of minutes during which he was in a confused state of mind, influenced by *khat* and by the words of other young men with whom he had just shared a traumatic experience.

Another case is that of Musse, a man in his early 30s born and raised in a small village in the Hiraan region of Somalia. He belongs to a minority genealogical group which, as he affirmed, can be considered part of the Gaboye. The latter are a cluster of hereditary groups of occupational specialists who suffer different forms of social, political and

economic marginalisation by the majority lineages in the Somali territories; they were also affected by stigma that has survived with different degrees of strength in the Somali region.[35] Musse grew up in a poor family in the village and lived by doing petty work for the other villagers; he also worked as a shoemaker and shoe-repairer. He recalled his life in the village as being negatively affected by the discrimination related to his genealogical identity. A tragic episode which happened to his family left him shocked: his sister was raped by a man who was identified, but Musse's family could not obtain the due compensation from the offender and his family; a system of codes and authorities regulates offence reparation through collective compensation (*mag* in Somali) in large parts of the Somali territories but, often, the members of Gaboye groups are excluded from these transactions.[36] This episode heightened Musse's awareness of the discrimination which stemmed from his genealogical identity. Shortly afterwards, members of the Al-Shabaab organisation entered the village:

> They arrived with a truck and broadcast messages with loudspeakers inviting men to join their ranks. Then, a man came to me and told me that in Al-Shabaab there was no discrimination. Everybody was equal and that was the pathway to heaven.[37]

The man obviously knew that Musse was a Gaboye. The young man was able to buy time and answered that he had to postpone joining the organisation. Not long after, he was visited again and knew that this time he had to accept the proposal: 'I could not say "no" this time. They would declare me "*kafir*" [infidel] and would probably kill me'. According to Musse, the members of Al-Shabaab were insistent with him because they knew that his Gaboye genealogical group was numerically and politically weak and could not hide or protect him. Musse pretended to accept the proposal but asked for a couple of days to arrange his departure. He informed his family about the situation and, as soon as he could, he ran away to Somaliland, where he spent some time in Berbera and Hargeysa. He had never thought of undertaking transnational migration to Europe before that happened. His travel to Europe started in the Ethiopian town of Wajaale, where he approached a *magaafe*.

The third case is not related to an episode of violence and is that of Khadra, a young woman in her mid-20s who grew up in Hargeysa, the capital of the Republic of Somaliland. She attended secondary school and then enrolled in one of the Ethiopian higher education institutes which, after the 2000s, opened branches in Hargeysa. When she undertook *tahriib*, in mid-2010s, she was also working as a primary school teacher. She had always wanted to leave Somaliland and had a very clear aspiration in mind: her aunt lives in Toronto and, since she was very young, she had repeatedly talked with her about the possibility of moving to Canada. Khadra described the motivation for her aspiration by using an argument which is extremely common amongst educated young men and women in Somaliland:

> People with foreign passports are always more appreciated, both socially and economically, in Somaliland. If you have always lived in Somaliland you can become a nurse or a teacher, while if you return to Somaliland from abroad, people expect that you will obtain more prestigious and better paid jobs, even if you do not deserve them.[38]

Khadra had never considered *tahriib* an option, although many of her friends had undertaken this kind of transnational migration after 2011: 'I always criticised people who did

tahriib: I considered them people with no future.' Nevertheless, a phone conversation with her aunt in Canada was the turning point, as she stated, in her life pathway; her aunt explicitly told her that there was no chance for Khadra to move to Canada and she had to cope with the reality of a future in Hargeysa. In Khadra's words, this conversation overwhelmed her emotionally as she saw years of cultivated dreams about a future in Toronto completely erased. She said: 'I was shocked and full of anger; I immediately took my savings and went to find transport towards Ethiopia.' In order to underline the fact that undertaking *tahriib* was an entirely impulsive act she explained that just few hours before the phone conversation with her aunt she had paid the fees for her university course.

The three cases are linked to different geographic and political environments within the Somali territories. Cabdi was from the politico-militarily unstable Somali region of Ethiopia, the Somali Regional State, which after the late 2000s saw an escalation of the confrontation between the ONLF on one side, and the Ethiopian army and militias of the regional government on the other.[39] Musse came from the volatile areas of South-Central Somalia intermittently involved in the operations of Al-Shabaab, and Khadra's roots were in the (at that time) pacified area of the self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland. Cabdi and Musse described the initial phase of *tahriib* as escaping from a direct threat to their lives, which prevented them from returning to their home settlements. Khadra did not escape from a direct threat but, as shown by other studies,[40] linked her trajectory to the influence of the ideological, emotional and economic dimensions of inhabiting a diasporic social milieu such as Hargeysa.

These contextual factors interlocked with two social dynamics: the first is related to the circumstances which jeopardised the kinship-based networks, a fundamental social institution protecting/controlling the aspirations and the material necessities of its young members. In Cabdi's case, the members of the household were regionally displaced as the result of a micro-level military crisis; in the case of Musse, the historically-inherited social, economic and political marginalisation of hereditary groups of Somali occupational specialists prevented his group from protecting him from Al-Shabaab's forced recruitment campaigns; in the case of Khadra, the perception of the interruption of the expected emotional and material support within the kinship-based transnationally dispersed network instantly generated an individual reaction of contestation. Migration in the life trajectories of these young individuals is framed as the tragic experiencing of the boundary of their kinship-based networks of solidarity, and the emotional and pragmatic need to cross that boundary. The beginning of trajectories is 'a nexus of potential social futures' or 'a duration of uncertainty and possibility' like the 'vital conjuncture' conceptualised by Johnson-Hanks;[41] whereas the author specified that the term conjuncture 'emphasizes the intersection of structured expectations with uncertain futures',[42] the cases presented seem closer to vital dis-junctures as they evoke vital turning-points determined by the temporary or perceived de-structuring of socio-cultural institutions.

The second dynamic is related to the consolidation and availability of a locally dispersed network of mobility facilitators, or *magaafe*, which between 2011 and 2017 was easily accessible, especially in the Ethiopian towns bordering Somaliland, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and other minor towns of the Horn and Yemen. The majority of Somali and Somalilander interlocutors I met in Italy stated that they were not well informed about the organisation of human smuggling and trafficking networks. The

magaafe who operated in the towns of the Horn of Africa actively worked to attract migrants and convince them of the feasibility of a quick journey leading straight to Europe. Several male informants interviewed in Italy provided accounts of the first days of their *tahriib*, which they spent in Addis Ababa or Nairobi, like Cabdi. The *magaafe* took them to nice compounds or comfortable hotels, offered them free food, *khat*, cigarettes and sometimes also prostitutes. Some interlocutors affirmed that they started to ask themselves why these people were so helpful, but they were so intoxicated with the experience that they preferred to think that they were simply recruiting labour and the migrants would repay the journey with their work.

In the next section I will outline how, after the initial phases of the *tahrib*, the migrants re-connected with the solidarity network in order to meet the costs of the journey. Moreover, *tahriib* could also be framed by migrants as a sort of liberation allowing them to explore new network creation practices in the suspended sphere of *tahriib* itself: practices which evade or subvert social repertoires of solidarity.

Solidarities in transit

In practice, the re-activation of the migrants' suspended kinship networks of solidarity happened in different ways. A very important dimension of kinship-based solidarity during the 2010s *tahriib* trajectories was the collection of the ransom demanded by the traffickers, usually once the migrants had been taken prisoner in Libya. This dimension is analysed by Simonsen and Tarabi in their contribution to this special issue.[43]

Some migrants also used family networks to escape from the chain of human trafficking. In several cases, contacting relatives was of vital importance to implement and readjust mobility strategies; the dispersed network of contacts situated between the Somali territories, Nairobi, Ethiopia, Uganda and other towns along the route, such as Juba and Khartoum, was actively exploited by the migrants to re-organise their travel. A minority of the interlocutors I met during the research stated that they had planned their journey to Europe for months, undertaking extensive research and seeking information through multiple channels. Personal contacts, research, through the social media such as Facebook, amongst people who had already done *tahriib* to Europe, and also mass media such as YouTube or TV news channels were carefully and critically scrutinised in order to accumulate enough information.[44] The conclusion that these interlocutors had come to before departure was that they could not do the entire journey inside the *magaafe* networks, letting themselves to be taken forward one step after another up to Libya. Arriving in Libya in this way was extremely dangerous and resulted in people being taken prisoner by traffickers asking for large sums of money. One of these interlocutors, Mohamud, underlined how difficult it was during the early 2010s for him to collect reliable information about *tahriib*; he approached several people who had reached Europe but he came to realise that they could not be trusted: none of them mentioned the dangers in the relationship with traffickers in Libya, or the high costs. Mohamud said:

> I don't know why they [the migrants who were in Europe] behaved like that. You know … Somalis are like that … divided amongst themselves … sometimes they may help you, sometimes they may hurt you. Then, those in Europe feel the pressure … know that they have to

> talk positively about migration. For example, they often challenged people who said that *tahriib* was dangerous on Facebook. They said they are cowards.[45]

Mohamud approached a *magaafe* in Ethiopia and started his journey, but he had already carefully prepared his escape from the *magaafe* with whom he was travelling. His father had a friend living in a Sudanese town who had been alerted prior to his departure and who was ready to assist him; when Mohamud ran away from the *magaafe*, this man gave him shelter, hid him from the traffickers who were trying to recapture him, and gave him money and a mobile phone. During the first steps of the journey, the *magaafe* always take the migrants' mobile phones away in order to maintain control over the migrants' external communications, to prevent escapes and discourage second thoughts. Mohamud was well informed about this and was able to exploit the *tahriib* network to undertake a good part of his journey towards Europe almost without any cost. However, he could do this because, besides the help of his father's friend, his elder brother had been living in the USA for several years and was ready to provide regular financial support to him during each step of the journey. As Mohamud had planned, he continued the journey across Egypt, avoided the dangers of Libya and, as he said, avoided the US$7,000 fee usually paid by Somali migrants once in Libya.[46]

Besides the re-activation of family networks, all the migrants interviewed underlined that they had to experiment creatively with other forms of solidarity, often horizontal solidarity amongst the migrants themselves. During an interview, Khadar showed me a video circulating on Facebook of a middle-aged woman from Berbera crying for help to save her daughter: in the video, the woman explained that her daughter was kept prisoner in Libya and could not collect the money demanded by the traffickers to release her. She also showed her daughter's little children whom she had left with her. Khadar, my interlocutor, commented that this kind of video appeal is extremely common and circulates widely in the Somali digital sphere, but this woman would not raise much in donations because she was a Gaboye. Khadar himself is a Gaboye who left the Somali territories in 2014 and our conversation about the video led him to give me further details about his permanence in Libya which he had omitted during our previous interview: during his entire journey with the *magaafe* and other Somali migrants across Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya, Khadar had always avoided introducing himself and indicating his true genealogical identity. He declared that he belonged to the majority genealogical group that was more numerous in the rural settlement where he is originally from. According to him, this precautionary tactic allowed him to be integrated into the group of migrants and participate in information exchanges about the organisation of the journey.

He also believed that, once in Libya, hiding his genealogical identity literally saved his life: when he arrived in the camp, he was asked to pay about US$7,000 like the others and he knew that there was no chance of his family collecting so much money, as they were very poor and had no relatives abroad. Khadar said:

> [After the trafficker asks for the money] the first thing the *magaafe* does is to cut off access to water, food and showers. They give you one glass of water and a fistful of pasta every two or three days. Then, if they see that your family does not send the money, they start with torture such as beating with sticks.[47]

Khadar knew that the money was not coming for him and thus was getting ready for the worst scenario: 'In the end they took me, tied my arms and feet, put a rock on my back and left me under the sun to die.'[48] The other Somali migrants who were in the same camp mobilised because they could not let him die in that horrible way; in order to cover part of Khadar's ransom, those who were contacting their families for the first time told them a sum of money bigger than that which was actually demanded for them by the *magaafe*; others asked the traffickers to contact their families again and request additional money. According to Khadar, some of the migrants told the truth and explained to their families that they were asking for money to save somebody who was about to die, while others invented excuses such as that the *magaafe* was asking for extra money for their food or clothes. Within a few days the sum demanded to save Khadar and allow him to continue the journey to Italy was collected and the traffickers agreed to release him. In this painful account, Khadar repeatedly underlined the fact that he received this solidarity only because the other migrants did not know he was a Gaboye. According to him, the torture inflicted on those who did not pay was unbearable for the other migrants; the traffickers knew it and, possibly, used that torture to put pressure on and mobilise support from other migrants travelling together with those who could not pay.

The trafficking system in Libya partly relied on an economy of solidarity based on the traumatic experience of personal physical suffering and on the equally traumatic experience of physical proximity to other people's agony. Khadar's story shows that this economy of solidarity is connected to kinship and social infrastructures of solidarity surrounding the individual migrants, not only through the family-to-migrant transfer of financial resources. Khadar believed that access to the horizontal solidarity of other migrants is shaped by strong social norms which he was able to circumvent only because, since the beginning of his journey, he had been prudent and had hidden his Gaboye genealogical identity: 'of course some people would have helped me anyway, but many would have not if they knew I am a Gaboye … Maybe only 30% of those who actually helped me would have helped me anyway.'[49]

Khadar was able to exploit the economy of solidarity of *tahriib* only because he was in a socially suspended sphere where he could lie about his genealogical identity and gain access to a form of solidarity which he had never experienced in his community of origin in the Somali territories. Indeed, it was the past experiences of social and economic discrimination related to his membership of a minority and stigmatised genealogical group that had taught him how to exploit horizontal solidarity creatively once in the socio-geographic bubble of *tahriib* where he could exhibit a different socio-genealogical identity. Khadar's expectations about the other migrants' reluctance to help a Gaboye person were filtered through his past experiences of discrimination in the Somali territories. However, his perspective shows how historically inherited patterns of the hierarchised access to the benefits of solidarity (the complex legacies of the Gaboye's marginalisation) are subverted by individual creativity in the activation of horizontal solidarity opportunities within the specific framework of *tahriib*. In the next section I will outline individual creativity in relation to selective or imposed disconnection as a crucial experience which qualifies the development of the individuals' trajectory in Italy.

Selective disconnections from solidarity networks in Italy

The migrants' social networking practices in Europe are affected by legal and socio-economic frameworks: the fragility and inefficiency of the assistance and bureaucratic apparatus in Italy, the legal norms constraining secondary movements between European Union countries and the adaptation of 'cosmologies of destinations'[50] are called into question by the narrations of personal experiences of the fragmentation of solidarity networks in Italy. Besides the experience of economic precarity shared by almost all the Somali migrants in Italy, the impossibility of solidarity is the core object also in the narrations of mental suffering. The fragility of the migrants' social networks cannot sustain the effort of including the most vulnerable groups of individuals in the network: for instance, people who suffered mental health problems after the traumatic experience of *tahriib*. My interlocutors underlined the fact that they are generally prudent in developing intimate relationships of friendship or collaboration with other Somalis once in Italy. For those residing in the metropolitan area of Milan, interactions are extemporaneous because they are generally framed under fortuitous meetings in the area of Piazza Maciachini. Only some Somalis cultivate more intimate relationships, and groups of friends do not include more than three or four individuals. Relationships of this kind imply a deeper level of mutual trust, and resource and information sharing. Sharing the rent of an apartment usually marks the existence of this form of solid linkage because it requires reliability in meeting the expenses, cleaning the house and providing hospitality to other Somalis.

Another element of fortuitous interactions is material help. All Somalis who can afford it hand over small amounts of money (normally between 2 and 10 Euros) to other Somalis or directly buy food products for them. The Somalis who have a stable income also provide material help on a regular basis to a restricted group of Somali migrants whom they know personally. These small payments are requested and delivered mostly during informal meetings in places such as Maciachini. One of the Somalis I met told me that every visit to Maciachini costs him around 25 Euros because of these donations. The latter represent a form of spontaneous and horizontal solidarity in which formalised infrastructures of solidarity, such as the genealogical group, play no role.

All my interlocutors underlined the fact that they find it extremely difficult to trust other Somali migrants. They are afraid that they cannot control the requests for money. Other elements are the fear and discomfort which are caused by being associated with bad behaviours manifested by other Somali migrants. In 2019, the area of Maciachini hosted small groups of Somali migrants who spent several hours drinking alcohol on the street. This form of alcohol abuse was highly visible and linked by the interviewees to individuals whose migration trajectories in Europe had failed. Many of them had spent several years moving cyclically across different European countries and returning to Italy (because of the Dublin Regulation[51] or in order to renew their personal documents which they had originally received from Italian authorities).

Mutual distrust among Somali migrants is also related to the memory of the situation in Milan until the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018. Milan was a hub for the constant flow of Somali migrants who were hosted by local organisations and institutions, or arrived from other regions of Italy and were organising the continuation of their

journey towards other European countries (Scandinavia, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland etc.). These young Somali migrants used *Somali Istaag*, i.e. Maciachini, as a place to find money transfer services (to receive money from relatives and continue the journey), and to collect information about the journey, possible destinations and assistance to reach them. The newly arrived migrants were known as *baciid*, i.e. 'gazelles', indicating that they were naïve and could be deceived easily. Indeed, according to my interlocutors, some of the Somalis who had arrived in Italy before 2011 exploited these people by organising frauds or actively helping them to cross the border. Some reported that the migrants who did not receive documents in Italy had their money stolen by the Somalis whom they had asked for help to access money transfer services. Others reported that some Somalis cheated the newcomers who wanted to cross the border: they bought cheap clothes so that they did not look like recently arrived migrants and told them that they were expensive; then they bought local train tickets and told them they were tickets to Germany. The swindlers invested only a few dozen Euros and collected several hundred Euros from the *baciid* as payment for helping them to continue the journey to northern Europe. Then they accompanied the migrants to the station, where they were systematically stopped by the frontier police and sent back to Milan. The regular flow of newcomers allowed the scheme to be replicated, but after 2018 this sort of activity completely stopped. The memory of these activities produced an attitude of mutual distrust and extreme prudence in establishing intimate relationships with other Somalis. Another element of prudence is related to the migrants' backgrounds. The widespread diffusion of violence and the direct experience of the micro-level proliferation of conflicts, especially in southern Somalia and Mogadishu, is another important factor.

Social media were not used as tools to assemble forms of internal organisation of the Somali migrants in Italy. Whereas instruments such as Facebook groups which include the Somalis living in one location are widely diffused among the Somali communities in other European countries, Somalis in Italy did not use them and did not consider this a great deprivation. Social media platforms such as Facebook were mostly indicated as useful for personal communication with relatives and close friends in the Somali territories. The interviewees declared that they also communicated with other Somalis they had met during the journey or after their arrival in Italy. Numerous interlocutors revealed the vital importance of Facebook and other social media for romantic relationships, but this theme is too vast to be analysed in this article.

Two interviewees were radically detached from this approach and declared that they had almost entirely broken off any communication with friends in the Somali territories. Although the Somalis interviewed usually considered isolation as being related to 'failed' migration trajectories, these two interlocutors could not be classified as such: they both had jobs and were able to send regular support to relatives back in the home community. One of them explained his self-imposed isolation by saying that his life had taken a pathway which was too different from that of his friends in Somalia; the other expressed a similar opinion but in a much more bitter way: 'The *tahriib* erases your mind'.[52] The sufferings during the journey were a turning point which made meaningless the reproduction of any sort of continuity between the present and the past life, and his parents were his only link with his past.

Although the majority of the Somali migrants whom I met in Italy were not planning to move to another European country, the labelling of Italy as a transit place was widespread. The decision to stay in Italy was linked to an awareness of the Dublin Regulation and the wish to avoid wasting time moving between different European countries and being brought back to Italy. The imaginaries and practices which shape the secondary movements of the Somalis are an important point for understanding practices of social networking, mutual help and solidarity among Somali migrants in different European contexts. According to my interlocutors in Italy, the Somalis who left Italy contributed to undermining the consolidation of these networks by representing their presence and acting in Italy as in an unstable and temporary passage. The interlocutors also indicated the scarcity of resources and the precarious socio-economic situation of the majority of them as the main factors behind the lack of networking efforts.

An insightful perspective on the fragmentation of networks of solidarities amongst migrants in Italy is also offered by the accounts about *buufis*. The interlocutors used this term to identify several conditions of mental suffering with different degrees of severity. These scaled degrees are acknowledged by the Somalis themselves through the definition of big or small *buufis*. Scholars analysed *buufis* in relation to migration as obsession with leaving the Somali territories[53] and, more recently, to the cultural expression that allows migrants to make sense of and de-stigmatise conditions of distress in diasporic contexts;[54] according to the interlocutors in Italy, if *buufis* appears after the *tahriib*, it is caused by the difficult material, relational and emotional conditions of life in Europe. These conditions are related to the perception of the migration trajectory having failed and the disillusion about pre-migration aspirations which materialises through it being impossible to send money home. According to a young Somali man who has been living in Italy since 2014, and to whom I commented on the behaviour of some individuals whom he identified as affected by *buufis* in *Somali Istaag*, *buufis* has evident features: it is a permanent state of anxiety, suspicion and fear. People with *buufis* overreact to normal, negligible occurrences in everyday life by being seized by terror and interpreting them as clear evidence of extremely complicated machinations against them. According to the interlocutor, a synonym of *buufis* in Somali is *bac*, which means plastic bag; like a plastic bag placed over your head which forces you to hear a continuous sort of crackling noise, under *buufis* a sense of terror never leaves you and mediates every small aspect of everyday life.[55] The fact that *buufis* overlaps with paranoia is corroborated by its metaphorical uses to denominate the behaviour of people who adopt extreme forms of suspicion in daily interactions.

The discussions about *buufis* during spontaneous conversations at *Somali Istaag* in Milan and the collection of the individual trajectory of one Somali migrant with whom I had several informal conversations show that it is often related to an obsession about being controlled by external entities. The latter are described as emanations of the security and mobility regimes enforced within European Union. A common element is the idea of being constantly spied on and controlled by state authorities, or by obscure and secret multinational criminal organisations. Often this happens, they say, through body implants which allow these entities to exert a suffocating control over the migrant or to control him/her remotely. Thus he/she can be used by these entities to spy on other Somalis or be forced to carry out criminal activities which the individual

would refuse to perform of their own free will, such as transporting drugs. The people in this state describe these body implants as GPS microchips or devices which transmit whatever he/she sees or hears. These devices are implanted during medical treatment.

According to an individual who shared his experience of being constantly spied on, the action of these external entities was directly linked to the impossibility of his/her being part of networks of solidarity with other Somali migrants in Italy. The body implants or other devices placed on personal items such as mobile phones deprived him of the possibility of asking for help or simply interacting with other people, especially with other Somalis. He decided to remove himself from the networks to protect other people, or for fear of being spied on by other migrants, and used the implants to explain why he could not communicate with other Somalis.

The subjects produce these narrations of isolation by re-elaborating the most important elements, from their point of view, of their experience of legal mobility regimes within Europe: the constant efforts of national authorities to control and constrain the intra-European mobility of migrants; the social and economic isolation vis-à-vis the paradoxical efficiency – whenever the individual has a sudden health problem – of emergency medical assistance, which is explained by the doctors' secret agenda of collaborating with the security apparatus and installing body implants; the omnipresent vicinity of the security apparatus vis-à-vis the socio-economic marginality experienced in the tragic effort to find accommodation in Milan or a decent source of income.

Conclusion

The accounts collected paint a picture of a dynamic process of bi-directional circulation inside, beside or outside networks of solidarity, performed by migrants while responding to moral and economic duties towards these networks or while subverting them. In the biographies of individuals from the Somali territories and the stories of their networks of solidarity, migration was represented as a transformative process under the historically specific circumstances which, after 2011, featured *tahriib*. This process also coincided with the re-negotiation and distribution of roles and resources within networks of solidarity.

The study of migration trajectories has discussed critically dichotomies such as that of voluntary/forced and the notion of voluntariness of migration,[56] and should go beyond a focus on individual decision-making processes. In fact, the turning point at the beginning of the mobility trajectories quoted above is not a supposed moment when risk evaluation or the decision to undertake *tahriib* was taken. The initial phase of *tahriib* was, for the majority of the interlocutors, an indecipherable and prolonged process marked by fear, anger or the practical necessity of finding somewhere safe from direct threats to their life, and by the manipulations of the *magaafe* who offered a few days of relaxation and promised smooth travel to Europe. The common element and turning point in these trajectories, thus, is the experience of vulnerability or the limits of the network of solidarity. This experience inaugurated a temporary suspension of the individual's participation in that network and their absorption into the external network of migration facilitators. Somali kinship networks of solidarity go through cycles of vulnerability and dispersion of their members which are influenced by different external and internal factors; this ongoing micro-level process was captured by the *tahriib* infrastructure and sustained

the consolidation of the networks of *magaafe* which, as a sort of gravitational centre attracting people dispersed during cyclical crises, exploited both the latter and the moral duties internal to kinship networks. The human smuggling and trafficking networks have drained human beings and financial resources from the transnational networks of solidarity within which the Somali migrants had social membership. They did so by exploiting the temporary or systemic inability of these networks to protect and control young individuals.

The analysis of in-transit uses of networks of solidarity shows that *tahriib* is a temporary and suspended field which the facilitators, smugglers and traffickers struggle to keep as closed-off as possible from the outside world, especially from the networks of solidarity of individual migrants. After the initial phase when the migrants had to be convinced about the facility of the journey, the *magaafe* needed to control their external contacts more stringently. This process consisted in the introduction of coercion such as threats and physical violence which, as many interlocutors underlined, started in Sudan and culminated in the camps in Libya. The so-called deferred payment system maximised the attraction capacity of the *magaafe* networks in the areas of departure but pushed the people working in the network itself to strictly control the migrants while they were moved along the journey or 'sold' (a term used by numerous interlocutors) on to other *magaafe*, in order to secure access to a share of the money that was yet to be paid. Some of the migrants who had the opportunity of collecting detailed information about the organisation of *tahriib* in the 2010s and could mobilise a transnational network of support, like Mohamud, actively worked to use their solidarity networks against those of the *magaafe*. Those who could not, like Khadar, invented creative ways to exploit the social suspension and the internal economy of solidarity manufactured by the *magaafe* inside the *tahriib* infrastructure. During *tahriib*, the suspension from social norms of the context of origin could allow individuals like him, with a lot of good luck, to gain access to new opportunities through, for example, the temporary 'abolition' of his membership of discriminated-against genealogical groups.

Social networks are dynamic settings which change according to the actual performance and the timing of the connections. Schapendonk acknowledged Bourdieu's legacy in showing that social capital exchanges exist only in the practical state.[57] The analysis of solidarity disconnections amongst migrants in Italy shows that the shared representations of migration trajectories and destinations shape the networking practices of the Somalis. Author Nureddin Farah had already identified the dominant representation of Italy as a transit place among Somalis who arrived in the country between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.[58] Social networking practices cannot be applied in Italy in the same way as the Somalis apply them in other European or African countries. For example, the *dhaqaan* – the cultural precept – of giving, of providing help, is implemented by migrants in Italy but in a deliberately limited way. Social imageries, individual aspirations, and contextual factors converge to re-adapt the performance of the networking practices of Somali migrants in Italy because imageries, aspiration and context converge to define Italy as a transit place – even for those who have accepted or are coping with the fact that the European legal regime of mobility forces them to stay in Italy. Finally, the condition of mental suffering coincides with a fruitful point of observation for assessing how the legal regime of migration inside the European Union directly impacts on ideas and practices of solidarity.

If social networks in migration are not grid-like structures, a historically situated theorisation of migration from below is a productive analytical access point to the ongoing process of ideological and practical transformation of the internal organisation of fundamental social institutions such as kinship groups, and of social bonds or cultural norms such as solidarity itself.

Notes

1. The data on arrivals into Italy from the sea prior to 2017 are not available on the Italian authorities' official websites. However, Wikipedia still reports the original data showing that, in 2008, 2,556 Somalis landed in Sicily; in 2014, 5,756 Somalis arrived in Italy while in 2015 they were 12,176. See https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigrazione_in_Italia#cite_ref-sbarchi-asilo_2015_77-0 (accessed 16 January 2024)
2. Ciabarri, "Assemblages of mobility and violence".
3. Ciabarri and Simonsen, "Fragments of solidarity".
4. Ibid.
5. Schapendonk, "What if Networks Move", 818. Schapendonk refers to disconnections and network failures as part of networking practices.
6. Granovetter, "The Strength Weak Ties".
7. Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital".
8. Schapendonk, "What if Networks Move", 810–1.
9. Bakewell, Kubal and Pereira, "Introduction", 6.
10. Caarls, Bilgili and Fransen, "Evolution of Migration Trajectories", 3311.
11. Ciabarri, "Productivity of Refugee Camps".
12. Horst, *Transnational Nomads.*
13. Little, *Somalia: Economy Without State*, 164–5.
14. Carrier and Lochery, "Missing States? Somali Trade", 344–5.
15. Iazzolino and Hersi, "Shelter from the Storm".
16. Lindley, *Early Morning Phone Call.*
17. Kleist, "Mobilising the Diaspora".
18. Shaffer, Ferrato and Jinnah, "Routes, Locations Social Imaginaries", 162.
19. Bjork, *Somalis Abroad*.
20. Liberatore, *Somali, Muslim, British.*
21. Abdi, *Elusive Jannah.*
22. Hoehne and Sharrer, "Balancing Inclusion and Exclusion"; Zoppi, *Horizons of Security*.
23. Moret, *European Somalis' postmigration Movements.*
24. Glick Schiller, "Theorising Transnational Migration", 205–6.
25. Shire, "Dialoguing Negotiating with Al-Shabaab", 10–4.
26. Ali, *Going on Tahriib*, 7–9.
27. Ibid, 23–4.
28. Bellagamba, Ceesay and Vitturini, *Migchoice Country Report: The Gambia*, 22.
29. Ali, *Going on Tahriib*, 26–8. See also Simonsen & Tarabi, "Images of torture", in this special issue.
30. Andersson, *Illegality Inc.;* Andersson, "Europe's Failed Fight Against".
31. Al-Sharmani, "Transnational Somali Families", 96.
32. Bakewell and Sturridge, "Extreme Risk Journey Feasible", 191–2.
33. A plant whose leaves are chewed in order to produce a psycho-physical stimulation. It is widely used in the Horn and Yemen.
34. Interviews, 25–26 April 2019, Lombardy.
35. Vitturini, *The Gaboye of Somaliland*.
36. Hill, *No Redress: Somali Minorities*, 21–2. See Hill for an account of the Gaboye's unequal access to justice in the Somali territories. Schlee shows that justice negotiations managed

by conflicting parties, which are predominant in the Somali territories tend to favour the stronger (chiefly from a numerical point of view) party. See Schlee, *Customary Law*, 268.
37. Interview, 16 March 2019, Lombardy.
38. Interview, 26 June 2019, Lombardy.
39. Hagmann, "Punishing the Periphery", 730–2.
40. Ali, "The Quest to Become".
41. Johnson-Hanks, "Limits of Life Stages", 871.
42. Ibid, 872.
43. Simonsen and Tarabi, "Images of torture".
44. Bakewell and Jolivet, "Broadcasting Migration Outcomes", 187–8. These sources of information fall under the three types of 'broadcast feedback' identified by Bakewell and Jolivet. They argue that broadcast feedback can contribute to the consolidation of a culture of migration. The interlocutors I met in this study underlined that these types of information collection were not much related to the formulation of mobility aspirations, but rather to pragmatic needs, i.e. to collect details about the functioning of human smuggling and trafficking networks between the Horn and Libya.
45. Interview, 30 March 2019, Lombardy.
46. Interview, 30 March 2019, Lombardy.
47. Interview, 26 March 2019, Milan.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Belloni, "Cosmologies and Migration", 558–561.
51. The Dublin Regulation in an EU framework which governs which member state is responsible for handling an individual's asylum application. See: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/country-responsible-asylum-application-dublin-regulation_en
52. Interview, 1 June 2019, Milan.
53. Horst, "Buufis Somalis in Dadaab".
54. Jinnah, "Cultural Causations Expressions of Distress", 113–4.
55. Interview, 16 October 2019, Milan.
56. Erdal and Oeppen, "Forced to Leave?", 993–4.
57. Schapendonk, "What if Networks Move," 811.
58. Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, 64–5.

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