Liminal Communitas:

A case study of Somali refugee women in Kenya

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates the applicability of the concept of liminality in migration and refugee research, particularly on the empirical example of a community of Somali refugee women in an urban outskirt in Kenya. Originally an anthropological concept, "liminality" refers to an in-between period of uncertainty, a transitional phase in which people are equal and a sense of community trumps differences. The concept lends itself to processes of unfolding social drama, and in this case it is the urban refugee community that is the center stage. The argument is that, in combination with a gendered transnational approach to migration, liminality is useful to deepen the understanding of the refugee community, and on a broader level, human experience. The conclusion is that using the analytical concept of "liminality" in refugee research does not rule out space for human agency, as is demonstrated in the example of the Somali refugee women.

Keywords: Liminality, refugees, migration theory, development, transnationalism

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Introduction

Persisting instability in countries like Somalia continues to generate more refugees and does little to encourage the voluntary return of those who have already fled from violence and insecurity. Migration and refugee research has in recent decades become of great interest to academics from a variety of disciplines. Highly relevant to studies of international development, migration and refugee research is about the movement of people, resources and ideas, and the social, juridical, and economic consequences of these movements. In this thesis, emphasis is also placed on the human experience of "refugeness", and the conceptual tools that researchers have in order to attempt an understanding of the social phenomena.

Refugees can be said to inhabit a liminal space, in between structures, which often leads to refugees being depicted as extremely vulnerable, poor victims with few options in life. Particularly refugee women have been subject to these kinds of images and stereotypes. This thesis will attempt to move away from the pitfalls of stereotyping, while at the same time considering both the vulnerabilities and the opportunities for agency among refugee women who are living in a liminal community.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the usefulness of the concept of liminality in migration and refugee research. From my own fieldwork among Somali refugee women in Kenya, I intend to illustrate not just how these women are living in a state of liminality, but also in what ways a level of agency can be noted within this liminal period, making it misleading to think of these women as mere victims of their circumstances. The main research questions are as follows:

- How can the liminality concept be useful when theorizing on migration and refugee life?
- How is this evident in the empirical case of the Somali refugee women?

Delimitations

Migration is a subject that has captured the interest of an increasing number of social science disciplines and other academic fields. The obvious problem is that different scientists approach the subject from different and often competing theoretical perspectives, rather than from a shared paradigm. A main contrast is between scientists who approach migration issues from a macro-level, looking at populations and large structural conditions, and those (mainly anthropologists, sociologists, and some economists) who tend to take a micro perspective and study the individual or the community. For this limited format, taking a macro perspective would be a case of hubris, and instead I choose to look at the community-level as the unit of analysis, while also taking into account the complicated political relations between Somalia and Kenya.

The empirical example in this thesis is not intended to provide a comprehensive view on the situation for Somali refugees in Kenya. Rather, the strength can be seen to lie in its somewhat narrower focus on refugee life outside of the refugee camps (where a lot of the research is usually done), and into the urban community and the relations and survival strategies that develop here. It is however important to keep in mind that a community is not a bounded, isolated unit. Perhaps this is even less so in the case of the Somali refugees, whose often widespread, transnational networks of nomadic family and relatives have been rather extensively documented (see for example Horst 2006).

Research Methodology

This section will provide insight into how I conducted my fieldwork among the Somali refugee women[1] in Kenya, and a discussion of the research methods used, in particular the case study approach, as well as some notes on the challenges I faced in the field.

Finding, or stumbling into, the "field"

Before I met the Somali refugees among whom I would conduct my research, I had spent a few weeks with a local Kenyan NGO called Dandelion Africa. This is a relatively new organization situated in the Rift Valley area not far from Nakuru. Their main focus is on health and entrepreneurship, working with schools and women groups in rural areas as well as in Nakuru town. A staff member of the organization had been approached by an older Somali woman named Mariam, who would later become my key informant. She explained her circumstances to the staff member, said she would put together a group of women and welcomed the organization to come and work with them. This is how I was introduced to the small community of Somali refugee women and their children, living in a concrete compound in the outskirts of Nakuru. I started out by visiting them a few times a week with a staff member, trying to start up a micro loan and savings project as well as teaching English to the women upon their request. Finally I asked them if they would want to participate in my research, and share their stories and experiences with me as I lived with them for a period of time, which they all agreed to.

Mariam, at age 52, was the oldest woman in the community and it soon became apparent that everybody more or less considered her as an extra mother. She knew the area well and spoke enough Kiswahili to facilitate any business that needed to be done, such as helping new-coming Somali families rent rooms in the community or buy groceries and coal for the communal kitchen. She would influence my research in that she became my key informant and took me around to meet different women in the community whom I would later

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[1] As Somali refugees are supposed to remain in the designated refugee camps in Kenya and not venture out into other parts of the country, I will only use the women's first names and not be too specific on their location. Although, according to recent information that I have received, due to growing insecurity for Somalis in Kenya, many of my informants from the community have chosen to leave Nakuru and return to the refugee camps in Dadaab and Kakuma.

interview. The small community was made up of about 30 families, mostly women and children (although I was informed that there had originally been about 100 families living there, but many had left due to police harassment and insecurity), and it is this community and its people that I came to consider my research field. The idea of a "field" in terms of what is included and excluded is of course a construction of the researcher who creates the boundaries as the study proceeds. Within these boundaries, one might also note, is the interactional patterns of the people who are studied. As these patterns extend beyond the community, this means that the regional, national, and international are not "out there", but interwoven with the local in webs of communication, interaction, and socialization. (Sjöberg 2011:21) This is very much the case with the Somali women in my study; although the concrete compound with its tiny one-room houses and small courtyards looked very isolated, it is worth knowing that many Somalis have a very large transnational network of family members with whom they have various methods of communicating.

Gaining access in this case turned out to be the easy part. Language proved to be the more difficult issue, as most of the women only spoke Somali, a language I was unfamiliar with up until then. Mariam was the only one who spoke a little Kiswahili, and most of the times we were able to understand each other using a mix of Kiswahili, some Somali words that I had picked up, and some English words that Mariam knew. For the interviews, however, the need for an interpreter was obvious and will be problematized more in the interview section.

Bridge-building within case study research

Case study is a method from which writings on its applicability and status, as well as validity, draw their inspiration from different philosophical traditions. Much of the critique against case study research, for example on the basis of subjectivity and reliability, is by no means unique to this method, but has been aimed at social research methods in general. In line with a more positivistic tradition, case study method has been theory driven and focused on gathering data to test the accuracy of that theory. In this way, the case study becomes an experiment but without the control. (May 2011:219-222) From a different philosophical view, case study is a way to understand the complexity of a particular setting rather than attempting at explanation. This does not rule out the possibility for

generalization, but it is not the main goal of the research. From this interpretivist perspective, intersubjectivity is inevitable and doesn't turn into bias as long as the researcher engages in self-reflection and remains sensitive to his/her own participation in the social context they study. The intimate knowledge through which meanings can be understood is generated by precisely this "inside" point of view, or what is referred to as an "emic" perspective within ethnography. The case study method has also been used by many as a way to bridge dichotomies between generalizing and particularizing, deductive and inductive, and quantitative and qualitative techniques (May 2011:224-226). Williams is one of them and has discussed the role of generalisation in interpretative research. He maintains that "moderatum generalisations" are possible and that interpretative researchers do generalise even when they claim it's impossible. Total generalisations within interpretative research are, in William's words, "objectively unjustified". (Williams 2000:221) Moderatum generalisations are about saying something about a process, a process that is not necessarily unique but goes beyond the particular, single setting that is the focus of the study. Or in Geertz's words: "to say something of something" (Geertz 1979:218).

A case study from an interpretative perspective can expose the meaningful experiences of the people studied, and "if these experiences can become moderatum generalisations then they can form the basis of theories about process or structure" (ibid.:222). For the purpose of this thesis, I hold that the case study in its in-depth description of a social reality is valuable in its own right, but also that theory-building and a certain (moderate) degree of generalisation remains possible, if not inevitable.

Using semi-structured interviews

I decided to do semi-structured interviews with as many of the Somali women as my time would allow. In the end, I managed to complete interviews with eleven of the Somali women in the community. It is worth noting that the selection of these women was heavily influenced by my key informant, Mariam, who was the one taking me around to the women's houses. A few of the women, though, I had met during my visits with Dandelion Africa and learnt their names, so I was able to ask Mariam if she would take me to see those women specifically, and ask if they would partake in my research.

When doing semi-structured interviews there's the benefit of having specified questions (see Appendix 1), but also the opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate if they wish, and the researcher is provided with a more in-depth perspective compared to using surveys. In some cases, the information provided by the women also led to new questions which I was able to discuss with them due to the casually structured format of the interview. Some of the questions I had also served the purpose of helping Dandelion Africa assist the women, and was mainly about their status as refugees and the immigration status of their husbands and children.

Before I started doing the interviews with the Somali women, it was obvious that I would have to use a translator, preferably someone who spoke English as my Kiswahili was nowhere near fluent. May (2011:140) has brought attention to the importance of considering the characteristics of the interviewer (which in this case is synonymous with 'researcher'), as this will affect the type of information elicited. I would argue that the same goes for the translator; careful considerations need to be made as to the age, sex, race, religion and status. That being said, as this thesis will show it can be beneficial to the research not to let preconceptions about who would be the most appropriate translator dictate the choosing of such; but instead remain reflexive and observant of the social relations between translator and interviewee.

I gave a lot of thought into how I would find a translator on short notice who could speak both Somali and English. I had become good friends with a young Somali couple in the community, Samira and Muhammed. Samira was a refugee who had been in Kenya for around five years, while Muhammed had been born there and was a legal citizen. He told me that he would be on a break from school during my visit, and would gladly help me with my research as my translator. This definitely had its benefits; he spoke Somali and good English, knew the community well, and according to himself he didn't have much else to do at the time. From the beginning though, I was a bit uneasy about having a male translator for my interviews with the women. I thought about how this could impact the situation and the data that I would get. My questions mainly centered on the current challenges that the women were facing, and their thoughts on the present situation as well as the future. I observed the women carefully whenever Muhammed was present. Worth knowing is that most of the time, he would be the only male there, as many of the women's

husbands, I was told, worked as truck drivers and were gone for long periods of time. Not all the women were married, and the only adult male except for Muhammed that I ever saw in the community was Mariam's husband who would show up occasionally to catch up on his sleep before going back to work. In other words, women heavily dominated everyday life in this community, not to mention most of them were older than Muhammed who was only 21 years old. After observing various social situations, including one occasion where I had gathered with the women at another woman's house for a ceremony where they took their veils off even though Muhammed was also present, I started to feel a lot calmer about my decision. From what I could observe during the actual interviews, the women didn't seem to mind having Muhammed there, and many of them shared detailed and intimate stories of their backgrounds.

Liminality, Migration, and Refugee Research

Introduction

A lot has happened within the last decades in regards to studying migration issues and refugees, especially with "refugee studies" becoming a new subfield in its own right, although it continues to attract interest from many disciplines. From a development perspective, migration issues were highlighted particularly in the 2009 Human Development Report entitled "Overcoming barriers: Human mobility and development", advocating that lowering the barriers to movement can achieve large gains to human development. The report shows that most people migrate in search of higher income and better access to education and health services, but the gains from mobility are unequally distributed. Conflicts and wars forcing large scales of civilians to flee for their safety is the main contributing factor to the increased number of the world's refugees, estimated by the UNHCR in 2012 to be as high as 35.8 million. This section reviews trends and themes in theorizing about migration and refugee issues – particularly with respect to transnationalism as this is highly relevant in the empirical example – before moving on to discussing the integration of the liminality concept.

Theorizing on migration and refugees

Studying migration and refugee issues has not been the privilege of a single discipline, but has rather attracted attention from a myriad of disciplines, each with their own theoretical viewpoint. The concept of "migration" is itself worthy of some attention, as it too has been the subject of differing opinions and debate. Skeldon (1997:2) has elaborated on the use of the term "migration" and argues that:

> "Migration itself encompasses more than a simple unilinear movement between rural and urban sectors and needs to be conceptualized as a complex system of short-term, long-term, short-distance, and long-distance movements that can better be subsumed under the term 'mobility'."

For this thesis, the emphasis lies on migration as not so much a complex system, but rather a non-linear process incorporating different phases, whereby liminality is one of them. However, migration as a concept is nevertheless used, but it's still important to realize the different forms of human mobility that are included in this process. More on that note, there are also different actors involved in the process. When examining literature on migration, there seems to be a number of distinctions made between different types of migrants, and migrants and refugees. Chiswick (2000:61) distinguishes between "economic migrants" – those who move either within a country or internationally from one place of work and residence to another because of economic opportunities, and refugees and others who move because of the migration decisions of others, so-called "tied movers". For the purpose of this thesis, I choose not to make such a distinction but rather focus on a community of people, for which the most relevant term would be "refugees", as recognized under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and in accordance with the UNCHR Statute. Refugees are conflict-generated, and often in need of complementary forms of protection, and it also include people living in refugee-like situations. (UNHCR 2012)

In relation to development studies, the consequences of migration are often the focus of research, and there are both positive and negative effects at play simultaneously. Migrants can send back remittances that will give their home country an influx of foreign exchange and be of good use for family relatives in need, as will be shown in the empirical example in this thesis. But on the other hand, migration is often generated by conflict and lack of development and can have negative effects on the family in terms of a separation in time and space, and be detrimental for the home country in terms of loss of labor force. (Skeldon 1997:3)

Transnational and network theories of migration

In the waves of globalization, concepts like "transnationalism" and "transnational community" started to gain prominence in the academic world and are at the center of interdisciplinary debates, including on subjects such as migration and refugee studies. Among the pioneers of this research is Massey (1987), who along with collaborators identified the growing and tenacious importance of economic, political and social links between Mexican immigrants and their communities of origin. Similar links have since been

identified by other social scientists, demonstrating that immigrant networks and social capital is no longer confined to the local space of the host community, but rather stretches across national and political borders and hence are considered transnational social spaces. It has also been suggested that transnationalism is another manifestation of globalization, and that transnational communities are a strategy for survival, a separate mode of incorporation. (Schmitter Heisler 2000:87)

Horst (2006:208) has argued that the transnational networks of Somali refugees in Dadaab that enable the flow of resources, people and information, are crucial to understanding any refugee situation, "touching on various aspects of migration, refugee livelihoods and identity formation". This is by no means unique to just Somali communities, as many other refugee and minority communities benefit from networks of family and relatives. Moreover, Horst criticizes what she calls the creation of an artificial distinction between economic migrants and refugees. She argues convincingly that refugees are not isolated from other migrants and it makes more sense to study communities such as Somalis, who have lived in Europe not just as refugees but under a variety of legal statuses, and are part of a larger diaspora that should be included in the analysis.

Liminality as analytical tool

Originally a concept developed by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]), "liminality" referred mainly to the in-between stage in ritual passages or initiation rites in small-scale societies. In his study, Van Gennep uncovered an underlying pattern in transitional rites; that is, rites that marks a passage from one state to the other. The middle stage of these rituals was named the liminal period, and he distinguished between transitional rites, which he called *liminal rites*, and rites of incorporation, or *postliminal rites*. The periods of separation, transition, and incorporation are not equally important or detailed in specific rituals, and, according to Van Gennep's research, within the liminal period itself, the tripartite structure is sometimes reduplicated. An important point about Van Gennep's research is highlighted by Thomassen, who states that what Van Gennep did was to detect a pattern, a ritual form that turned out to be universal, but his work cannot be used as an argument for a particular theory of rites. (Thomassen 2009:6)

The liminality concept's theoretical usage was however broadened by Victor Turner (1969), who showed the importance of these in-between periods and how to understand human reactions to liminal experience, and also suggested that liminality can become fixed or permanent. He set up a number of dichotomies to illustrate differences between a state of liminality or transition and a more structured, status system as seen below:

Transition / state
Homogeneity / heterogeneity
Communitas / structure
Equality / inequality
Absence of property / property
Absence of status / status

The Latin term "communitas" was employed by Turner instead of "community", to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an "area of common living". (Turner 1967:106) Turner rediscovered the liminality concept as a welcomed complement to his own concept of "social drama", and it is with Turner's work that liminality began to reach beyond small-scale societal rituals to other situations in non-tribal or "modern" societies. Besides employing the concept in his study of Ndembu ritual, he suggested two other areas

of application; the first was modern consumerist societies where liminal experiences have been replaced by what he called "liminoid moments" of art and leisure activities where creativity and uncertainty are unfolding. Although, "liminoid" experiences differ from liminal experiences in that they are voluntary and does not involve a change of status or resolution of a personal crisis. The second area where he found use of the liminality concept was in his research on Christian pilgrimage (1978), where he argued that the social event of pilgrimage encompass aspects of liminality in that participants become temporary equals, distancing themselves from structures and social identities and forming a sense of communitas. (Thomassen 2009:14n) The following quote outlines his thinking on the difference between transition and state:

> "It is as though there are here two major 'models' for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders." (Turner 1967:96)

Liminality is applicable in both time and space; liminal periods can last for a moment, a longer period, or even an epoch. Particular places can function as liminal thresholds; such as borderlands or even whole countries that occupy a space between civilizations. Different subjects can also be considered. Inevitably, the concept of liminality has undergone a few adjustments since van Gennep, in order to be applicable to modern situations. Thomassen has suggested that in today's world, most liminal experiences takes place within societies where everything else remains "normal". However, there can also be situations where liminal experiences are intensified due to a convergence of the subjects (personal, group, and society) in a state of liminality over an extended period of time. It seems reasonable, then, that there are varying degrees of liminality, depending on the existing structure against which the liminal experience can be weighed. An interesting dimension of liminality is that it can happen suddenly and unexpectedly (think natural disasters), but it can also be artificially produced as in rituals. Occupying a liminal position is sometimes a freely made choice, as when individuals choose to stand outside normality, and sometimes individuals

or groups can be thought of as occupying a liminal position whether they have asked for it or not. (Thomassen 2009: 17n)

The following is a slightly modified model from Thomassen (2009:17) describing different types of liminal experiences:

Model 1. Liminal experiences

Subject Time	Individual	Group/Communitas	Society
Moment	Sudden life-changing event (death in the family, unemployment, illness) or individualized ritual passage (baptism, marriage)	Ritual passage to manhood (almost always in groups), graduation ceremonies	An entire society facing a sudden event (invasion, natural disaster, revolution) where social distinctions and normal hierarchy disappear
Longer period	Critical life-stages Puberty "Refugeeness" (gaining the status as a refugee, which can last for a longer period of time)	Refugees living in a group, inside or outside a refugee camp Ritual passages to manhood which may extend into weeks or months	Wars, revolutionary periods
Life-span duration or epoch	Individuals standing outside society, by choice or designated.	Ethnic minorities, religious fraternities, social minorities, immigrant groups Groups that live on the edge of "normal structures", often perceived as both dangerous and "holy".	Prolonged wars, enduring political instability, prolonged intellectual confusion

In this model, I have placed refugees and refugee communitas/groups as being liminal for a longer period of time, but there is also the risk of an extended liminal experience where it becomes life-long for some refugees. The "permanentization" of liminality has been touched upon briefly, and perhaps Szakolczai (2000:220) has described it best; "Liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence [of separation,

liminality, and reaggregation] becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (quoted in Thomassen 2000:23).

Re-examining the use of the liminality concept in refugee research

In the realm of studying refugee life, liminality is not an entirely new concept. Malkki (1995) made use of the term in her study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, where she argued that refugees occupy a problematic liminal position in relation to the "national order of things". As we live in a world where the system of nation-states has become naturalized despite its historical recency, not having a nationality is considered unnatural and possibly even dangerous. Malkki attempts to get at this "categorical quality" of the national order by examining what happens when something – or someone – is subverting it. Hence the application of the concept of "liminality" becomes more about the attached and perceived "danger" of the position from the perspective of the hosting nation-state; "Refugees are seen to hemorrhage or weaken national boundaries and to pose a threat to 'national security', as is time and again asserted in the discourse of refugee policy". (ibid.:7)

Turner pointed to the structural invisibility of the liminal personae, as being unclassified and unclassifiable at the same time, and thereby considered "particularly polluting" (Turner 1967:95-97). This becomes Malkki's starting point for her anthropological analysis of how order and liminality are created in the national order of things, and mainly the hegemonic order of nations in which refugees operate. Classification is not only a bad thing, however, as her study shows the social and political significance of refugee status for Hutu refugees as well as how they themselves subverted these categories and created new ones. (Malkki 1995:8)

Another use of the liminality concept in the study on refugee life is by Martha Baird and Joyceen Boyle, who have studied the health and well-being of Sudanese refugee women who resettled with their children in the United States. In their research, liminality emerges as a theme that describes the situation that the resettled women are in, being in-between American and Sudanese culture. One of the refugee women are quoted in the article as saying that "It's hard because Sudanese woman…now they are in the middle between; they not in the American culture, and they not in Sudanese culture. They just in the middle from nowhere." (Baird and Boyle 2011:17) Here, the refugees are already resettled in the U.S.,

but nevertheless speak in terms of being in a liminal ("in-between") state. They also note that this is an uncomfortable position to be in, and expressed hope that their children would "pick a side"; be either American or Sudanese, as it was simply too difficult to be in the middle (ibid.:17).

The empirical case: Somali refugee women in Kenya

Background

The relationship between Somalis and Kenyans and the state has been strained for a long period of time, beginning in 1963 with demands from the Kenyan Somali population to be joined with Somalia at independence. A low-intensity conflict started in the north-eastern parts of Kenya close to the Somali border, an area which has since continued to be vulnerable not least because of the lack of state presence and development support. Somalia has been plagued by the breakdown of the centralized government and began spiraling into crisis in the 1980's. Security crackdowns by Kenyan military in the northeastern parts have made little effort to distinguish between the terrorist-labeled Al Shabaab and the local, Kenyan-Somalis in the area. Successive failure of the government to extend full citizenship rights to the Kenyan-Somalis, and the imposed restrictions of movement, have further increased the alienation and facilitated the creation of Al Shabaab networks inside Kenya. (Branch 2011)

Somalia is currently generating the third largest number of refugees in the world, with Kenya being one of the main hosting countries. In the Dadaab camps in northeastern Kenya – the largest refugee complex in the world – the population stood at 474.000 in 2012, whereas Kenya as a whole is now home to more than 600.000 refugees. (UNHCR 2013a) The Kakuma refugee camp in the northwestern part of Kenya isn't "home" to nearly as many Somalis, but it is the place where many of my informants were registered as refugees. Life in the refugee camps is a topic beyond the scope of this thesis, but an in-depth study of how Somalis cope with refugee life in the Dadaab camps is found in Cindy Horst's book "Transnational Nomads".

The situation for Somali refugees who live outside the refugee camps in Kenya's urban areas has not been a whole lot easier than life inside the camps. With reference to threats against national security, the Kenyan government has since the 1990's stripped the refugees

of their freedom of movement, and ordered them to remain inside the refugee camps. The situation is not helped by the fact that the refugee camps are located in harsh, underdeveloped areas riddled with insecurity and with few livelihood opportunities. For quite some time, this position was not challenged by other actors within the refugee regime, such as the UNHCR which has had a significant role to play in the country. The lack of an urban refugee program stemmed from the belief that any establishment of such would act as a pull factor, and quickly put strains on its limited capacity and resources. A consequence from this stance was the severe lack of knowledge on the urban refugee situation, and lack of a constructive relationship with the refugee population. (UNHCR PDES 2011:5nn)

The refugee population has proven to be highly mobile despite any official restrictions, and many Somalis have settled in Nairobi and other urban areas, trying to avoid the refugee camps entirely. This kind of migration is facilitated by regular bus routes and the relative ease by which the refugees can bribe their way through police checkpoints. A recent High Court decision in Kenya ruled against a directive issued by the government in 2012 to order the forced transportation of urban refugees back to the refugee camps. This directive contributed to increased hostilities and police harassment of refugees, who were afraid to move about freely and some even fled the country. The High Court ruling has yet to be implemented by the government, and legal services such as registering and issuing essential documentation to refugees need to be resumed.(UNHCR 2013b)

Daily life as refugee women in Kenya

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the in-between, liminal experience in the migration process using the example of the group of Somali women refugees that I came to know in Kenya, and to show that although these women are struggling in many ways, they are still active agents who make strategic choices, despite being in this liminal phase.

It made sense to study the community as a whole, rather than the individual being the unit of analysis, mainly for two reasons. The first is because decisions in the migration process about when and where to go are rarely made in a vacuum, and second because resources are usually pooled together and shared among people (Brettel & Hollifield 2000:9), as was the case in this community.

I should perhaps not go as far as to describe shosho Mariam in terms of the "ritual elder" as present in Turner's framework of analysis, but her role in the community remains immensely important. As touched upon in the methodology section, Mariam was the mother of the community, performing daily activities in order to sustain some kind of order. On my first day as a temporary resident in the community, Mariam brought me to another Somali woman's house where she had helped organize a Somali ceremony for the woman, named Malyuun, who was pregnant. The ceremony was held in order to bless the pregnant woman, as well as the other women present, and wishing for the delivery to go well. Trying to keep some of the cultural traditions alive was merely one of the tasks occupying shosho Mariam's itinerary. She had first come to Dadaab in 2005, from which her mother and four of her children had been resettled in the U.S already in 1991. She lived in Nairobi for a number of years, but came to Nakuru because she said she wanted to provide education for her two children that still lived with her, along with a Somali boy to whom she was a foster parent, and a Kenyan boy who had been displaced and lost his family in the last post-election violence, so shosho had taken him in as well. Her husband also lived in the otherwise female-dominated community, but I rarely saw him and was told he had a number of jobs that kept him busy. Although shosho Mariam was mostly busy with daily chores and what may best be termed as social and administrative tasks, she would also contribute economically to the community. She was the one who purchased

charcoal for cooking in the communal kitchen, and if something broke down she would immediately try and fix it.

Besides meeting shosho Mariam and some of the other Somali women, I also met a Kenyan woman very early on whose name was Esther. She lived in the same concrete community in her own little room next to the Somali women. Outside by the tiny courtyard she had a small number of chickens in a wooden cage, and every morning she would go out and feed them. Esther was a refugee as well; her house had been burned down during the last election violence in Kenya from December 2007 to January 2008, and so, displaced, she rented this cheap room and became neighbors with the Somali refugees. I had visited a Kenyan IDP camp during my work with Dandelion Africa, and had heard many stories about what has happened (or rather hasn't happened) after the election violence when the government promised to aid the thousands of Kenyans who had been displaced from, or lost, their homes. Esther told me she hadn't received any compensation or assistance from the Kenyan government as promised, and I sensed she probably had as much faith in the government as the Somalis did. The idea of "communitas" applies well in this case, where people with different ethnicity, religion, history, and social background are joined together in a state of liminality where these differences doesn't seem to matter or triumph the sense of community and camaraderie. Esther and shosho had become good friends, and they had even started a small shop together where they sold some food and everyday items to try and make ends meet.

> *"I used to work for an NGO in Somalia for five years. Now I'm supported by my son in law who lives in the States, and my brother who lives in Sweden. But the helping hands I get are not enough, and I'd like to fight for my own bread."[2]*

To a large extent, the women living in this community were all equal in their current inequality, so to speak, and not many differences between them could be noted. In my interview with Zamzam, however, I started to get a more nuanced image of the lives the women had been living before they got to this liminal phase. In difference to the other women, Zamzam had attended school in Somalia, and worked for an international NGO until she started receiving threats from Al Shabaab about how she was risking her life

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[2] Interview with Zamzam, 2012-04-23, in Nakuru, Kenya.

"working for the infidels". So she took her children and fled to Dadaab, but then continued on to Nakuru when the fighting between Al Shabaab and Ethiopian forces escalated. Like so many of the other women, Zamzam saw her future as being somewhere abroad, where she could get education for her children and an opportunity to "fight for her own bread", as she had done before in Somalia. Previous studies have shown that for those who had a higher socio-economic position in their country of origin, the experience of becoming a refugee – or, one might say the experience of suddenly occupying a liminal position – is at times more difficult (Horst 2006:7). Another difference that was impossible to overlook was the higher living standard of one of the refugee women that I interviewed. Her name was Malyuun, the woman for whom the ceremony mentioned above was held, and I stayed with her and her four children in what was a separate house in the community. While the other refugee women were mostly residing in single rooms with a communal kitchen and a couple of outhouses, Malyuun was living in a two-bedroom house with a small kitchen and a bathroom with running water. She had never attended school and was married to another Somali refugee whom she said was very poor, so she relied on remittances from relatives in England and Denmark. The benefits of a strong transnational network are evident, and in some cases this could contribute to increasing inequality among refugees (Horst 2006:211). In this case, however, there was a strong sense of communitas and the other women benefited indirectly from these remittances. Partly because of the cultural and religious obligation of assisting those less fortuned that is very strong amongst the Somali refugees.

Although the concept of liminality underscores a certain level of homogeneity, there is always going to be some visible differences that are reflective of a person's background or network, and it is important not to disregard them but rather study the level of choice and power that individual refugees may have. Horst (2006:201) has suggested that the life histories of refugees are as important to their present situation as their dreams and links with a future abroad.

> *"My parents are very naïve; they have stayed in Dadaab since 1991, but haven't received any help."*[3]

One of the most difficult but also rewarding interviews I did during my fieldwork was with a young woman named Fatuma. Almost of my age, she already had two young children and

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[3] Interview with Fatuma, 2012-04-11 in Nakuru, Kenya.

was pregnant with her third, with no husband. She was born in Kismaayo, in the Jubaland region of Somalia, but had spent nearly her whole life in the Dadaab refugee camps on the Kenyan side of the border along with her parents. She had never gone to school and was upset that her children were not getting an education either. Now she was living in the urban community and was supported by the other Somali women who were her neighbors. It became clear that Fatuma had had enough of life in the refugee camp where, she said, refugees had no rights and the Kenyan police would enter the houses and beat and rape them. Although she admitted to having no stability in her current situation as she wasn't allowed to work, it was obvious that she at least felt a little safer in this female-dominated community. She explained how her parents have been living in Dadaab since 1991, waiting for an interview and possibly resettlement, but nothing has happened.

Not an unusual story in refugee research, this serves to illustrate how liminality as explained by Turner can sometimes become fixed or permanent. As highlighted by Thomassen (2009:5), there is no certainty concerning the outcome of liminality; "it is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and 'reality' itself, can be carried into different directions." The awareness on this matter among refugees like Fatuma, breeds frustration but can also be a motivator to take drastic action, as with Fatuma deciding to leave the refugee camp and making the long and perilous journey to the urban community instead. Fatuma also claimed that the UN in Dadaab was corrupt because a person coming to the camp from Somalia in 2012 can get an interview for resettlement faster than someone who has been living for many years, who is naïve and doesn't have anything. "If someone gives money they can get resettled using your name, your background and your story", she told me during an informal conversation. Identity theft in refugee camps is suspected of happening, but from what I could find out, hasn't yet been confirmed and is rather difficult to investigate. There was however a corruption scandal involving the UNHCR staff in Nairobi, which was uncovered in 2000-2001 and dubbed as a "resettlement scandal" (UNHCR PDES 2011:12).

One could describe these women as being in "the liminal phase" of their migration, that is, they are not where they wish to be, most of them continuing to hope for resettlement abroad (usually in the West), but neither do they see a possibility of returning to Somalia due to the on-going fighting and instability. It is also possible to argue that within this

liminal phase, there is a circular, sometimes forced, migration between the urban community and the refugee camps where the authorities will transfer the women when they are arrested in Nakuru, but from which they will soon return to the urban community. There are, as we shall see, elements of separation and incorporation within this liminal phase, and hence the tripartite structure is once again reduplicated. Some of the Somali women visit the refugee camp – mostly Kakuma in the northwest – voluntarily when their contacts in the camp inform them that they have been "posted" (i.e. when the UN has put their name on the list of people who will be interviewed for possible resettlement abroad).

In 2011, UNHCR's Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) downplayed the encampment rule – the decision to restrict the refugee's freedom of movement beyond the refugee camps – and claimed that although it was the working policy of the government, Somali refugees in Nairobi were not of risk of compulsory relocation to the camps. One year later, the story is remarkably different, not least in the urban outskirts of Nakuru.

> *"My homeland is Somalia but there is nothing there, "home" in my heart is abroad where I will have opportunities. We Somalis have great problems here in Africa; I believe my future is abroad where I will get help. I can't get help in Kenya."*[4]

The story of Samira mirrors this mobility within liminality. Samira had come to Nairobi as an unregistered refugee, and stayed with friends in the Somali parts of town. She then had to make the long journey to Kakuma refugee camp in order to get registered, and she lived with relatives there for about eight months before returning to Nairobi. This is where she met her husband, and the two of them moved to Nakuru and now had a baby boy. She told me about how the police had come to the neighborhood, in December 2011, and arrested Samira and some of the other women. Samira was in the middle of feeding her son, and was told to leave the baby behind. After spending 24 hours being locked up, a network of Somali men in Nakuru had raised the 20.000ksh needed to get the women out of prison. (It is well-known that the Kenyan police informally refer to the Somalis as "ATM's", due to the ease of which they can get money from them). Despite paying the police, the women were forcibly relocated to the Kakuma refugee camp. Samira had to stay in the camp for two weeks, after which her husband had received money for the bus ticket

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[4] Interview with Samira, 2012-04-11, Nakuru, Kenya.

from his father, and was able to wire it to Samira. She explained these difficulties and said she was most upset about her newborn baby having to go without breastfeeding for all this time. During my stay in the community, I never saw the police around, but heard stories of how the police would show up usually in the middle of the night and arrest some of the women, leaving their children behind for the rest of the women to take care of, and then demanding large sums of money to release the women.

Samira would also tell me that, if she could afford the bus ticket, she would travel to Kakuma voluntarily when her friends in the camp notified her that she had been scheduled for an interview. Now she had received a call saying that her name was posted on the UN board, but she had no money for the journey. But even if she went to the interview, she explained it takes a long time before there is any decision on resettlement, and remaining in the camp for any longer period of time is not a viable option: "When I go I get sick, I don't adapt to the climate and the hotness makes me sick. I don't have any family there now, just friends and they can't help me. I try to go when I'm posted, but then I run away from the climate there."

In the light of the Kenyan government's policies restricting the movements and whereabouts of the Somali refugees with reference to national security, it's easy to recall Malkki's study and the liminal personae as a danger or pollution. The refugees, occupying a liminal space where there is no determined direction, can be viewed as therefore dangerous and in need of strict regulation. The political situation in Kenya is, however, far more complex for the poor handling of Somali refugees to be reduced to the commonly invoked "fear of the unknown".

This empirical example shows the workings of a highly female-dominated refugee community, where women assist each other in daily chores, in particularly vulnerable situations and in the occasional celebratory occasions, such as the birth of a new child. Even though the women are economically dependent on the generosity of their family relatives in faraway countries, their everyday life and interaction with society is not characterized by the mediation and determination by their husbands, fathers, or other male family members as common patriarchal gender relations would have it (Moghadam 2009:258).

Brief summary

None of the women I interviewed could envision a future in Kenya; a few would consider returning to Somalia if there would be peace and security, but most of them expressed a desire to go somewhere else, such as Europe or the United States, where some of them had family already. There was an undisputable sense of "just passing through", or, "this is simply temporary". What is also interesting is the level of mobility, even within this period that I have argued is best characterized as a liminal phase. There is still room for individual and collective agency, for example as in the demonstrated case where the women choose to travel back to the refugee camps, if this means a possibility for resettlement abroad.

The resettlement *and* integration in another country would signify the end of the liminal period in the case of the Somali refugees. However, there is the obvious risk that for some, the liminal stage might become permanent.

Conclusion

Migration and the human experience of it will certainly continue to be of great academic interest, and even though efforts have been made to "talk across disciplines", I doubt there will be a single, shared paradigm from which to theorize on the subject. It seems there's also a difficulty in theorizing about both the agency and the vulnerabilities of refugees without falling into the trap of reinforcing common labeling and stereotypes.

This is where I think the liminality concept can be useful, in combination with a gendered, transnational process-approach. For liminality to make sense, it needs to be placed within social dramas as they unfold, that is, in a process. In a way, liminality as an analytical tool is a way of framing the unstructured, and can also be deemed the origin of structure itself. It is about creating an understanding of a shifting reality, where the outcome or direction is not yet known. Hence what is advocated is the incorporation of liminality into the non-linear process of migration as a mechanism for increased understanding.

The vulnerability and victimization that has been the order of the day in much of the research and available information concerning refugee women need to be nuanced. As the example in this thesis shows, the women are highly capable of making strategic choices for themselves and their families, even though there are economic, juridical and social constraints within the liminal period of existence. They most likely benefit from living in a community that is dominated by women, where gender norms can be transformed or renegotiated.

In conclusion, liminality is not an explanatory device, but it is indeed a useful concept to deepen our understanding of a variety of human situations; life as a refugee being just one of them.

Further research

Further research is needed into how being in a liminal phase affects gender relations and cultural norms, as liminality usually turns "normality" on its head and opens a space for renegotiation.

The degree to which liminality is experienced, on a personal, group, or societal level, is also something which should be the subject of further research. Given the long period of instability in Somalia, it could be possible to describe the entire country as being in a prolonged stage of liminality, which could also affect the degree to which Somali refugees experience liminality in refugee camps or other transitory places. One needs to keep in mind that refugees, like everybody else, are people with a history.

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Appendix 1 – Interview questions

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where were you born?
4. How long have you been in Nakuru?
5. How did you come to Nakuru?
6. Where did you stay in Kenya when you first arrived? If a refugee camp, for how long?
7. Are you married?
8. Is your husband a Kenyan citizen?
9. How long have you been married?
10. How many children do you have?
11. Were they born in Kenya?
12. Have you attended school? Where and for how long?
13. Do you work for a living? What do you do?
    If not, how do you get money?
14. Do you have a refugee card/"alien id"?
15. Do you have a birth certificate? Do your children have one?
16. What languages can you speak?
17. What are your biggest challenges right now?
18. What in your life do you value the most?
19. What do you wish for the most right now?
20. What are your thoughts on the future? On life in Kenya?
21. Would you ever go back to Somalia?
22. What is "home" to you, what does it mean?