

‘The Gift’ Transnationalized: An Anthropological Contribution to the Study of Remittances

Cindy Horst¹

¹PRIO, Oslo, Norway

cindy@prio.no

Remittances are a very interesting manifestation of the transnational, as they concern flows within transnational networks that involve the gift of money. Surprisingly, there is relatively little anthropological study of this phenomenon despite a great interest in transnational practices. At the same time, the extensive literature on remittance sending makes very little use of analytical developments in the anthropology of the gift. This paper attempts to bridge the two fields. Remittance sending practices among Somalis living in Europe are very often misunderstood and thus easily misjudged. Social workers ask why parents do not provide for their children in Norway but spend their low incomes abroad, Dutch municipalities have great difficulties dealing with debt problems among Somali residents, and various European authorities question the legality of the money that is being sent because of the high levels of unemployment among Somali immigrants. Yet in order to understand remittance sending practices occurring between Europe and the Horn of Africa, it is crucial to comprehend long-established social security mechanisms in Somali society. Anthropological understandings of gift-giving, social status and reciprocity can thus help us to analyze the ‘moral economy’ of remittance sending. At the same time, the paper will provide a thorough analysis of empirical research on remittance sending practices among Somali remittance senders in Norway and remittance receivers in Kenya, in order to develop and ‘transnationalize’ theorizing on gift-giving.