

The ‘diasporas’ of Little Mogadishu

By Neil Carrier

Eastleigh is a Nairobi estate that over the last two decades has grown into a global Somali hub and a centre of commerce in East Africa: it has become Nairobi’s ‘Little Mogadishu’, as the media have dubbed it. Previously a quiet residential estate, an influx of Somali refugees in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought with them transnational connections and business acumen that transformed the estate into a hub for cheap clothes imported from Dubai. Since that time the continued expansion of Somali trade networks has dramatically altered the Eastleigh landscape, creating over 40 shopping malls. As I have found in my research on the estate for the ODP, Eastleigh is a fascinating example of how forced migration can bring all sorts of economic opportunities alongside the very real hardships of lives lived in exile. It is also fascinating for its substantial population of European and North American citizens who come to an estate that offers opportunities and experiences not easily available in the West. These are the Somali ‘diasporas’ of Eastleigh.

Somalis use the term *buufis* to refer to an all-consuming yearning to move to the West, a syndrome very common in the harsh conditions of such refugee camps in Kenya as Dadaab, as Cindy Horst has well described. Eastleigh too has its fair share of *buufis*, and many Somali and Oromo refugees living there hope it is only a stepping stone to a life elsewhere. However, the estate also attracts Somalis from the diaspora: it has become a place where those in the West suffering a reverse form of *buufis* – that focused on a return to Africa – can find a cure. For Somalis from southern Somalia, Eastleigh has become a part of their homeland transplanted to nearby



First Avenue, Eastleigh, 2011. ©Kimo Quaintance

Nairobi, while there are many Kenyan Somalis too living in the West for whom Eastleigh has always been a home. During my fieldwork in Eastleigh I met many Somalis from Western countries in Eastleigh. Such visitors and residents give the estate a very cosmopolitan soundscape as their Western accents can often be made out. So common are such visitors from the West that they are referred to by other Eastleigh residents as *diasporas* (or *diaspora* in the singular).

These diasporas come to the estate for a number of reasons. While Eastleigh may not seem an idyllic location for a holiday, the estate offers much for a Somali visitor, especially ones with family in Kenya or in Somalia. Its new plush hotels such as the Grand Royal and Nomad Palace provide decent accommodation for those coming to visit family in Nairobi, or hoping to travel on to Somalia itself (Nairobi's international airport now has many flights to Mogadishu and elsewhere in Somalia). Some come to find spouses: Eastleigh is an important hub for marriage ceremonies, often arranged transnationally, and even carried out transnationally. There are ceremonies that involve substitute brides or grooms in cases where the partner in the West has not yet secured documents with which to travel.

A proportion of Eastleigh diasporas are young boys and girls sent to the estate from the US, the UK and elsewhere to spend time with relatives for what is known as *dhaqan celin* ('cultural rehabilitation'). This usually consists of spending months at a *madrassa* learning to be

better Muslims, as some of the children are regarded as having gone astray in their life in the West. Such children are sent to Eastleigh rather than Somalia itself as it is safer, yet 'home-like' enough, so that they might escape Westernisation for a while, while still living in a place that is dominated by Muslims. I met some young Somalis in the estate on *dhaqan celin* for whom life in Eastleigh was very different to that which they had known in the West. Its muddy streets were a shock to the system, although Eastleigh's many restaurants now stock the sort of food they were used to at home: Hershey's chocolate and pizza played a role in helping them settle.

Many 'diasporas' invest in the Eastleigh economy. Such investors have not necessarily ever lived before in Kenya, although having family or clan connections is usually seen as important in navigating Nairobi. It is easy to find people who had lived for a long time in London and elsewhere, and have come to Eastleigh for investment opportunities. Some come with family while others maintain transnational families, with spouses and children remaining in the West.

Diaspora investors are motivated by a number of factors: some by the desire to invest in a boom before it ends, others to invest in a place perceived as more profitable than the West. One such investor, with a strong London accent, told me that I too should forget about the UK and set up business in Kenya, saying: 'Listen mate, England is finished'. This links to a common sentiment that the West is already developed, so more opportunities lie in the likes of Africa. Establishing a business in Kenya is regarded as easier and cheaper than in the West too, with fewer overheads, cheaper labour costs, and the ability to speed up bureaucracy by exploiting the country's endemic corruption. Indeed, one supermarket owner in the estate who also ran a business in the UK, told me that those from the UK appreciate the familiarity of Kenya's bureaucracy, but also how a payment here and there can facilitate matters. In Kenya there are many regulations and restrictions, but ones which corruption has rendered negotiable. Also, as the cost of living is less than in the West, good lifestyles can be had, especially for the most successful, who have saved considerable sums. Such investors may have businesses in Eastleigh but often live in more salubrious residential estates like South C, another Nairobi estate with a sizeable Somali population.

Kenya has not proved the most welcoming place for Somalis in recent years. The country has offered Somalis a refuge, but increasing concern over security has led to profiling of Somalis and their scapegoating, as witness the screening exercises of 2014 under the name Operation Usalama Watch. But, for the diasporas of Eastleigh, Kenya still offers a place to reconnect with family, to educate children, and the chance to live more prosperous lives. In the words of one diaspora investor – a woman who had spent many years in the UK – successful Somalis from the diaspora can enjoy an *Out of Africa* lifestyle in Kenya, living in comfort with maids and drivers. A diasporic dream of a romantic life in Africa might thus be influencing a new generation of settlers to move to Kenya from the West. □