In this chapter I discuss the influence of urban setting and spatiality on various aspects of Somali identity (social, economic and religious). I describe different categories of Somali immigrants, who continue to face levels of uncertainty and risk in their new host country and particularly in the city-region of Johannesburg. The categories described relate to immigrant status, gender, class and religious identity, and I show how these are important in the stratification of the Somali population living and working in the suburb of Mayfair in Johannesburg. In particular, I look at how intermingling notions of class and immigrant status have contributed to structuring the economic spatiality that Somali entrepreneurs have formed through a nexus of links between the city of Johannesburg and townships in the Gauteng region.

My-gration, your-gration: who are the Somalis in Johannesburg?

In the field of transnationalism Somali migrants constitute what we call a diaspora – a diaspora whose members have through transnational mobility created a Somali diasporic space on different continents. The diasporic mobility of Somalis is not new, especially for sailors employed in sea ports of the British Empire (Hyslop 2009). As a result, small Somali communities – especially Isaaq communities – can be found in port cities as far apart as Perth and New York (Lewis 1961). By the end of the nineteenth century, the biggest Somali presence outside Africa was settled in England along the Welsh coast: these were the seamen of the British Merchant Navy. During the 1930s, Somali leaders in Britain served
as political intermediaries for Kenyan Somalis, who tried to negotiate with the Colonial Office in London about uplifting their racial status in Kenya (Turton 1972). There are a number of cases of Somali transnationalism in Africa and elsewhere during imperial and colonial times, as well as after the Second World War. Somalis travelled into southern African countries such as Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to work as miners; they were also present in Yemen and the Gulf states after Somalia’s independence, where they were able to organise trans-Indian Ocean business.

Therefore, it is no surprise to observe a stratification of identities among Somalis in post-apartheid South Africa along specific transnational experiences and journeys. Not all Somalis are considered the same, even though they insist on a pan-Somali identity as it was in the past during their struggle for independence. So who are the Somalis in South Africa? Somali migrants and refugees come from different parts of Somalia, including the self-declared states of Somaliland and Puntland. Some are originally from Ogaden in Ethiopia or from Kenya but had been settled in Somalia for generations. Somalis have spread and dispersed over different continents and countries, including Western Europe, North America and the Middle East. Some of those who have long resided outside of Africa have also made their way to South Africa. Thus, Somalis in South Africa represent different categories of transnational migrants who have crossed different borders at different times and in different ways; Somali migrants are not the same in terms of journey experiences or trajectories. This plurality of migrant routes plays a role in differentiating Somali subgroups, who have different approaches to dealing with uncertainty in their new country and particularly in Johannesburg.

Undocumented Somalis face the highest levels of uncertainty. Some haven’t renewed their national passports because no Somali embassy existed in the country before 2013, when one opened in Pretoria. As refugees, these Somalis insist on a pan-Somali and Islamic identity in order to secure assistance and solidarity from their national and religious counterparts. For example, during their journeys to South Africa they tend to use diasporic routes, which provide them with contacts they can trust and the right to hospitality. As stressed by one interviewee:

You know the Somalis, we are not like other people, and we help each other. When I come to you, you have to give me a place to sleep, clothes, what I need to eat. I went to Mayfair because I had an address, the other person in Nairobi, they gave it to me.

Cross-border activities give existence and power to the pan-Somali imaginary, which transcends the other imaginary: nationalism. Somali migrants continuously look for information and solidarity from different parts of their diasporic space. Refugees are the most vulnerable and might settle in places where they face hostility and higher risk, as described by a woman who transited in Malawi:

You have to do everything by yourself; it’s your own problem. Sometimes when you talk to a local, in their language nicely, some of them will help you, some not. Some will rob you because you are a foreigner, because you don’t know the language and whatever.
Somali migrants who hold a passport, either from Kenya or countries such as Canada, have the ongoing option of transnational mobility. Furthermore, having a passport helps Somali entrepreneurs to import goods from other countries, and enables them set up economic partnerships with other members of the Somali diaspora. A passport confers a higher status and position in the Somali economic hierarchy, and places the city of Johannesburg in a transnational and diasporic space.

Gender is another differentiating factor among Somali migrants. Women’s mobility is enabled by the institution of Islamic marriage. Travelling alone as a single woman is unsafe and considered immoral. Women often get married in transitory places such as UN refugee camps in Kenya or once they have settled in South Africa. Having a female body can secure a safer journey from South Africa to Europe, and being pregnant or giving birth in Europe can guarantee women longer stays as refugees. This is a strategy often used in the past by female refugees from various countries in Africa and, of course, elsewhere. The travelling female body has social consequences in family circles too as women gain confidence after proving to themselves that they can survive migratory journeys. Furthermore, any loss of morality in the migratory experience tends to be balanced by a religious life. The Somali dress code for women – which covers the whole body except the face and hands – shows their attachment to religion and, according to them, helps to protect them from harassment.

Thus migration routes, bi-nationality and gender identity are important in understanding the stratification of Somali immigrants in Johannesburg. However, economic status gives us another dimension of stratification: class identity coupled with religious identity is analysed in the next section.

Mayfair’s 8th Avenue: the nexus

As noted, Somali spatiality is a diasporic one that provides diverse resources for Somali migration globally, and also for Somali economic settlement and integration in Johannesburg. Somali entrepreneurs in Mayfair have extended their ethnic urban space through business networks in the African townships of the region. This economic spatiality, defined by the organisation of economic relations among Somalis, has had a major influence on shaping different social classes.

Somali migrants in Johannesburg – documented or undocumented – have deployed different strategies for their economic survival. Their settlement in Mayfair represents their main urban strategy. The suburb of Mayfair, which is located in the city adjoining Fordsburg, was established as a working- and lower-middle-class Afrikaner neighbourhood. Since the late 1980s, it has been inhabited by South African Indian Muslims. Today the suburb, from Hanover Street in the east to Mayfair West, is predominantly Muslim and home to most of the Somalis living in Johannesburg. Not only has the demography of Mayfair changed as a result of Somali settlement, but religious beliefs and practices have also been transformed. Unlike other African Muslim migrants, such as the Senegalese or Malians who have mainly settled in Hillbrow and Yeoville, Somalis prioritised socialisation with South African
Indian Muslims as well as establishing a Muslim neighbourhood for their religious, social and economic activities. The urban mode of separation and differentiation that prevailed in the city was appropriated by the Somalis, who wanted to live in Muslim territories. Consequently, Islam rather than race or Africanism became their mode of identification.

It is in Mayfair that Somalis have developed an ethnic market to sustain their business networks in South Africa, as well as their business partnerships overseas. In particular, 8th Avenue, where the Somali mosque and different businesses rented or owned by Somalis are situated, represents a nexus between the centre of the city, its urban townships and the more rural areas. Essentially in Johannesburg, different classes disperse into different entrepreneurial spaces with wealthier Somali traders working in the city and others making a living in the African townships or in the more peripheral areas. On 8th Avenue, however, these different traders find a shared space.

Trading risks are high for foreigners in South Africa’s townships. Since 1994, more than a hundred Somalis have been killed in different townships in the country. Most were shopkeepers who provided basic commodities like bread and sugar. Several interviewees in Mayfair mentioned that Somali shopkeepers in the townships are often employed by entrepreneurs in the cities (Beck 1992). However, some choose to go into these higher-risk areas using their own resources as they can make more money there than in the city, where the market is dominated by an upper class.
Uncertainty and risk seem to have different meanings for different class groups among Somali immigrants in South Africa, and an understanding of uncertainty is fundamental to understanding Somali place-making in Johannesburg. The Somali market in Mayfair, established over a decade ago offers Somali migrants a sense of security and belonging. In contrast, the townships are considered transitory economic places, strongly linked to the city that provides services and commodities for the shopkeepers. Townships may be said to represent places of vulnerability whereas the cities are considered spaces of ethnic, clan and religious solidarity.

Somali class identity is based on financial resources, the possibility of owning and running a shop in an urban setting, and living in a religious environment. Religion is thus vital to understanding Somali stratification. Mosques are considered places of purification and markers of Muslim urban territory, and both mosques and markets signify place-making. The mosque most frequented by Somalis in Johannesburg is situated on the same 8th Avenue in Mayfair where city and township-based entrepreneurs transact. Somalis felt the need to set up their own mosques where the sermons could be delivered in *af-Soomaali* rather than in the Urdu or English spoken in Johannesburg’s other mosques.

The mosque is situated opposite the Amal Shopping Centre, a small shopping mall opened in 2005, where most of the shopkeepers are Somali women. Gender is important here as Somali women are advised to work in the city rather than in the townships. Although some women tried to establish businesses in townships, many returned to Mayfair after being subjected to xenophobic attacks.

Somali religious territory, marked by mosques and the madrassas, gives meaning to notions of a Somali collective identity. A pan-Somali identity based on religion is being enacted in Johannesburg. However, the notion of hybridity needs to be stressed as transnational migration often leads to cultural changes in the host country. Islamic identity has been a major source of social capital for Somalis seeking help and solidarity from South African Muslims of Indian origin, who have their own economic and religious territory in Fordsburg. One of the first Fordsburg mosques opposite the Oriental Plaza mall was built after the eviction of traders from Fietas in the 1970s.

The Muslim transnational movement, Tablighi Jamaat, has been influential in helping Somalis in Mayfair to territorialise their religious identity. That is, for Somalis, being associated with Tablighi Jamaat offers a way of being, and a means to recognition as an urban Muslim. In the past, the movement played a major role for Indian Muslims’ place-making in Lenasia, south of Soweto. Members of Tablighi Jamaat focused their religious proselytism in territories such as Lenasia, where large numbers of Muslims and mosques were already established. Tablighi Jamaat has not sought to convert Africans in the townships to Islam, and is regarded by Somalis as a way of enacting a more urban Muslim identity.

We have our own culture, Islamic culture from Somalia ... Tabligh I cannot say it is a culture, or a tradition. Tabligh is a way of *da’wa* [call to Islam]. Our *madaris* [plural of madrassa], our syllabus is in Arabic as it is in Somalia. Their syllabus is in English ... actually they are calling people to go to the *masjid* [mosque].

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In the case of Somalis, the term ‘class’ needs to be understood in both economic and religious terms. Religion is important and upper-class Somalis can distinguish themselves by living in a city where they can pray in a mosque, a purified place, alongside their business activities, shops and offices. By deciding that the absence of mosques in townships presents a risk and a danger to morality, Somalis may be said to reinforce their own vulnerabilities in these spaces.

Conclusion

For Somalis, overcoming uncertainty in South Africa is first a matter of gaining resources, including a passport, finance and social capital. However, vulnerability is also related to social class, which is shaped by Somali economic spatiality and religion. Within the same clan, individual Somalis do not necessarily belong to the same class, thus it is important to understand the complexities of clan relations as well as class divisions formed by urban identities that are strongly linked to a religious territory. The dichotomy between city and township plays a role in differentiating Somali classes in Johannesburg, but it would be naive to consider Somalis’ mobility and stratification as limited to the patterns of movement analysed in this chapter; networks between Mayfair and the townships dominate at present, but new internal migrations are spreading within the city-region as Somalis participate in and contribute to Johannesburg’s ethnic, cultural and spatial diversity.

Notes

1 The Isaq represent one of six Somali clan-families; clans are the widest level of segmentation among Somalis.
2 Indians faced a similar situation when they arrived in South Africa. Two main groups were differentiated: the indentured labourers recruited from the 1860s to work in the Natal plantations and the Indian ‘passengers’ who were traders and paid their own way to South Africa from the 1880s.
3 Interview with H, a Somali woman, Mayfair, Johannesburg, 8 November 2007.
4 Interview with Z, a Somali woman, Mayfair, Johannesburg, 7 July 2007.
5 Interview with A, a member of Tablighi Jamaat, Mayfair, Johannesburg, 9 September 2007.

References