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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Transnational lived citizenship turns local: Covid-19 and Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi

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Abstract

This paper analyses how migrant community practices of transnational lived citizenship were altered by both, COVID-19 and the policy response from the Kenyan government. It is based on interviews with members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora residing in Nairobi. The paper demonstrates how policies introduced because of the pandemic caused migrant communities to lose local and remittance income. More than the loss of material resources, however, they were impacted by the elimination of social spaces that enable diaspora lives. These two dynamics have intensified a trend that may have been present before the pandemic, a local turn of transnational lived citizenship. By focusing on lived experiences and how they have been re-assessed during the pandemic, the paper argues that transnational lived citizenship is always in flux and can easily become reconfigured as more localized practices. The concept of transnational lived citizenship is demonstrated to be a useful lens for analysing shifting migrant livelihoods and belonging.

KEYWORDS
belonging cosmopolitanism and identity, diaspora, Horn of Africa, transnational social relations, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Like any pandemic, for example the Spanish flu and HIV/AIDS, COVID-19 affects people and societies globally not only in relation to health sectors, but in all economic, social and political spheres. While at the time of writing, hopes for universal vaccination, eventually leading to a more manageable endemic status, are high, in the real world of entrenched global and national economic rules and supply chains, this is likely to remain an imagination rather than reality in the nearer future (Sparke & Anguelov, 2020). In all likelihood, COVID-19 will be here to stay in multiple ways.

Already, COVID-19 has profoundly affected migration and mobility and the well-being of migrant populations, internal and external migrants alike (Igoye, 2020; Oucho & Müller, forthcoming; United Nations, 2020). At the same time, well-being of migrant population groups is hardly ever at the forefront of government policies, and much less so during times of crises (in relation to COVID-19, see, for example, Castillo & Amoah, 2020; Khanna, 2020; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2020).

This state of affairs is visible in global measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 that largely centred on lockdowns and (border) closures, measures regarded as successful to halt the spread of the pandemic across a large number of countries (Mueller et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020). These were also key features of the 'quick and decisive response' to the pandemic in many African countries (Dzinamarira et al., 2020, p. 2466), and have disproportionally impacted lives and well-being of migrants or those dependent on remittances (Mobarak, 2020). At the same time, many of the jobs done by migrants in most societies exposed them to greater risk of COVID-19 infection and exacerbated existing inequalities between different population groups, including native citizens and migrant populations (Maffioli, 2020; Monzó, 2020).

One population group in which these dynamics can be observed in paradigmatic fashion are diaspora communities. They are often regarded as a quasi-vanguard of transnational citizens, with multiple connections—socially, economically, politically, psychologically and culturally—to their homeland, hostland and the wider transnational social field (Cohen, 2017; Collyer & King, 2015; Krawatzek & Müller-Funk, 2020). In turn, diaspora populations are a key example to advance our understanding of the ways in which global forces, states, communities and individuals interact and shape transnationalism (Bloch, 2017), and, in turn, how pandemic policies centred on reducing social interactions within and across borders transform transnational livelihoods or not.

In this contribution, I focus on members of two regional diaspora communities in Nairobi, Kenya, namely communities from Ethiopia and Eritrea.[1] I analyse the transformations of their lived experiences as two communities whose pre-COVID lives and well-being were strongly determined by transnational connections. While often having lived in Nairobi for many years or even decades in the case of some, a majority regard Nairobi as a transitory home from where journeys further afield are organized, and where everyday life is strongly dependent on transnational networks. These networks have been disrupted in different ways, while at the same time COVID-19 mitigation policies in Nairobi forced many to retreat into local spheres, even if sometimes also those local spheres could only be accessed virtually. This has, at least temporarily, for some changed their sense of belonging in a way that can be described as a local turn of transnational lived citizenship; for others, it has merely accelerated a process towards the local. Both dynamics support three wider claims in the literature on migration and transnationalism: Firstly, refugees and migrants enact their citizenship in relation to a transnational social field (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992). Secondly, structural inequalities determine potentials and pitfalls of transnational lived citizenship (Brees, 2010), and COVID-19 has enhanced many of those inequalities. Thirdly, transnational lived citizenship as a framework allows an in-depth analysis of migrant lives and the changes any shock such as COVID-19 might bring about in concrete detail (see also Boccagni, 2012).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, transnational lived citizenship is introduced as the theoretical lens through which COVID-19 and its effects on members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in Nairobi are investigated. This is followed by a section on methodology and data collection. The paper then provides empirical data on how COVID-19 and the policies implemented to combat it in Nairobi altered material and immaterial aspects of diaspora lives. It subsequently discusses how this partly triggered a reconfiguration of transnational lived

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citizenship that could be described as a turn towards emphasis on localized practices, before providing some tentative conclusions.

THEORETICAL LENS: TRANSNATIONAL LIVED CITIZENSHIP

Transnational lived citizenship is a useful framework for analysing diaspora lives and experiences. It allows to understand in detail the intersections between more formal aspects of citizenship as well as its emotional and practical aspects related to feelings of belonging, transnational connections and circulation of material cultures (Müller & Belloni, 2021). This framing combines the literature on definitions of lived citizenship with the concept of transnationalism that has gained prominence in migration studies over the last decades (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Portes, 2003).

The concept of lived citizenship has expanded definitions of citizenship beyond legal status and nation-state-centred ideas. It defines citizenship as relational and affective practices grounded in multiple forms of interconnectedness (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Wood & Black, 2018). This allows a focus on citizenship as practiced in everyday encounters, and with it to analyse the lives of mobile populations regardless of official status or papers, but with respect to acts aimed at well-being and practicing belonging (for examples, see McNevin, 2006; Müller, 2016; 2022; Nyers & Rygiel, 2012; Ticktin, 2006).

The added dimension of transnational recognizes the fact that frames of reference for migrants and their activities span national borders (Basch et al., 1994; Vertovec, 2009; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Although these authors also recognize the perhaps problematic orientation towards the nation-state inherent in the word transnationalism (see also Krawatzek & Müller-Funk, 2020), I contend that the term transnational is still useful to understand flows and connections between and beyond nation states, with cities a pertinent focus of reference (Kemp & Müller, 2021), as it allows us to analyse lived realities of migrants across a transnational social field.

This terminology is supported by recent debates on transnational lived citizenship that, on the one hand, aim to foreground non-state-based connections and conceptions of belonging, while at the same time recognize that the nation state remains a powerful means of identification, belonging and conditioner of lived citizenship (see Horst et al., 2020; Kallio & Mitchell, 2016; Kallio et al., 2020; Müller, 2022).

For the objective of this paper, to analyse the changes and continuities in Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora everyday lives that COVID-19 has brought about in the city of Nairobi, Kenya, transnational lived citizenship is therefore a useful lens.

It enables me to look at the relational aspects of citizenship, its practical and emotional parts related to belonging, but also material aspects of transnational connections (see also Müller & Belloni, 2021). The protagonists of this paper have legal citizenship of a country, Eritrea and Ethiopia, respectively, to which they have a strong emotional attachment. Political developments in their country of citizenship and, in particular, in the case of Eritrea, state obligations imposed on citizens have caused them to leave (Carter & Rohwerder, 2016; Kibreab, 2003). Nairobi is regarded as a transit location and the majority hope for eventual resettlement via the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). At the same time, most are aware that this form of resettlement may be a long way off or indeed never come, and in parallel explore other routes to resettlement via compatriots in the global diaspora. While Kenya remains one of the top refugee hosting countries in the region and has provided registration papers to a small number of people who would otherwise be stateless, Kenyan authorities prioritize voluntary repatriation or resettlement and work with UNHCR to facilitate these options. Numbers for resettlement are, however, small: In the year 2000, out of a total of 504,845 refugees, 443 departed for resettlement (out of 4465 refugees who were proposed for resettlement, the considerably lower number partly due to COVID-related travel restrictions) (www.unhcr.org).

For Ethiopians and Eritreans with slim hopes of actual resettlement, this means that their lives unfold in a transnational space between allegiances to their country of origin and an aspired future in the Global North, where they imagine that their aspirations can eventually be fulfilled. But in actual fact, they are stuck in Nairobi, and their daily survival often hinges on transnational communities from their country or region of origin. Lived citizenship thus

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has an important transnational dimension, and as such becomes potentially precarious when a shock like COVID-19 occurs. To investigate this through the framing of transnational lived citizenship and its changing parameters adds an important dimension to the debates on re-grounding research on transnationalism, or on how transnational practices are being played out locally (Pascucci, 2016; Yeoh, 2010).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Methodologically, the paper is based on the analysis of interviews conducted with 16 members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi, Kenya, who have lived in the city for 3 years or longer. This choice of method, to conduct in-depth interviews, was based on the objective to investigate lived citizenship and participants' sense of belonging in Nairobi, the transnational dimension of it, combined with potential ruptures due to COVID-19 and the policies enacted to combat the pandemic. Such a focus on real life events and their interplay with wider structural forces is best understood through in-depth interviews where participants are given the opportunity to reflect upon and interpret their lives (Crewe & Harrison, 1998; Long & Long, 1992). This is ideally combined with participant observation and other face-to-face encounters—but the latter two were not possible due to COVID-19 (thus COVID-19 also had repercussions for the research process itself). Taken together, the research design follows the call to ground research on transnationalism in everyday practices and how people interpret those (Walsh, 2006; see also von Benzon et al., 2021).

The interviews were conducted for a broader comparative study on transnational lived citizenship and belonging among regional diaspora in urban centres of the Horn of Africa (with the cities Nairobi, Khartoum and Addis Ababa as the key sites). Face-to-face fieldwork was to commence in Nairobi in March 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic had to be reconfigured to virtual fieldwork. Instead of sampling based on participant observation of diaspora community activities on the ground, snowball sampling starting from informal personal networks was used to conduct virtual interviews via zoom or WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted by a former research associate of the project, Mesghina Abraha. I added specific questions on the effects of COVID-19 on diaspora lives to the interview guide, questions that were not part of the original research design. Answers to those questions, together with an analysis of the wider narrative interview data, form the empirical base for this paper. As it is based on a comparatively small sample, the paper does not make a claim to wider generalization. But its focus on detailed dynamics in individual lives is a pertinent methodological approach in the investigation of migrant practices of 'makeshift' citizenship in the here and now (Nyers, 2013, p. 38) and the wider study of transnational belonging (Pascucci, 2016).

The interviews were conducted at a time when lockdown measures had been implemented in Nairobi for several months. Such measures commenced in late March 2020 and eased on 28 September 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to slow. When the pandemic situation worsened again a little more than a month later, on 4th November 2020 new restrictions were announced lasting until January 2021. These measures had nationwide economic repercussions. In the second quarter of 2020, Kenyan gross domestic product reportedly shrank by 5.7 per cent, and at least 1.7 m people lost their employment (out of a working age population of 32 m people). According to data from the Central Bank of Kenya, diaspora remittances did not see a drop but in 2020 were actually higher than the year before, a trend that has continued into 2021 (www.centralbank.go.ke). This reflects the fact that diaspora remittances in particular from the United States and Europe have grown constantly over the past few decades to become Kenya's single biggest source of foreign exchange (Oucho & Müller, forthcoming). But the data predominately refer to remittances by Kenyan diaspora in the Global North to compatriots back home via official channels, thus not to the mainly 'informal' remittances received by research participants.

Out of the 16 interviewees, eight participants were Ethiopian (five men and three women) and eight were Eritrean (also five men and three women). Some were long-term residents of Nairobi with relevant papers like work permits, some were recognized refugees (with UNHCR urban refugee papers) and others were non-status refugees. In terms of numbers, 1868 Eritreans and 11,148 Ethiopians in Nairobi were registered with UNHCR in 2020 (to get urban refugee

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papers for the city via UNHCR is the easiest way to reside in Nairobi). From the 16 interviewees, three had lived in Nairobi for 3 years, six between 5 and 9 years and seven for 10 years or more.

Participants were asked, following a detailed interview guide, about all aspects of their lives in Nairobi as well as the networks they engaged with, in the city and beyond, locally, regionally and globally. Most raised COVID-19 in their narrative anyway, but specific questions on ways in which COVID-19 had affected their daily lives and routines were also asked of all.

The interviews were conducted in either English, Tigrinya or Amharic, the latter two languages spoken by the research associate, in some cases in Oromo with the help of a local interpreter, Dirirsa Nagara, who translated from Afaan Oromo into English. The interpreter was recruited via the project's local partner organization, the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC), who also supported the sampling process via local contacts. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the research associate and coded thematically with input from the project team, using the NVivo software package. The interview data were then cleaned and coding and English language were adjusted in that process.

Participants have been anonymized and any markers that could help identify them have been removed from the paper. The project received all required ethical approvals. All participants agreed to the usage of anonymized content and quotations from their interviews in publications.

'THE CORONA PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED EVERY INCH OF OUR LIVES': MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL DIMENSIONS

The analysis of the interview data, on the one hand, confirms much of what the early literature on the impact of COVID-19 has outlined, but it also adds additional dimensions that are of particular relevance to diaspora populations or migrants more generally. For everyday lived citizenship and practices of belonging, material and immaterial dimensions are of key importance, and in both spheres, in the words of one participant, 'the corona pandemic has affected every inch of our lives' (virtual interview with 'O', 8 October 2020). These 'inches' can be separated broadly into material well-being or economic survival; and social, cultural and psychological well-being. I define well-being following the resource profile approach, as a state of being with others where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals (ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, 2007). Similarly to the lived citizenship literature, this definition focuses on the assertion of agency in everyday lives, on how material and immaterial resources at peoples' disposal are used to achieve well-being (Mc Gregor, 2003, 2007; White & Ellison, 2007).

These processes have spatial repercussions visible in the re-configuration of networks ranging from local to transnational, and from intimate to virtual that often transcend material and immaterial aspects of well-being.

What makes participants from both diaspora populations an interesting example to understand the impact of COVID-19 on specifically the transnational aspect of lived citizenship and well-being is the fact that the majority views Nairobi as a temporary place of residence. As outlined above, both, Eritreans and Ethiopians, in most cases wait for resettlement as one of the durable solutions, and only very few envisage to stay in Nairobi for the long term, even if some have actually lived there for more than a decade.

COVID-19 and material well-being

Material well-being among research participants in general is secured predominately through (trans-)national connections, either through remittances or employment in businesses of fellow nationals.

The latter in particular was affected by COVID measures enacted and enforced by the Kenyan government. Like many countries across the world, Kenya adopted approaches geared towards 'flattening the curve' (for a comprehensive overview, see Oucho & Müller, forthcoming). Key COVID-19 directives included social distancing in public spaces,

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especially in areas that attract large crowds (including hotels, restaurants, clubs, gyms, churches and markets among others), a nationwide curfew from 7 pm to 5 am, cessation of movement directives, the banning of public gatherings and the nationwide closure of schools (Austrian et al., 2020). In particular, enforcement of the directives related to social distancing, curfews and cessation of movement had considerable impact on migrants. They affected key sectors of the economy, from hospitality to transport, where many migrants work. Hotels, spas, gyms and restaurants chose to close down, either permanently or temporarily. This led to job losses among all personnel working in these sectors who were retrenched or put on forced leave. Due to a lack of customers combined with restrictions of movement, many small businesses including those run by migrants faced bankruptcy, partly because they were unable to secure stocks. A survey by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) found that about 70 per cent of small businesses run by internal or external migrants and refugees such as barber shops and kiosks in Nairobi experienced job losses or closure (MMC, 2020). Although internal migrants often returned to rural areas where they had maintained connections, for external migrants, this option did not exist, as they do not have a rural 'home' to return to. At the same time, government support systems largely excluded these migrants, thus leaving them with limited support networks at a time of crisis (Brain et al., 2020; MMC, 2020).

Taken together, the COVID measures adopted affected material well-being of internal and external migrants through the pandemic's economic impact. Many Ethiopians and Eritreans are among the migrants who work in sectors particularly affected by the pandemic, namely the hospitality industry or as drivers. One respondent estimated that around 60–70 per cent of the work force in those sectors have lost their jobs—an impression that cannot easily be verified but that gives some indication of the subjective, felt effect of COVID-19 within these diaspora communities.

Many of these jobs are done on an informal or semi-formal basis, which makes it easy for employers to reduce working hours and wages. The interview sample points to a notable difference here between Eritrean and Ethiopian employers that might be followed up more systematically in future research: among Eritreans, little to no effort has been reported by business owners to help their struggling compatriots. Respondent 'N' says in this respect that for Eritrean-run business owners, it is good 'to have cheap labour', in fact often by qualified Eritrean employees to whom they pay meagre wages as they lack official papers, whereas 'for us [Eritrean employees] it is an earning, we have to chase those jobs and if we are lucky we get one' (virtual interview with 'N', 6 October 2020). Although job insecurity is also a feature for Ethiopian diaspora members, the Ethiopian business community seems more sympathetic, on an individual basis but also as a collective. In relation to individual experiences respondent 'E', who works for an Ethiopian compatriot, explains: 'Our wages and job is not guaranteed by law, we are casual workers […]. I entirely depend on the mercy of the owner, if she wants, she can fire me anytime […]. I want to thank her for letting me work when possible. I owe her a lot for the help she gave me during that difficult time' (virtual interview with 'E', 31 October 2020).

In addition, Ethiopian participants reported a coordinated response by business owners and other wealthy members of the Ethiopian diaspora. Partly coordinated through the Ethiopian embassy, immediate support was provided and additional funds were raised to buy necessities like flour and sugar for those who lost their work, as also reported in the media (IOM, 2020). Furthermore, the respondent revealed, monthly stipends to those affected by lockdown policies and closures were set up by wealthy Ethiopian business people (virtual interview with 'A', 8 September 2020).

Among members of the Ethiopian Oromo diaspora community, the Oromo being Ethiopia's largest ethnic group but often victims of economic and social marginalization within Ethiopia, in addition a strong semi-formal network of support does exist. 'We Oromos have a social welfare organisation where we support each other […] this is our culture as Oromos, though I come from Ethiopia I am first an Oromo […] we Oromo are helping each other as much as we can', interviewee 'B' says (virtual interview with 'B', 6 October 2020). These social welfare organizations are, in fact, structured entities in the different communities, he continues to explain, in effect 'it's like a social welfare system by the Oromo community in different parts of the city'. 'B' is a member of his local organization made up of 75–100 people. They collect money on a regular basis from their members and then support either activities for the common good of all Oromo or, in times of crises like COVID-19, those in urgent and unexpected need. They are loosely interlinked also across closed social media groups globally thus can draw on wider support if needed.

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Among Eritreans, a majority, estimated at 80 per cent by respondent 'J', mainly rely on remittances from abroad, usually from countries in the Global North (virtual interview with 'J', 28 September 2020). But remittances for many have decreased in the times of COVID-19, and they struggle to make ends meet. Even those who have work do so in 'customer service, as barista, in hairdressing (…) one does not earn a lot' so even with a job they rely on remittances for their regular expenses as Nairobi is an expensive place to live in (virtual interview with 'A', 8 September 2020).

Ethiopians also rely on remittances even if it seems to a lesser extent. How the cycle of COVID-19 has disrupted transnational and local relationships that secure everyday material well-being is described in exemplary fashion by respondent 'D': Her partner and the father of their two children managed to get to the United Kingdom, where he works in the construction sector. Before his departure she was the breadwinner and he looked after the children, as he was unable to find work in Nairobi. 'D' now lives of the remittances he sends that also pay for tuition fees for the eldest school-age child—the only way to secure a good education in Kenya's school system and to learn proper English. COVID-19 and the lockdown measures in the United Kingdom have left her partner without work for many months. She had just enough savings to allow the continuation of her child's schooling and started to give some home-schooling lessons to others, as she is house bound with her youngest child. With the UK lockdown easing, her partner started work again, but her example demonstrates the fragility of this transnational arrangement. While waiting to be allowed to join her partner in the United Kingdom, she is realistic enough to know this may take a long time, and her prime efforts are geared towards securing economic survival and a better future for their children—therefore the big emphasis on supporting English language education. Her main support network and the focus of her daily life beyond financial remittances has become the local Ethiopian Oromo community, as will be taken up further in the section below (virtual interview with 'D', 31 October 2020).

Perhaps, most difficult was the situation for those who are self-employed and/or have a business that caters for their local community, including taxi drivers or the owners of hairdresser shops or small restaurants. Many of these businesses had to close when lockdown measures started, and hardly anybody had insurance or was entitled to some form of compensation, nor did alternative means to earn an income exist. Many Eritreans in particular, as, according to the interviewees, no support was provided by their embassy (the embassy was contacted for comment but declined) or other semi-formal networks, and remittances were less secure, only survived through ad-hoc support measures in their neighbourhoods or through friends, leaving those who lived in areas of the city without a substantial diaspora community at a distinct disadvantage, as will be explored in more detail below.

Taken together, many of the challenges raised by members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora in Nairobi in relation to employment and economic security are similar to those of migrant workers more generally, be they internal or external migrants. Although in some cases, ad-hoc and/or semi-formalized networks of support existed or sprung up, it were predominately local social networks that provided emotional support, at least in immaterial ways. For everyday lives, the concrete local environment thus gained prime importance. At the same time, drawing support from these local networks became more difficult in practice, as Kenyan lockdown policies and their enforcement posed a challenge in relation to the social and cultural habits within both communities.

COVID-19 and social, cultural and psychological well-being

Two social activities are of prime importance within both communities to similar degrees: gathering for daily coffee ceremonies to exchange news but also develop helping networks and strategies; and attendance at religious gatherings, predominately Christian churches ranging from Orthodox, Catholic to Pentecostal churches for Eritreans and Christian and Muslim places of worship for Ethiopians. With lockdown measures, both social activities became severely curtailed, albeit to different degrees. Especially for those who live in neighbourhoods without a substantive diaspora community and/or those living on their own, without family or relatives, isolation in such circumstances was a constant struggle, in addition to anxiety about economic security discussed above.

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Eritreans [and Ethiopians] are social animals, 'people cannot handle the loneliness' (virtual interview with 'I', 9 September 2020). That fact makes the daily coffee ceremony in addition to faith-based encounters so relevant, and innovative ways were found to facilitate such encounters and secure well-being in the everyday during these times of crisis, as discussed in the following.

Many churches were closed during the lockdown periods, or had visiting numbers curtailed. For many Eritreans and Ethiopians, especially those who live on their own, church gatherings are the most important means to meet others, in terms of social connections as well as in relation to ask for actual help with any emerging problems. Some churches organized prayer sessions via zoom, as respondent 'O' elaborates: 'One good thing was the church had organised daily prayer time using zoom. That felt like we were together because we can see each other's faces on the screen. That was great […] for people to comfort one another. We were spending more than one hour chatting after the prayer time to talk about how people were doing during lockdown […] Some people did not have the opportunity to join and were suffering psychologically [as a result]. Some Eritreans were meeting up with their Eritrean neighbours in small numbers, to overcome that' (virtual interview with 'O', 8 October 2020).

Although one may imagine virtual encounters with faith-based groups also beyond the neighbourhood and related to the transnational diaspora community might have a similar effect, those could not disperse the feeling of being isolated. Rather, of prime importance was the possibility to connect to those within the city or the local community. This was partly the case as many concrete initiatives to provide support, not only psychologically but also in material ways, started from local churches or mosques, as this business owner explains: 'I now support two families regularly with their rent payments […] the assistance is organised by the church, they communicate with us which people need help […] I don't know the people personally who I support, as it is better to do this anonymously' (virtual interview with 'G', 13 January 2021).

But more importantly, interviewees felt the need to be reassured in their daily struggles by engagement within their locality. In that respect, the opportunity to gather at religious festivals was highly valued, as at the same time private gatherings were partly forbidden and visits to coffee houses where people who live dispersed across the city tend to meet were closed, depriving people of social contacts. 'Luckily our congregation is less than the maximum number allowed to congregate in church. Therefore, we are still having church services as usual following the government guidance of social distancing and face masks. For example, we had beautiful *Qudus Yohannes* (Geez New Year's Day) and *Meskel* (Holy Cross) celebrations in church. Entire families were able to take part' (virtual interview, 'L', 29 September 2020).

Apart from or in addition to church/mosque gatherings, the coffee ceremony is often the only social outlet for many, and a key feature of everyday life including also in their home country, a feature even more important in a diasporic setting. It is the glue that holds society together. But coffee ceremonies have in some areas ceased almost completely with lockdown policies, according to some informants. 'People [*referring to Kenyans*] started to monitor neighbourhoods for COVID-19 symptoms, and if they see somebody breaking the rules, they pass it on to the authorities to safeguard the neighbourhood health […] people are very active in that respect to ensure government guidelines are followed'. This has resulted in a state of affairs where 'we refrain from going into other people's houses and have coffee as we used to, this has created pressures on our lives' (virtual Interview with 'A', 8 September 2020). This pressure is more devastating for single men, who not only often lack the equipment necessary for a proper coffee ceremony and who in the past would have been invited by women living in their neighbourhood or connections further away, as travel and visiting were now constrained while coffee houses they would otherwise visit also remained closed.

Others were lucky in relation to their personal living conditions, one example here is 'J' who says: 'If I see it from my building's perspective, I can say we are lucky. I personally did not go out for two months at the beginning of the pandemic, I used my time to finalise some project. But in this neighbourhood in general and my building in particular I always hear people laughing. People were trying to forget their problems by congregating in small groups inside their houses and chat, having fun and laughter while having traditional coffee, eating what they had together, doing most of the things together with their neighbours. That encouraged me to be optimistic that this problem will go away and the community will overcome it together' (virtual interview with 'J', 28 September 2020).

Taken together, how well participants dealt with COVID-19 repercussions and in particular the lockdown depended strongly on their networks. Although some of those networks transcended the local setting of Nairobi and some used the lockdown to re-connected more deeply to the wider transnational social field, localized connections became much more important, as analysed in the following section.

DISCUSSION: SPATIAL RE-CONFIGURATIONS OF NETWORKS FROM TRANSNATIONAL TO LOCAL, AND VICE VERSA

I set out to analyse transnational lived citizenship practices among members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora communities in Nairobi in light of COVID-19.

The local lives of the members of the Eritrean and Ethiopian diaspora interviewed for this paper have been shown to take place in a wider transnational social field determined by their country of origin to which they have multiple attachments and the aspirations for their future which is envisaged beyond Nairobi—as they are transit migrants or in the phrase of one interviewee 'involuntary settlers' (virtual interview with 'A', 8 September 2020). But the shock of COVID-19 has reconfigured this transnational orientation towards localized practices of citizenship for some, whereas for others, it enforced transnational engagements, even if not necessarily by choice. Both dynamics demonstrate that these migrant lives rely on transnational lived citizenship practices to negotiate everyday well-being and secure a sense of belonging in the city that has become their temporary home.

'E' is a case in point for the increased importance of local connections to fellow nationals: She shares a flat with a member from the same diaspora community who she first met in a refugee camp in Kenya. When they decided to live together, it was partly as an extra layer of security and confidence, as for unmarried women to live on their own always carries risks. In the times of COVID-19, it became a life saver, as she explains: 'We were able to survive the lockdown because I shared my expenses and my life with my friend [*her flatmate*]. We were and are still supporting one another in all aspects, financially, emotionally and socially. That is a blessing for me' (virtual interview with 'B', 31 October 2020). While both see Nairobi as a transitional place, their future plans have moved to the background in favour of securing their joint life in the city.

For others, new ad-hoc informal support networks emerged, sometimes drawing on narratives of past histories that define their understandings of community, but are now lived in a diasporic context that, ironically, was created as a repercussion of that history. 'J' says in this regard that those who still get remittances often share those with others, and then draws a comparison with wider Eritrean history: 'It reminds me of the time in 1990 when Massawa was liberated and people in Asmara were struggling to get some food, our mothers then shared what they had with their neighbours to get through that difficult time' (virtual interview with 'J', 28 September 2020). 'J' here refers to some of the founding narratives of Eritrea as an independent state that centres on community and sacrifice, narratives that have ultimately resulted in the repressive politics in Eritrea from which the migrants in Nairobi have actually fled. In this interesting referral back to this 'heroic' past, these narratives are now re-invigorated as a means to get through the difficult life of a migrant during the time of crisis (for a wider discussion of the role of memory in migratory lives, see Hirt, 2021). One could almost say that turning to important national narratives supports locally lived citizenship in a transnational migrant setting. In addition, in everyday lived citizenship practices of solidarity and support, affective dimensions of lived citizenship come to the fore and become grounded in local material and immaterial acts and practices among non-citizens, at times supported by transnational diaspora (see also Kallio et al., 2020).

Even for others with a clear link to beyond Nairobi, as is the case for 'D' discussed above whose partner works in the United Kingdom and whose remittances are her main source of income in normal times, the local environment has become much more central to their lives than this distant connection. This local environment, as has also been reported by other interviewees, is in itself often made up of narrow networks, based on nationality or more often on confined perceptions of ethnicity. 'D' elaborates in this respect: 'Most of my time is with my friends who like me are mothers

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[…] we spend time chatting over coffee and discuss life while our children play together […] my friends are mostly Ethiopian Oromo … there are also Kenyan Oromo in Nairobi but I do not socialise with them […] I mostly socialise with Oromo from my province' (virtual interview with 'D', 31 October 2020). Local transnational lived citizenship practices and the acts of belonging expressed through those are thus clearly tied to specific and often narrow perceptions of 'national' within a diaspora context.

This observation is supported by the fact that already before COVID-19, many respondents actively sought to live in neighbourhoods where other Ethiopians and /or Eritreans lived, in particularly those who refer to themselves as Habesha, Ethiopians and Eritreans from the Tigrinya, Tigrayan and Amharic ethnic groups predominately. As 'A' explains: 'You see, when we live outside our country of origin, we might be referred to differently, Eritreans and Ethiopians, but there is no difference in our lives […] you cannot differentiate an Eritrean from an Ethiopian, we live together here', and this allows mutual informal support in times of crises like COVID-19, even if just in offering emotional support during daily coffee ceremonies (virtual interview with 'A', 8 September 2020).

This makes it difficult for those who live far away from areas where communities from their country or culture of origin gather. 'I live far away from the neighbourhoods where Eritreans or Habesha live, I do not have time to go there regularly […] but in normal times I go to church every Sunday and meet with people and chat there' (virtual interview with 'K', 28 September 2020). With lockdown restrictions, this has been severely curtailed, and 'K' was thrown back to virtual connections with friends or family elsewhere. In his case, COVID-19 has actually enforced recourse to transnational networks, as local spaces were closed down.

A similar experience was reported by 'H', an Ethiopian merchant. He says: 'Corona affected every part of our life. During the lock-down my business was closed, I had no income and was using my savings to survive. Concerning the social aspect, the lack of physical relationships was stressful […] we could not go to church … staying the whole day at home was psychologically detrimental […] that is why I turned to the internet. The good thing is, I now had more opportunity to follow the news from my home country, and I was also able to connect more with relatives and friends across the world, using social media […] I even used zoom calls to connect with people in Nairobi and also abroad' (virtual interview with 'H', 24 January 2021).

In contrast, for those who through their living arrangements were closely embedded with friends, neighbours or communities and/or faith-based networks, these connections became much more prominent than their transnational networks. COVID-19 has enforced a turn towards localized practices of citizenship, a turn towards considering as 'home where you live, until you may leave there […] you feel and have an important attachment', even if your wider ambition is to move to another country (virtual interview with 'A', 8 September 2020). It has also enforced among those interviewees who live far away from co-nationals, usually not by choice but for economic or other logistical reasons, a strong desire for more local linkages in the everyday. Whether this will in the longer term result in more close-knit local neighbourhoods or disappear again in a post-pandemic world remains to be seen.

Taken together, the empirical data I have analysed here and the focus of the paper on how individuals act out their lived citizenship and multiple dimensions of belonging allow me to make sense of the repercussions of a shock like COVID-19 in relation to transnational lived citizenship. It has demonstrated how COVID-19 re-enforced or triggered a turn towards local environments, or rather, a turn towards local networks of fellow nationals or fellow ethnic communities, whereas it could also re-enforce allegiances to global fellow national collectives. With these findings, the paper contributes to the literature that suggests that transnational lived citizenship is a useful framing when trying to understand migrant livelihoods and diaspora engagement, and how belonging can be modified and transformed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have provided empirical evidence of the effects of COVID-19, most pronounced in relation to lockdown measures, on members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora communities in Nairobi, Kenya. I have used the concept

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of transnational lived citizenship to demonstrate how key aspects of material and immaterial well-being were affected among participants to different degrees.

This has partially triggered a local turn in practices of lived citizenship, but the latter has maintained or enforced a deep connection to the national and transnational community of participants' country of origin. Through focusing on concrete lived experiences and how these have been re-assessed by participants due to the pandemic, I argue that transnational lived citizenship can easily become reconfigured as a local practice within and among diaspora communities, even if not in relation to local Kenyan citizens. In turn, I also demonstrate that transnational lived citizenship is a useful lens when analysing shifting migrant livelihoods and belonging. This turn towards the local may be temporary or more permanent, but above all, it indicates that transnational lived citizenship holds promise when analysing the role of diasporas in global networks.

In addition, I contribute empirical groundings to two wider claims in the literature on migration and transnationalism: Firstly, responses to a shock like COVID-19 support the assertion that refugees and migrants enact their citizenship in relation to a transnational social field (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Vertovec, 2009). Transnational linkages are being severed or enforced, but also the turn towards local networks is determined by transnational conceptions of such networks, and how these are related to countries of origin and global connections.

Secondly, structural inequalities determine potentials and pitfalls of transnational lived citizenship (Brees, 2010). COVID-19 has enhanced many of those inequalities, but at the same time opened avenues for new forms of solidarity within diaspora communities. A case in point here are the various ad-hoc or organized networks where those with resources helped others in need, some with global connections.

This leads to two further conclusions when considering diaspora connections in the times of COVID-19 or related to future shocks of its kind:

Firstly, much has been said about the important role of civil society organizations in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Indeed, civil society in its organized form has played and continues to play a vital role (a good summary on a global scale is given by Civicus, 2020). But when talking about civil society the focus is predominately on organized parts within the NGO sector, whereas diaspora networks are often informal, all the more so in settings where diaspora members may not have the right residency papers for their place of residence (as was also the case with some informants for this paper). A better understanding and recognition of informal networks and an effort to link those with state or non-state actors, but also across wider regional and international networks would be useful. Diaspora groups are often only recognized as vital contributors when they are based in the Global North and provide help to their country of origin or people from their country of origin in the Global South. Such an approach fails to make use of the many connections that determine transnational lived citizenship across such imagined geographies of power and resources.

Secondly, diaspora populations, through the interconnectedness of their lives between their country of origin, their country of residence and the wider transnational social field, could become key actors in imagining different ways to ensure people's well-being. Such visions have been formulated as a tentative agenda for certain regions of the world in light of COVID-19 (see, for example, Kabutaulaka, 2020)—based largely on nation states as crucial actors, and diaspora could be a way to move beyond the state here. From the interview data presented, the tentative efforts by wealthy members of the Ethiopian business community to provide monthly stipends to those in need, a move not dissimilar in approach to that propagated by supporters of a Universal Basic Income, is a case in point: If a coalition of diaspora, state and non-state actors and international organizations would pool resources in a way to provide such an income, well-being among mobile populations would be greatly advanced. But even a simple approach to strengthen local networks with transnational links could have many positive externalities, as also demonstrated in a recent paper on trans-local connections and displacement outside COVID-19 concerns (Tufa et al., 2021).

Taken together, even where transnational lived citizenship turns local, diaspora lives unfold in a transnational social field that fosters innovative ways to sustain identities and belonging, as all participants here have demonstrated in different ways.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study will be available upon completion of the overall research project via the ESRC data repository (expected to be in 2024). At the time of writing, the data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Different definitions exist of the term 'diaspora'. I use the term diaspora in the simple sense of referring to migrant groups who retain a strong sense of connection to their country of origin, directly and/or via engagement with global networks of country of origin populations.

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