

Adaptation of Residential Space by Somali Immigrants in Nairobi to Accommodate Social and Cultural Needs

Crispino Ochieng

*Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology, Nairobi**

Abstract

In the Somali community, social taboos among members of different social generic group are informed by avoidance form of relationship. In the traditional setting the built environment is structured to take cognizance of this taboo. The taboo is clearly manifest during periods of socialization when both kin-people and friends come together. Separate settings are prepared for each group. During the Somali civil war from early 1990' to the present, Somali immigrants in Kenya occupied domestic dwellings that had not been informed by their socio-cultural needs such as avoidance relationship, rites of passage some of the common practice between members of the different social generic groups. In time the domestic space have ideally been re-structured, surrounding open area for example the front yard is occupied and/ or territory is extended to a friendly neighbors domestic space. Thus the taboo is maintained.



Introduction

The Somali people are predominantly Muslims. They reside in Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eastern Ethiopia and northeast Kenya. Since the early 90's and due e to the civil war in Somalia, Somali's have continued to migrate to neighbouring countries. A sizeable number of them have settled in some of Kenya's major towns. In Kenya, they view themselves as members of a minority group. In Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, the majority of Somali's have settled to the northeast of the city in a residential neighbourhood known as *Eastleigh*. Historically, this neighbourhood has been identified with people of Islamic background, mostly Kenyans of Somali origin. From the mid-90's some of the migrating Somalis took up residence in *Komarock*, a newly developing residential neighbourhood at the edge of Eastern Nairobi. This is a high-density neighbourhood. There are differences found in the housing block typologies in these two neighbourhoods.

Housing Block Typologies

The two neighbourhoods, *Eastleigh* and *Komarock* has different characteristics. The later is an old neighbourhood having been started in the early 20th century. It has a decaying infrastructure. *Komarock* is a 1990 project.

*Dean and Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture and Building Sciences, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology, Nairobi, P.O Box 62000, Email: cochieng@hotmail.com

Eastleigh

This is a high-density residential neighbourhood. Dwelling block layouts have been informed by a grid system. Blocks are of courtyard typology. They are low-rise units averaging two levels and enclosing individual courts. Each block is controlled through a single entrance. A typical block accommodates units for shops on the ground floor, while upper floors are used for residential purposes.

Eastleigh is heavily densified with very few open spaces. There are only three types of open space. Firstly are some of the open spaces located within some of the institutions, for example, those within schools and religious buildings. People regularly congregated within these structures. Secondly, are the inner courtyards within each block, where womenfolk spend most of their time. They use this space to socialize and at the same time to carry out some domestic duties. Occasionally elders would also congregate in this area, especially in the evenings. They would receive friends including some Somalia's. Thirdly are the open spaces along the street and/or outside some of the popular commercial blocks or neighbourhood shops. Both the youth and adults spent some of their time socializing outside. Some of their activities included, playing cards, discussions, and chewing their favourite khat. A plant leaf that is popular with the Somali community. Chewed and acts as stimulant.

Komarock

This is a new medium density housing development on the outskirts of Eastern Nairobi. Two types of housing blocks found are the linear and the courtyards. Housing units are semi-detached. Each dwelling unit has an open space both at the front and at the back. Over time, every house had enclosed its open space. There was only a single planned commercial and recreational area for the entire *Komarock* housing scheme.

Open spaces in each of the individual housing units provided ready setting for realisation of social, as well as domestic activities by individual families. For example, some of the visitors would be welcomed and entertained in the front open space. Some of the domestic activities, for example food preparation, would take place in the back open space. Open space at the back is also the space where some of the domestic activities are performed.

There were open spaces outside, within the neighbourhood, that were popular with people of Somalia origin. These included some of the street and/ or outside popular commercial blocks and/ or corner shops. Somalia people would stay here to chew their popular plant leaf *khat* and to engage in discussion and/ or playing of cards (figure 1).

People who wanted to drink liquor, generally frequented the commercial centre. All eight units, within the four blocks, were used for selling liquor. In other parts of *Komarock*, illegal structures had been developed. These accommodated both commercial and recreational activities. Because they are of Islamic faith, the commercial centre was not popular with people of Somalia origin.

Culture and Change of Social Ideas

Culture is viewed as a typical lifestyle, that is identified with a particular group of people and that has passed down from generation to generation (Khodmany, Rapoport: 1980, Parkin: 78, Lartey: 77). At the social level, any activity that is frequently repeated becomes cast into a pattern. Culture also brings about order in the group (Khodmany, Duncan). Among the

Muslim people, there is a set way that people of different social generic groups behave towards one another. For example women adorn particular type of clothing that would not readily expose them to their men. Culture is an adaptation to the external forces (Allen, Lartey). The outside forces are addressed in such a manner that the inner stability is reconciled with the external. There are institutions developed by society to support this.

When there are new forces, cultural dimensions undergo change. In any society, two types of culture can be identified (Khodmany, Abu-Ghazze, Rapoport: 83b). The first type includes cultural values that have been judged by the group to be important for their survival. Also, these help to identify the group from the rest. The second type includes those cultural values that are of less significance to the group, but are still part of the culture.

These two kinds of change can be witnessed within the different elements of culture. When there is a force of change, cultural needs that have been judged to be of little significance are discarded. The rest of the needs identified to be of social significance are retained. These are the principles of the culture that are retained (Rapoport: 80, Rapoport: 83b, Rapoport: 89). Although the way of enacting the role may have changed, the goal still remains the same.

An example of cultural change, where the principle is still being held on to, is the Australian Aborigines and the concept of 'going walkabout' (Rapoport: 83b). This is one of those cultural needs that the group has continued to hold on to. In the culture, members walked through the land while experiencing different cultural themes. Of late, rather than moving around on foot, the ritual movement is undertaken by going round in a truck. Both the new and old have been integrated and a new way of enacting the rite has been introduced.

Among the women of Damascus, in spite of the introduction of modern design in dwellings where wide windows are clearly articulated, women still prefer privacy in their space. They rely on among other blinds to block access to the interior.

Culture has three different forms (Parkin). Activities, concepts and lexicons are all possible forms of culture (Rapoport, Parkin). These do not necessarily mirror each other. There are times when material objects and symbols are relied on to represent the message of culture (Rapoport, Perkin). A built setting that is congruent with a particular group's behavior should be an example of cultural material. The characters of the setting would have been influenced by the culture of the community (Khodmany, Allen, Rapoport: 80).

Although culture has different attributes, it is a system that has to be approached as a whole. This is explained more fully by the suggestion of the existence of a cultural landscape (Abu-Ghazze, Rapoport: 92, Meining, Lartey). Within a certain context, the built elements as example of culture can only be understood by seeing them in relation to the surrounding. One cannot understand the Acropolis outside the context of contemporary Athens (Rapoport: 92).

One of the setbacks to change in culture is the fear that people have of what may happen. The view of culture is of something that is secularized and should not be tampered with (Allen, Acholla-Ayayo). Cultural change represents the unknown. Along the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, there are four communities that live next to one another. These comprise hundreds of thousands of people. Each person here considers the other one to be a brother or sister. Due to exogamous rules and the incest taboo, people here cannot marry one another (Acholla-Ayayo). No one is willing to question this requirement.

A side effect of change in culture is stress (Rapoport: 83b, Derek, Vivienne Japha, Acholla-Ayayo). There can be change in an individual and within the community. It is highly likely that cultural change can end in the displacement of family and social structures (Derek, Vivienne Japha, Khodmany, Acholla-Ayayo). These are among the institutions for the individual and also form part of the society's identification. At the same time, places are identified by the type of cultural activities that they represent.

It can be summarized that culture is dynamic. Change does take place within any of the attributes of culture (Rapoport: 89). There are several kinds of attributes. When there is change, an individual and society might go through a stress period (Rapoport: 83b). With change there is the fear of the unknown. In order to allay the fear, some of the groups, such as the Australian Aborigine, have integrated aspects of modernity into their cultural activities. This is a form of psychosocial therapy.

Scope and Limits

Primary data was collected from Somali immigrants who had settled in Nairobi. Combined literature sources, archival information and narratives were used to compile information on background culture. Although there are several clans among the Somalia people it was confirmed that they share similar cultural ideas.

Although some of the immigrants had learnt to communicate effectively in the two Kenyan official languages of Swahili and English, the majority still experience language problems. They preferred to socialise among themselves. Thus research had to rely on a few translators. Another factor was with women. They would not readily socialise with research. Research had to rely on women from same community to collect the data.

It is hoped that research findings will be of use to those concerned with addressing planning and design issues in the current spate of urban housing. Their ideas should aim at developing a built environment that provides for the social cultural needs of diverse groups.

Method

Data was collected both in *Eastleigh* and *Komarock* over a six-month period. These were both from informal as well as formal social activities. Later, activities included marriage celebrations and mourning of the dead. Qualitative ethnographic design was applied.

Data was collected from two types of informants. First were those who were identified as key informants. They were those judged as being knowledgeable enough of their culture (Patton, Leedy). Also they were able to articulate and so could explain events in a clear manner. They were mostly elders and religious leaders who were viewed as being paradigmatic examples. Also in the Somali community there are those who have been elected to positions of leadership. Among other duties, their role includes settling of disputes between community members. Second were the focused groups. These are the women and elders.

Combined methods included observations, discussions and photographing (Patton, Leedy). This enabled cross checking and exposed some hidden issues. At times, I joined in some of the activities, for example the gender dance that is enacted during marriage celebrations and at meal times. For some of the activities that required avoidance form of relationship for example where only women were required I had trained a female to collect the data. Finally data was analysed by coding. Several categories were developed; issues were

compared and contrasted by looking horizontally across the categories. This method revealed recurring themes, for example avoidance relationship between members of the different social generic groups and some of the requirements of social space and usage.

Social Relations

Inter-social relationships are very strong. Somalia people are predominantly of Islamic background. Their behaviour and lifestyle is highly informed by religion. There are three generic groups in this community, namely the elders, women and youth. Social activity relations between members of different groups are generally controlled and often groups occupy their own territories. When they migrated to Nairobi, the majority of the Somali people preferred to settle in *Eastleigh*, a neighbourhood that borders the Central Business District (CBD) to the northeast. Recently *Komarock*, a newly developed neighbourhood, located about 15 Km. to the east of the CBD has continued to attract immigrants. Somali people live in close-knit families and it is common to find several families sharing one housing unit. Religion and social requirements influence their lifestyle.

In their new homes in Nairobi, behaviour between members of different generic groups are heavily influenced by cultural requirements. For example, except when the need arose, each group stayed in its own territory. For example, in *Eastleigh*, elders preferred to congregate outside on the streets. With time they identified their own favourite settings. These were identified as outside some of the popular shops, under a tree or anywhere that would accommodate seating (fig 1). Youth too would be outside, except in very rare cases they occupied their own setting. Women stayed indoors and did all the domestic work.

In *Komarock* the case was slightly different. The front yard provided a proper setting for elders. Here they would be served tea and meals. They would come here to consult, chew *khat*, play cards or simply engage in discussions. Unless summoned, both youth and women would stay away from the elders. The youth spent most of their time outside in the streets. They preferred street corners and/or outside retail shops that provided ample outside seating space. Here they would engage in gossiping, while at times chewing *khat*. They would stay out until late in the evenings. The majority of the youth lacked an internal room where they could socialise with their mates.

A popular activities among the Somali youth is the games off volleyball and football They took advantage of any open ground to start a game of either football or volleyball. They mainly played the game between themselves.

Women of Somali background are well known for their culinary skills, and the cooking area was a favourite setting, here they would entertain. In *Komarock*, cooking was done in the backyard. There was an avoidance form of relationship between members of the different generic groups and. the behaviour between members of different generic groups was noticed particularly during celebration periods of a marriage and during mourning.

Celebration of Marriage

Marriage celebrations last the whole day. Preparation for celebrations begins very early. Several goats, the favourite animal among the Somali people are slaughtered. In the course of the day, different kinds of events take place. They are informed by cultural needs and some activities require their own setting. Kin members of different levels are likely to attend. Levels of privacy should be introduced between some of the participants.

Firstly, elders from both sides sat together to give their consent. During this portion of the celebration, everyone else stayed away. In their present settlement, especially in *Komarock*, this activity would be marked inside the front room of the bridegroom's parental house (figure 2). The room would have been decorated with flowers and bright shiny clothing materials. A religious leader would likely be invited to witness this.

An important activity was also the gender dance. During this, members of each gender would dance in their own enclosed area that is far removed from each other. They dance, sing and make jokes with one another (figure 3). Often, room for one group would have been secured within some of the neighbouring block/ housing units, especially where there was a Somali neighbour.

Except when attending to the gender dance, women would be mainly involved with food preparation and serving. Food preparation was done both in the kitchen and also in the backyard. Extra space for cooking would be 'borrowed for use' where there was a Somali neighbour near by.

Marriage celebrations involve kinship people of different levels and there are cultural behaviours displayed towards each other. This is controlled by territorial definition. In some of the new residences, when celebrating a marriage, the majority of Somali people adapt their built environment to accommodate the different socio-cultural requirements.

Figure 1: Everyday, during the 1700 hours BBC Somali news, Somali men move out of their houses to sit together and listen to the news anchor (picture courtesy author).

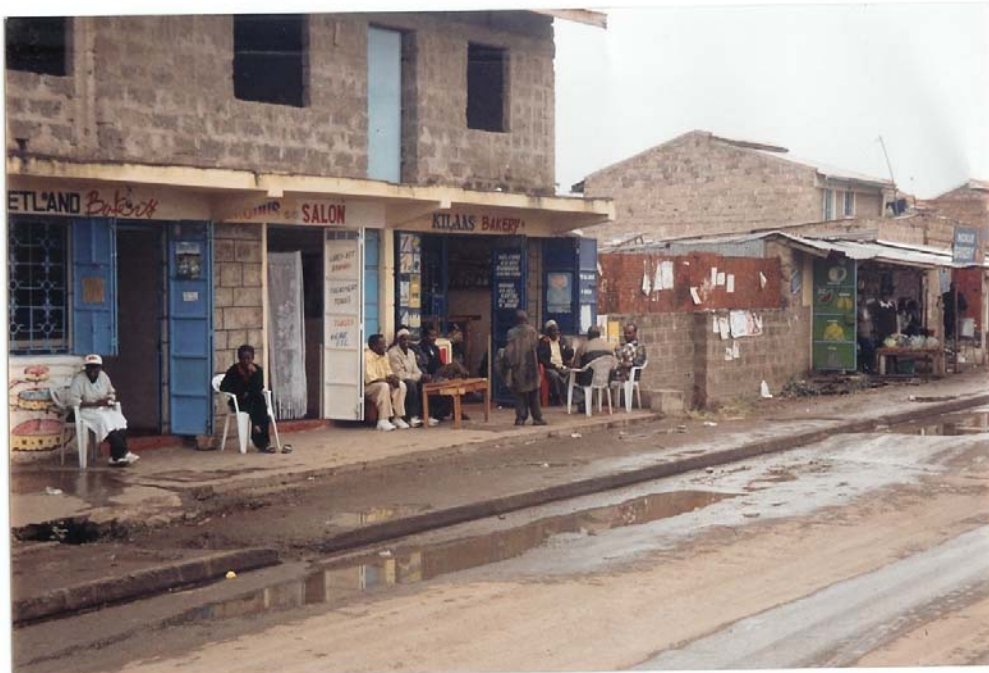


Figure 2: In one of the marriage rites, elders from both sides, an exclusive men club, sits in the front room to give their consent for the marriage (picture courtesy, author).



Figure 3: Separate dancing sessions are held by members of the different social generic groups to celebrate a marriage. This particular one was for the women (picture courtesy, female research assistant).



Marking Mourning

The period of mourning lasts an average of three days. Then, people are called in to console the bereaved family. Three types of places are needed. Firstly the prayer places where visitors call in. A corner of the room or yard is cleaned and prayer mats are spread on the ground. Visitors call here first. Secondly an appropriate setting is required for entertaining the elders who will be calling in to offer their condolences and thus prayers. The family head, usually a male sits with the elders. He receives all the condolences. In *Eastleigh*, elders sat within the front room, whilst in *Komarock* they sat within the front open yard. The third type is an ample area that is required by the women preparing the food. During mourning, a lot of food is

prepared for the visitors. In *Komarock* and in *Eastleigh*, this would take place in the usual cooking area and within the open yard both at the front and in the back.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has shown that within the Somali community, various taboos exist in the different social generic groups. There are typical elders, youth and genders. One way of observing taboos was by avoidance form of relationship in which there are some controlled forms of behaviour. There were particular settings both inside the dwellings and in the open outside areas that were associated with certain social generic groups. Also, during social activities avoidance relationship manifest and behaviours are controlled.

Emerging information clearly shows that the environment should be a result of several factors. There is, for example a complex arrangement of settings, expressing separations and linkages of people, privacy, transition, a range of activities and levels of significance. The relationships of this kind explain the congruency between settings and community ideals. Congruency between cultural needs and built setting can be further demonstrated by identifying the way that the two change in tandem. In a traditional environment the physical structure is a direct result of cultural needs. For example it should allow that during celebrations, members of different social generic groups celebrate in different groups despite the fact that they are united.

References

- Abu-Ghazze, T. M., Spring, (1994) 'Built Form and Religion: Underlying Structures of Jeddah Al-Qademah,' A, Nezzar, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Journal of the International association for the Study of traditional Environments, Center for Environmental and Design Research, Berkeley, University of California, pp 49-55.
- Al-Kodmany, K., (1997), 'Cultural Change and Residential Privacy: The Case of Women in Damascus', A, Maurice, J.C, Vischer, *Space Design and Management for Place Making, Design et, Gestion de L'Espace an Rapport Avec L'Amenagement Des Lieux*, Proceedings of the 28th. Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association, Oklahoma. pp58-70.
- Allen, A. E. G., Fall (1993) 'Architecture as Social Expression in Western Samoa; axioms and Models', A, Nezzar, A., *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Journal of the International association for the Study of traditional Environments, Center for Environmental and Design Research, Berkeley, University of California, pp 33-45.
- Bourdieu, J-P., Al Sayyad, N. (1989) *Dwellings, Settlements and Traditions*, New York, University Press of America.
- Burawoy, M., et al. (1991) *Ethnography unbound*, Power and resistance in the modern metropolis, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Eliades, M., (1959) *The Sacred and The Profane*, The nature of Religion, New York, Harcourt Brace and World.
- Fathy, H., (1973) Ed, *Architecture for the poor - an experiment in rural Egypt*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Hadjri, H., Fall (1993) 'Vernacular Housing Forms in North Algeria', A, Nezzar, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Journal of the International association for the Study of traditional Environments, Center for Environmental and Design Research, Berkeley, University of California, pp 65-74.
- Japha, D., Vivienne, J., Spring (1997) 'Two Missions: Case Studies in the Meaning of Tradition in Contemporary Development in South African' A, Nezzar, A., *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Journal of the International association for the Study of traditional Environments, Center for Environmental and Design Research, Berkeley,

University of California.

King, A. D., Ed, (1980) *Building and Society*, essays on the Social development of the built environment, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Leedy, P. D., (1997) *Practical research: Planning and design* [6th. ed.], New Jersey, Merrill, an imprint of Prentice Hall.

Ochieng, C., (1999), *The Dynamics of Culture in an Urban Setting – A study Set in Western Kenya*, A PhD Thesis Presented at the University of Cape Town in the School of Engineering and Built Environment, Cape Town.

Patton, M. Q., (1980) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, [2nd.ed], Beverley Hills, Sage Pub.

Rapoport, R., (1992) 'On Cultural Landscapes', A, Nezzar, A., *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Journal of the International association for the Study of traditional Environments, Center for Environmental and Design Research, Berkeley, University of California, pp 33-47.

Rapoport, R., (1983b) Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design, in *Habitat International*, 7[5/6], Pergamon Press Ltd.