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Haden Griggs
Utah State University

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Every Step a Novel:

Historical Circumstances and Somali American Identity

Haden Griggs

Introduction

Like many others collecting oral histories, some of the most informative moments of research occurred when the recorder was off. One Saturday in the summer of 2019, I had just concluded an interview with a helpful and open member of the Somali American community in Salt Lake. The interview took a while to set up, and a series of events including weather and obligations meant that this interview took place in his home. As I was packing up, his son, perhaps in his late teens or early twenties, entered the room. His father introduced him to me, explained that I had come to learn about Somali history, then jokingly remarked that his son didn't know anything about Somalia. His son quickly shot back, "that's because I'm an American." His father laughed—seemingly uncomfortably—and said, "Somali American." I left shortly thereafter. The passing exchange that took only a few seconds, after the end of an interview and many previous meetings with this man, got me considering Somali American identity in ways I had not during our interview.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical identity of Somali refugee men who now live in the greater Salt Lake area. Identity is a troublesome word that has some inherent challenges for the historian. First, it is difficult to define even one's own identity; there are many factors that influence an individual's day to day self-perceptions, beliefs, belongings, kinships, and feelings. It is difficult to share these personal perceptions and beliefs with anyone, let alone a stranger, and it perhaps is impossible for a scholar to say that someone's identity at a given point in the past can best be described as X or Y. Secondly, a historian, whether conducting an oral history or studying a document produced by an individual, is essentially locked out of the private chambers of that person's life. Andrew Shyrock, Nabeel Abraham, and Sally Howell give a useful comparison to the work of an historian studying individuals, in the experience and reality

of visiting an Arab American Museum in Detroit. This museum essentially functions as a guestroom, where a family—Arab Americans—receives visitors, or the public. The guest is made comfortable and has a safe space to interact with the family. The family, on the other hand, has an opportunity to make a good impression and interact with the guest, but also has a space that disconnects the guest from the rest of the house, where the family actually lives.¹ How does a researcher get at the truth of identity in their research?

Peter Burke and Jan Stets offer some useful insights into how scholars can approach identity. First, identity is better considered as a multitude of identities, as all people occupy a variety of roles, belong to a variety of groups, and have a variety of personal characteristics with which they identify.² These identities can be varied, and often seemingly disparate identities can coexist in one person. Amartya Sen observes that focusing on one strand of identity is a surefire approach of “*misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world [emphasis original].*”³

With the previous observations in mind, this paper will examine several historical aspects of Somali American identities that need to be carefully defined. It will examine how Somali men had to emphasize or articulate aspects of their identity within specific circumstances. It will also examine how others around them—fellow Somalis, other refugees, NGO employees, or Americans—attached identities to them, identities to which they had to cope or respond. These definitions of identity are akin to what Michel Foucault referred to as the “function” of identity in his essay, “What is an Author?”⁴ Foucault notes that the function, or identity of an author is

¹ Nabreem Abraham et al., *Arab Detroit 9/11. Life in the Terror Decade* (Detroit: Wayne Press University, 2011), 11.

² Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

³ Amartya Sen, “Violence, Identity and Poverty,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 1 (January 2008): 6.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow 1984. Repr., (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 110.

not a part of his inner being or persona, but rather the “result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being.”⁵ It is to this function I refer when I examine Somali identity in this paper. Therefore, this paper is less concerned with trying to strike at the core of what makes the men I spoke to individuals or capture their innermost feelings, straying away from more traditional identity studies as defined by Burke and Stets.⁶ Instead, it will look at the operations and events which shaped these men’s experiences and identities, the identities others (often unwelcomely) ascribed to them, and how they articulated their identities in return.

This paper brings to the table a historical perspective on a topic that has been commonly explored in sociology, namely, how refugees articulate their identities in order to best deal with their experiences. This topic has been well treated by several scholars, including Bram Jansen, Catherine Lune-Grayson, and Cindy Horst, who explored the experiences in refugee camps in Kenya; and also by Sandra Grady, Cawo Abdi, Patricia Buck and Rachel Silver, who explored Somali identity and challenges in the United States and elsewhere.⁷ I am indebted to their work in shaping my own theoretical lens. However, while these scholars largely considered events going on around them, my interest is historical, rather than sociological, and thus primarily focused on identity in the pasts of these men, and what factors shaped their identities, though I do venture into the recent past on some more recent events.

I argue that, prior to the Somali Civil War, Somali identity was often articulated based on Somali commonalities, including shared Islamic and national identity. The events leading to the

⁵ Foucault, 110.

⁶ See Burke, *Identity Theory*, 4.

⁷ See Jansen, *Kakuma Camp*, Grayson, *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya*, Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*, Grady, *Improvised Adolescence: Somali Bantu Teenage Refugees in America*, Cawo: *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity*, and Buck and Silver: *Educated for Change? Muslim Refugee Women in the West*. Cawo, Buck, and Silver, explore Somalis in the United States as part of a consideration of the greater diaspora.

fall of the Barre regime in Somali, including the Somali Civil War, flight to Kenya, and life in a refugee camp meant that group identities were ascribed to my informants, including clan and refugee identity. This meant my informants had to emphasize and, at times, downplay, aspects of their identity to match the needs of the circumstance in order to survive or overcome specific challenges resulting from the Somali Civil War and subsequent displacement. Resettlement in the United States, and specifically the Salt Lake area, brought Islamic and unified Somali identity back to the fore within the larger American Muslim community. Resettlement also brought a sense of American-ness, a keen awareness of difference, and a role-based identity that strongly focused on helping others.

Methodology

This paper is based on eight oral histories which I collected over the course of approximately a year and a half, as well as my personal observations over that time period. During this time, I attended prayers, *khutbahs*, community events, festivals, and meals at three different mosques in the Salt Lake area. I worked with leaders who hold both religious and secular roles in the Somali community to identify potential informants. This of course affected whom I interviewed.

All my informants were Somali Muslim men from the southern portion of Somalia (as opposed to Northern Somaliland).⁸ For purposes of considering their interviews, my informants fall roughly into three groups, with some overlap. The first group consists of three of my informants, Aden Batar, Osman Ahmed, and Ali Bahaji, who lived in Mogadishu and were

⁸ Somaliland currently has some autonomy as its own nation, even though it is largely not internationally recognized. Experiences in Somaliland during and after the civil war were markedly different from the experiences in the rest of Somalia. See Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, and Njoku, *The History of Somalia* for more information.

young adults (late twenties and early thirties) at the time of the Somali Civil War. All these men bypassed refugee camps and I interviewed them on my own. The rest lived outside of the capital and were children (ages five to thirteen) when the war began. All of them grew up in refugee camps, and came to America as young adults, with the exception of Abdulkhaliq Barbaar, who came at age fourteen. I interviewed the second group with the help of Omar Osman, who is a member of the Somali Bajuni tribe. Within the second group are two individuals, Aydrus Mohammed and Ismael Mohamed, also part of the Somali Bajuni tribe, a Swahili speaking minority that lives in the south of Somalia, and whose minority identity shaped and informed their experiences. The experiences of the older group have some key differences from the younger group. I will explore the differences in identity experience between the groups, as well as the commonalities. An appendix at the end of this paper includes more information and photographs of my informants.

I chose to interview men, rather than women, or men and women, for several reasons. I believed that it would be interesting to explore male gendered aspects of identity, as many writings on gendered experiences in Islam focus on the female experience.⁹ I also believed that with the limited number of interviews I would be able to conduct, focusing on just men rather than both men and women would provide for a more consistent set of data to analyze. As mosques are also gender divided, this seemed to be a practical approach as well. In retrospect, there were difficulties that resulted from taking this approach; It is difficult to understand the gendered experience of men without also considering the gendered experience of women. Additionally, Abdirizak spoke at length about the challenges Somali women face in Utah, and it

⁹ See Buck and Silver, *Educated for Change?* And Shakir, *Bint Arab*, for just a few examples. For a scholarly treatment on less scholarly obsessions with women in Islam, see Abu-lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

would have been helpful to have some perspectives from Somali women, including on how they understand the experiences of Somali men. I have tried to fill the gap in those histories based on the observations and writings of other scholars, especially Cawo Abdi, but have largely kept my analysis to the experiences of the men I spoke with, and the observations they offered.

In analyzing these oral histories, I have also had to look at what Sandra Greene calls “the whispers and the silences” in my oral histories and in my observations generally.¹⁰ Being neither a Somali or a Muslim, certain topics were simply not going to be broached with me as freely as if I had been an emic researcher. Thus, I have had to glean information on topics that were skirted or flatly avoided in our interviews. One example is the role of clans in Somali society and identity. While many of my informants mentioned clans, none identified personal clan ties, and when I asked for additional information about the roles of clans with one informant he seemed to become quite upset. Another topic that my role as interviewer might have affected was that of religious or racial discrimination in Utah, which none of my interviewees described as a problem, but some evidence pointed to the contrary. Where I delve into interpreting silences, I have passed beyond what was shared by my informants and am firmly interpreting with my best judgement. I have tried to identify these assumptions accordingly, to avoid misattributing information to my informants. All mistakes in the realm of interpreting silences are completely my own.

Somali Identity Before the Civil War

Because the Somali Civil War was both a watershed and (arguably) the nadir of Somali history, it is easy to let the events surrounding the war shape the memory, and thus our

¹⁰ Sandra E. Greene, “The Whispers and the Silences: Explorations in African Oral History,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 2 (2003).

understanding of identity, before the war. As Mohamed Haji Ingiriis notes, “memory has to be contextualised and situated to offer understanding to what indeed happened in the recent Somali past.”¹¹ With that in mind, we will examine the recollections of my older informants before the civil war, as the younger cohort universally indicated they remembered very little of Somalia.

The older informants described Somalia in the most positive of terms. Aden and Osman both without reservation recalled Somalia being a paradise prior to the civil war.¹² Aden described his hometown of Baidoa as a “beautiful town” which had everything that one needed, including agricultural production, free healthcare, and school. Those who visited Baidoa chose to stay forever, it was so wonderful.¹³ Osman acknowledged that it was not a rich country, but it was a beautiful one: “I mean, it was heaven.”¹⁴ Ali, while not wanting to focus on his time in Mogadishu, did note that it was a nice place before the civil war.¹⁵

In sharp contrast to antebellum Somalia, and almost immediately in the interviews, all three shifted suddenly to the harshness of the civil war. Aden juxtaposed the transformation of Baidoa, “the city of paradise,” to the “city of death.”¹⁶ Osman transitioned directly from his dreamy reminiscences into the political problems that led to the country’s demise. While discussing the unspeakable violence he saw during the war, he noted that most of the violence was “interclan.”¹⁷

¹¹ Ingiriis, “Many Somalia(s), multiple memories: remembrances as present politics, past politics as remembrances in war-torn Somali discourses,” *African Identities* 14, no. 4 (2016): 350.

¹² Aden Batar, interview by author, West Valley, August 10, 2019.; Osman Ahmed, interview by author, West Valley, July 13, 2019.

¹³ Aden, interview.

¹⁴ Osman, interview.

¹⁵ Ali Bahaji, interview by author, Salt Lake City, August 3, 2019.

¹⁶ Aden, interview.

¹⁷ Osman, interview. This was in response to my questioning if that was the case.

How do we reconcile these two images? Can a society with clan problems about to boil over really be a paradise? What does that mean for articulation of Somali identity before and during the war? Is it simply a papering over of problems in order to create a mythic, lost homeland? Ismael, one of the younger group, simply suggested that Somali problems, up to the present, were tied to tribalism.¹⁸ The issue of Somali clans is a complex one and their influence needs a closer examination.

Prior to the colonial period, the bulk of the Somali peoples had many aspects of shared identity, including religion, shared mythological ancestry, and what Christopher Clapham called “a pronounced sense of common identity.”¹⁹ The main demarcating identity between the Somali peoples were clans, or family groups, ranging from large major clans and smaller, sub-clans.²⁰ These clan relations were largely fluid, and relations between clans easily shifted as situations and needs did.²¹

We must be careful not to make the mistake of saying clans are or were an insurmountable obstacle for Somali unity. Somalia is largely homogenous in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion. Although there are notable minority groups including the Bajuni, Benadiri, and the Somali-Bantu, most people living in the country identify as Somalis, speak Somali, and practice Shafi’i interpretations of Sunni Islam that have traditionally allowed for Sufi practices as well.²² Writing prior to the collapse of the Somali government, Lee Cassanelli

¹⁸ Ismael Mohamed, interview by author, South Salt Lake, September 30, 2019.

¹⁹ Christopher Clapham, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18

²⁰ Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War, and Hope in a Shattered State* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2012), 11, 36.

²¹ Harper, 36.

²² The Qadiriyya, Salihyya, and Ahmadiyya Sufi sects historically played important roles in Somali society and identity. Harper, 15-16; Raphael Chijoike Njoku, *The History of Somalia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013), 12, 18. Some of these commonalities are shared by the minorities as well, who also largely practice Islam, and many

observes that by 1900, Somalia was perhaps the only modern Africa nation which had a nascent sense of its nationhood, while Clapham suggests that Somalis are more easily characterized as a nation than most of the peoples of Africa.²³ This suggests that the influence of clan membership on Somali identity may have not been as constant as some scholars have suggested.²⁴

Modern problems with clan identity and politics likely have their origins in the colonial period. Clan identity was the only legal Somali identity that the European powers recognized, thus reinforcing the importance of the clan as an identifying factor. Colonizers punished clans as a whole for actions of individuals.²⁵ Additionally, the colonial territories that cut across the Somali homelands split the Somali peoples across several countries.²⁶ The colonial boundaries of Somalia also included part, but not all, of the Bajuni people, a Swahili group that does not identify with the Somali clan structure. The Bajuni homeland ranges from Kismayo in Somalia to the Lamu Archipelago in Kenya.²⁷ Thus colonialism both separated the Somali peoples and included peoples within their border who were not part of the traditional Somali nation.

Siad Barre, the president of Somalia from 1969 to 1991, attempted to completely nullify clan identity during the early years of his regime. Barre promised an adaptation of socialism that would work in harmony with Islam, unite Somalis and end clannishness.²⁸ “It is unfortunate that

of whom speak Somali. Ismael, interview by author, South Salt Lake, September 30, 2019 (all interviews will be available online at a future date); Lewis, 63.

²³ Lee V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600-1900*, (Philadelphia: University of Pittsburg Press, 1982), 4; Clapham, 18.

²⁴ See chapter XI of I.M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, 4th ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002). Lewis, in writing about the civil war, ascribes it to clan problems.

²⁵ Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia: The Ruinous Legacy of 1991*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 75.

²⁶ Clapham, 54. There were attempts by the British to unite the Somali lands, but they were rejected by the other colonial powers.

²⁷ Ridwan Laher and Korir Sing‘O’, *Indigenous People in Africa: Contestations, Empowerment and Group Rights* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2014), 86. Project Muse.

²⁸ Harper, 54.

our nation is rather too clannish,” Barre declared. “If all Somalis are to go to Hell, tribalism will be their vehicle to reach there.”²⁹ Barre initially appeared to have some success in eradicating clan ties, as at the time of the Somali civil war, when interclan violence broke out, many Somalis did not know their clan identities.³⁰ None of my older informants, or my younger ones (excluding the Bajunis, who are outside the traditional clan structure) for that matter, emphasized clan identity playing a role in their identity at all, and none shared a clan identity or faction during the war. This is not surprising, as clans are of differing levels of importance among different Somalis. Even in Somalia, Mary Harper found that one of her informants emphasized the clan as the center of everything, while another said it was rude to bring up, as clans no longer existed.³¹

It is likely that clan identity was not the dominant identity that my informants felt they needed to emphasize prior to the civil war. Other aspects that we would associate with identity in the West were likely larger factors than clan, such as nationality, religion, occupation, and family ties. Osman noted that occupational success in Somalia was largely dependent on ties to Barre; position was tied to who you knew. He did not, however, make any mention of clan identity as being important to this cronyism.³² Lidwien Kapteijns notes that clan identity could play a role in making connections, but that Barre’s client system was built on personal loyalty, not necessarily clan connections, with members of nearly all major clan groups present in his government until at least 1988.³³

²⁹ Quoted in Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 222.

³⁰ Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya* (New York: Berghan Books, 2006), 57.

³¹ Harper, 36.

³² Osman, interview.

³³ Kapteijns, 79.

Clan identity did become important in the immediate lead up to and during the 1991 Somali Civil War. Barre had been ruling not for the clans, but through them.³⁴ This included using the tried and true colonial policy of employing the clan as a political tool. He began to recruit various clan based paramilitary groups to combat the opposition groups that were forming against his government, particularly to counter the Somali National Movement (SNM), which had formed to challenge the government, and also began to use clan narratives as a political tool.³⁵

For Somalis during the war, clan identity was suddenly the identity everyone cared about. For my younger group of informants, all children at the time, this was likely confusing, sudden, and terrifying. My Bajuni informants, Aydrus and Ismael, were the most willing to articulate the sudden emphasis on clan identity during the civil war. Ismael noted that the “big, big tribe,” likely referring to the larger Somali ethnic group as a whole, decided to include the Bajunis in their fight for no good reason. He recalled that the Bajunis were caught between clans in a fight that they wanted no part in, and that these clan groups used the Bajunis as hostages.³⁶ Aydrus noted that being a minority—outside the major clan structures—meant that the Bajunis had no one to defend them.³⁷ Abdulkhaliq, only five or six years old in 1991, recalled men coming to his house and harassing his family because his father was a politician.³⁸ This was likely tied to the renewed clan politics of the era. Suddenly, one’s position within or outside of the clan structure became crucial. This identity changed the game for my informants and their families, because as Burke and Stets observe, agency in acting out one’s identity is shaped by the structure of one’s

³⁴ Kapteijns, 79.

³⁵ Kapteijn, 79, 85, 88-89.

³⁶ Ismael, interview.

³⁷ Aydrus Mohammed, interview by the author; South Salt Lake, October 11, 2019.

³⁸ Abdulkhaliq Barbaar, interview by author, Salt Lake City, September 9, 2019.

society.³⁹ This was also articulated by Raphael Njoku who noted that what people think about themselves and what others think about them shape their realities.⁴⁰ Being identified with a certain clan during the civil war was paramount for survival. It could save your life or cost it. Other shared aspects of identity, such as religion, nationality, gender, paled in importance during the civil war.

The aspect that most of my informants did emphasize during this time was that of victimhood. Aden lost his young son during the war due to an accident; he was unable to get medical treatment.⁴¹ Ismael and Aydrus both recounted the violence their families suffered at the hands of militia groups, and Abdulkhaliq recalled men coming to mistreat his family in Baidoa.⁴² While none of the men I talked to mentioned any participation in militia violence, it is worth noting that the line between victim and perpetrator identity often overlapped during this period. As Mohamed Ingriis notes, many Somalis view themselves or their clan as victims of clan violence, even if their clan participated in the conflict.⁴³

In addition to victimhood, Aden emphasized the role of protector in his decisions to flee Somalia. He made the trip to the Kenyan border without his family, because he did not know if the trip would be safe for them. Once he made it to Kenya, he was able to secure passage for his family by plane.⁴⁴ Thus, it was possible to emphasize the role of protector in a decision to flee, rather than fight.

³⁹ Burke, 16.

⁴⁰ Njoku, 17.

⁴¹ Josh Axelrod, Von Diaz, Camila Kerwin. "We Are Americans': Somali Refugee Family Reflects On Making A Life In The U.S." NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/05/738216499/we-are-americans-somali-refugee-family-reflects-on-making-a-life-in-the-u-s>, accessed March 23, 2020.

⁴² Ismael, interview; Aydrus, interview; Abdulkahliq; interview.

⁴³ Ingriis, 353.

⁴⁴ Aden, interview.

Identity Outside of Somalia: Refugee Status

Paradoxically, while violence in the name of the clan fractured the meaning of identity in Somalia, my informants' choice to flee Somalia moved their clan identities to the background and put their Somali-ness to the forefront. Abdulkhaliq, speaking of his family's brief sojourn into Ethiopia, stated "Mainly what I remember is lack of support. Lack of resources, lack of friends. Not knowing the language. Discrimination."⁴⁵ In leaving Somalia, all Somalis found themselves as minorities in countries that often did not want them. Borders were closed to refugees, and Abdulkhaliq and Aden both recalled the risks of illegally crossing the Kenyan border.⁴⁶

Making the decision to go to Kenya meant my informants were all subject to the disabling, and at times degrading, identity label of refugee. Kenya does not provide refugees any legal status, so regardless of what one was in Somalia in terms of occupation or status, in Kenya one was instead status-less and illegal outside of the refugee camps.⁴⁷ However, identifying as a refugee granted one certain rights within the camps, so there was incentive to embrace the identity.⁴⁸

All of my older informants lived outside of the refugee camps, which gave them a greater degree of autonomy in identity, at the cost of a greater risk and less guarantee of aid. Aden, who was initially assigned to a refugee camp in Mombasa, chose to leave the camp and live in Nairobi, noting that for all the potential problems, "at least I [could] provide for my family" and

⁴⁵ Abdulkhaliq, interview.

⁴⁶ Aden, interview; Abdulkhaliq interview.

⁴⁷ Grayson, *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya* (New York, Berghan, 2017), 123-125.

⁴⁸ Bram J. Jansen, *Kakuma Refugee Camp* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2018), 187.

that made it worth risking being sent back to the camp or harassed by the Kenyan police.⁴⁹ Ali commented on the difficulty of getting anything done in Kenya, due to the corruption.⁵⁰ For all the challenges inherent in bypassing the refugee camps, my older group of informants largely avoided the identity challenges faced by my younger informants in the camps.

Refugee Camps and Multiple Identities

Time spent in refugee camps was a defining period for my younger informants. Camp life involved navigating the complex UN bureaucracy and Kenyan officials managing the camp as well as living among Kenyans and refugees from elsewhere. In some ways, camp life emphasized Somali-ness, in other ways it downplayed it. Most curiously perhaps, it had the potential to make victimhood a desirable aspect of identity.

For some of my younger informants, growing up in the refugee camps redefined what home meant. None of them had much agency in becoming refugees; they were brought by their families. All of them said they remembered little of Somalia.⁵¹ Ismael said that he considered Kenya home, rather than Somalia.⁵² Abdulkhaliq, while expressing a desire to return to Somalia, also said he would consider settling back in Kenya, indicating his ties there as well.⁵³ Yussuf discussed Somalia only briefly, and discussed his childhood growing up in Ifo, Kenya.⁵⁴ Ismael and Aydrus both emphasized that Somalia was more of a family story than a memory; their childhood and young adult experiences were rooted in Kakuma refugee camp.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Aden, interview.

⁵⁰ Ali, interview.

⁵¹ Aydrus, interview; Abdirizak, interview; Abdulkhaliq, interview; Ismael, interview; Yussuf, interview.

⁵² Ismael, interview.

⁵³ Abdulkahliq, interview.

⁵⁴ Yussuf, interview.

⁵⁵ Aydrus, interview; Ismael, interview.

Living in refugee camps like Kakuma drew awareness to my informants Somali-ness in interesting ways. Aydrus believed that the Kenyan government used the Somali refugees as a method of civilizing the Turkana, nomadic peoples who lived in the Kakuma area: “Okay, you want to have a camp? Have it here. So that those people [the Turkana], they will open their eyes.”⁵⁶ Grayson notes this view was common among Somalis and other refugees in Kakuma camp.⁵⁷ Aydrus also recalled that Somalis stung by scorpions generally recovered (having been stung approximately twenty times himself), but that Sudanese refugees stung by scorpions often died. He did not know why this was but postulated that it could have been due to differences in diet or in body composition.⁵⁸ Somalis also faced problems with Kenyan law enforcement. Hanno Brankamp notes that Kenyan police often extort refugees, but especially Somalis who they see as “business-savvy” and relatively wealthy from remittances from abroad.⁵⁹ Aydrus indicated that the police in Kakuma were not very helpful, and that refugees were more effective at settling their own problems.⁶⁰ The first refugee camp Abdulkhaliq stayed in was burned down due to conflict with local groups and the Somali refugees.⁶¹ Living outside of Somalia and in camps meant Somalis were very aware of their nationality, whether in positive or negative ways.

The meaning of Somali identity also changed as my younger informants grew up in the camps. Bram Jansen and Catherine-Lune Grayson both observed examples of this changing identity that aligned with what my informants shared. Grayson notes that camp life at times made

⁵⁶ Aydrus interview.

⁵⁷ Ismael, interview; Grayson, 50.

⁵⁸ Aydrus, interview. I was unable to find any literature about fatality rates in different ethnic groups from scorpion stings.

⁵⁹ Haano Brankamp, “Occupied Enclave’: Policing and the underbelly of humanitarian governance in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya,” *Political Geography*, no. 71, (2019): 75.

⁶⁰ Aydrus, interview.

⁶¹ Abdulkhaliq, interview.

clan identities less pronounced, as camp youth were generally critical of clan structure.⁶² Ismael was very critical of Somali clannishness.⁶³ Abdulkhaliq also noted that clan identity has little place among the younger generation in America.⁶⁴ This trend is likely influenced by growing up in the refugee camps. This is in line with what Bram Jansen observed during his fieldwork in Kakuma camp as well. Jansen observed that some Somalis in the camp had no intentions of returning to Somalia, even if it did stabilize. The children had grown up in Kakuma, many of them spoke Kiswahili, and they knew nothing about living a life like their parents had before the war.⁶⁵ In a conversation with Omar, he noted that having grown up in Kakuma meant he never had to learn to speak Somali, as he would have in Somalia. The time in the camps thus seemed to have an eroding effect on some aspects of Somali identity for the younger generation.

Somalis in camps articulated their identity as Muslims in ways that they would not have needed to do back home. Aydrus said that Somalis built their own mosque in Kakuma. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) helped, this was an undertaking of the refugees.⁶⁶ The Bajunis in Jomvu camp attended Islamic school.⁶⁷ Whereas the Bajunis felt benefited by their Muslim identities in the Jomvu camps, this was not the case in the larger UN run camp. Ismael emphasized that his treatment in Jomvu camp—run by Islamic Relief—was better than the treatment by the UNHCR in Kakuma camp. Islamic relief provided fuel, meat and tea to the refugees; the UN did not.⁶⁸ Abdulkhaliq, Yussuf, Ismael, and Aydrus all studied in Islamic schools during their time in the camps.⁶⁹ For most of my informants, living outside of

⁶² Grayson, 105.

⁶³ Ismael, interview.

⁶⁴ Abdulkhaliq, personal correspondence with the author.

⁶⁵ Jansen, 187.

⁶⁶ Aydrus, interview.

⁶⁷ Ismael, interview.

⁶⁸ Ismael, interview.

⁶⁹ Abdulkhaliq, interview; Aydrus, interview; Ismael, interview; Yussuf, interview.

Somalia would have been their first time living among many non-Muslims. This meant their religious identity changed from something that might have been taken for granted in Somalia, to something that marked them as different from those around them. All the men I interviewed emphasized the importance of Islam in their lives. Ismael even made sure to emphasize to me that Bajuni culture, although having some differences from mainstream Somali culture and “the way we live is not like 100% Islamic,” the Bajunis still followed Islamic rules and were “100% Muslims.”⁷⁰

In his interview, Aydrus emphasized common and shared identity with other refugees. While UNHCR reports note that conflict and interethnic violence were common in Kakuma camp, Aydrus indicated that there were no problems with the other refugees, only with the Turkana.⁷¹ I do not believe that this was because Aydrus never saw conflict, but because he wanted to emphasize an identity and spirit of cooperation and commonality among refugees. “Everybody has, you know, we Africa. We don’t like, worry about everybody’s religion.... As long everybody have his own traumatized, or being a refugee, and now you want to bring religious stuff? You don’t have even time to bring that conflict in the camp. Your conflict is you with your stomach.”⁷²

Aydrus’s emphasis on refugee commonality was likely influenced by a desire to restore the images of refugee humanity. Humanity is something often lacking in the media portrayal of refugees, and something they often felt was lacking in their identity in camp. Aydrus did not completely downplay conflict; he discussed being shot by the Turkana and his distaste for the

⁷⁰ Ismael, interview.

⁷¹ Aydrus, interview; UNHCR report, August 12, 1999, quoted in Jeff Crisp, “A State of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Violence in Kenya’s Refugee Camps,” 601, *African Affairs*, 99 no. 307 (2000): 601. Accessed November 7, 2019. Ebscohost.

⁷² Aydrus, interview.

enforcement of Kenyan law in Kakuma.⁷³ But he also emphasized the degrading, dehumanizing effects of the camp.

You deserve another chance of living as a human being. Because living in a camp, is life that nobody deserve to—no human being deserve to live in a camp. But because of circumstance, of war, killing, all those stuff, then people decide to live in a camp. Because there's no where you can go. You can't go to—if you're located to go to the camp, then you stay in the camp, because if you go to town, you get arrested, police, and you end up in jail.⁷⁴

By emphasizing harmony and commonality among the refugees, rather than conflict, Aydrus was likely granting a humanity and positivity he felt was lacking in his time in Kenya as well as in American understandings of refugee life.

Also working against the dehumanized and limited-agency picture of refugees, my informants emphasized their identity and role as providers, or their frustration at the loss of that identity. Aydrus and Yussuf both indicated that the food in the camps was not enough to sustain oneself or one's family.⁷⁵ While Yussuf and Abdulkhaliq stressed the lack of opportunity in Dadaab, Aydrus and Ismael discussed the ways that they were able to help their families make ends meet.⁷⁶ Aydrus worked as a preschool teacher in Kakuma, and Ismael risked working odd jobs outside of the camps.⁷⁷ Aydrus also was able to start a secondhand clothing business by working with contacts outside the camp.⁷⁸ Abdulkhaliq, while only a youth in the camps, did note that his brother was also engaged in some limited sales work in the camps.⁷⁹ Technically, many of these activities are illegal in Kenya or against UNHCR policies, ranging from these unauthorized businesses and remittances, or other activities, such as smuggling and aid

⁷³ Aydrus, interview, as well as a conversation about the police following the interview.

⁷⁴ Aydrus, interview.

⁷⁵ Aydrus, interview; Yussuf, interview.

⁷⁶ Abdulkahliq, interview; Aydrus, interview; Ismael, interview; Yussuf, interview.

⁷⁷ Aydrus, interview; Ismael, interview.

⁷⁸ Aydrus, interview.

⁷⁹ Abdulkhaliq, interview.

manipulation. Thus, many of these activities are not readily shared with the UNHCR or with researchers in the camps.⁸⁰ Yussuf noted that in Ifo even attempts to raise gardens were shut down by the authorities. “If you want to work, you cannot work. If you want to do something, nothing else, just what you do? Just sit in the house, and wait every month for food. But human being, God created. Sometimes when you remember these thing, it makes me feel very disappointed.”⁸¹ The ability to provide or not weighed heavy on the minds of my informants, and affected Somali male identity in the camps.

Finally, and in sharp contrast to the previous examples, identity as a victim was a central and at times desirable aspect of identity in the refugee camps. This was because resettlement from a refugee camp to a country like America or Canada was largely dependent on one’s victimhood status. While several of my informants suggested they did not know what all the factors were that led to resettlement, they did touch on the role of victimhood in the process. Aydrus, who compared the process of being selected for an interview was akin to a lottery, noted that in the UNHCR interview “resettlement is depend on your case. How your case is. How hard life you get, how did you pass through it?”⁸² Yussuf, who grew up in the Dadaab complex, noted “you apply [for resettlement] because you don’t feel too safe, you don’t feel safe to live in the camps also. Right? For many reasons, so then, once you applied, and for protection, if you can’t find any opportunity, the Western countries that way, you can find security.”⁸³

While the UN camps in Kenya were generally unsafe places, there were several ways of establishing or emphasizing an identity as a victim. Social pariahs or deviants in the camp often

⁸⁰ Jansen, 110-11.

⁸¹ Yussuf, interview.

⁸² Aydrus, interview.

⁸³ Yussuf, interview.

also found themselves in optimal resettlement positions. Somali women who participated in prostitution, or were raped, both of which bear heavy stigmas in Somali society, sometimes found themselves eligible for resettlement. Jansen notes that this sometimes meant that individuals in the camp would engage in controversial behavior in order to better their chances of resettlement.⁸⁴ Jansen cites one example of a man faking domestic violence against his family. The plan was that his wife and children would be resettled in the US due to the insecurity of the ‘dangerous’ domestic situation, then they would sponsor him for family reunification.⁸⁵

The need for insecurity in order to be resettled created some paradoxes in camp life, especially in the social order. In addition to deviants being rewarded with the opportunity for resettlement, membership in clans or ethnic groups that were traditionally persecuted or maltreated were also now opportunities for resettlement. Jansen notes that some members of the Madiban clan began to proclaim how badly they were being treated, and members of other clans, such as the majority Darods, claimed that they were Madibans, Asharafs, or other minority clans in an effort to get resettled.⁸⁶ Somalis often had to embrace these perhaps ordinarily undesirable identities, such as victim, at-risk refugee, or persecuted minority, in order to navigate the resettlement process.

Ismael was heavily involved in articulating the dangerous conditions that Bajunis faced. Bajunis were killed in the Kakuma camps.⁸⁷ Ismael’s father decided to try to qualify for resettlement. His father knew a Somali man connected with the UNHCR office in Nairobi, who

⁸⁴ Jansen, 145-148. One example Jansen gives is of a woman engaging in consensual sex, then inflicting wounds on herself and claiming to have been raped the next day.

⁸⁵ Jansen, 148. At the time of Jansen’s conversation, the man was still in camp, so it is unclear whether or not the plan worked.

⁸⁶ Jansen, 149.

⁸⁷ Aydrus, interview; Ismael, interview.

helped them talk to the UNHCR. They discovered that the UN did not recognize the Bajunis as a tribe. This was frustrating; Ismael and his father knew that the camp was aware of the Bajunis living in Kakuma. They had to return to Kakuma, compile their tribal history, and petition for recognition before they were to be considered for resettlement. Ismael and his father traveled back and forth from Kakuma and Nairobi many times—a distance of over four-hundred and fifty miles one way. His family members were individually interviewed, and the interviewers cross-referenced each of the family members' answers for consistency. Ismael noted that no one to this day knew how instrumental his family had been in getting the Somali Bajuni tribe recognized, and thus eligible for resettlement.⁸⁸ While Ismael didn't say it directly, it is likely that the unique challenges and dangers the Bajunis faced in the camps—being able to be identified as victims—were key to their resettlement efforts.

Resettlement in America

Although resettlement in America was a long-anticipated opportunity, it created new challenges, and emphasized different aspects of identity for my informants. This included a new level of othering, additional focus on religious identity, an emphasis on the role of provider, complications to one's identity as a Somali, and an additional identity of being or becoming an American.

There was plenty in America to make my informants feel different. Abdulkhaliq, arriving in Nashville at age fourteen, put it simply.

100% Culture shock. Yeah, it was culture shock, and didn't speak English. Like, the first time, when I went to high school, the first I saw a girl and a boy holding hands, and kissing! Like, what are you doing! You know? You're not supposed to do that. Yeah, it was really culture shock. It was different. We struggled. Transportation. Lack of

⁸⁸ Ismael, interview.

language. There was a time that we wanted to go back [to Africa], 'cause it was so hard here.⁸⁹

Abdulkhaliq was not the only one to be made keenly aware of his identity as a foreigner and refugee simply by the unfamiliar customs and systems of America. Abdirizak, watching others use the pullcord on a bus in Salt Lake City to indicate they wanted to stop, realized how much he did not know. He attempted to imitate them the next day but did not know to let go of the cord. The bus driver had to explain it to him. He emphasized the confused looks of other passengers, none of whom offered him help.⁹⁰ Ali, who moved without notice (likely because he did not know that this was the process), found himself unable to rent an apartment because of this for a time; he spent two days in a homeless shelter.⁹¹ The structures and norms of America drew attention to my informants' status as newly arrived refugees soon after their arrival.

Ismael also explained an interesting parallel to the identity of a refugee or outsider in mainstream American society. When going back to visit Kenya, he noted that he and his family could not go to his family's villages. "We can go to big cities. But in our villages, it's very, very dangerous. In a different way. 'Cause, like, first of all, you're Americans right now. And the second thing, you know, when you're coming from the West, and you've been here for years, the people over there think that you have money. So, they can come and rob you. Or sometimes you get killed for nothing."⁹² Even though it was difficult to enter mainstream American society, being perceived as an American was exclusionary or possibly dangerous back in Africa, which could cut off refugees even further from their homelands.

⁸⁹ Abdulkhaliq, interview.

⁹⁰ Abdirizak, interview.

⁹¹ Ali, interview.

⁹² Ismael, interview.

Life in America also drew attention to a new category of identity: race. Omar remarked that race was a confusing category for Somalis; the difference between who Americans called white and who they called Hispanic was unclear to Somalis.⁹³ After living in California for a time, Osman indicated that he did not think there would be opportunities for him, a black man, when a friend initially suggested he move to Utah.⁹⁴ Perhaps touching on complicated and sometimes discriminatory attitudes of police towards blacks, Abdirizak emphasizes basic phrases while teaching new refugees English.

If the police stopped you, you have to say, like, only three things. “My name is Abdirizak. I’m from Somalia. I’m a refugee.” That’s it. The police will understand. But if the police stopped you, for example, if you don’t say nothing, and the policeman is going to say, “this guy is not respecting me.” He may gonna call extra police. And then you’re going to get trouble, maybe.⁹⁵

While my informants recognized challenges associated with being black in America, it could also be difficult to find connection with black peers. Abdulkhaliq, in a school in Nashville that was 98% African American, felt keenly that he was not one of them. “I didn’t fit in with the white people, and I didn’t fit in with the African-Americans. So, I was in the middle. During lunch time, I didn’t know where to sit. I usually looked for that one white girl and two guys from India. But then, I always felt, outside of everything.”⁹⁶ He was not alone in this feeling. Somalis, like some other African and black Caribbean immigrants, have at times distanced themselves from African Americans, partially in an attempt to distance themselves from the problems they face in America.⁹⁷

⁹³ Omar, in Yussuf, interview.

⁹⁴ Osman, interview.

⁹⁵ Abdirizak, interview.

⁹⁶ Abdulkhaliq, Interview.

⁹⁷ Cawo M. Abdi, “The Newest African Americans?: Somali Struggles for Belonging,” *Bildahaan* 11 (2011): 101, Accessed November 7, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol11/iss1/12/>; Cawo M. Abdi, *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 210-211. Accessed March 25, 2020. Proquest Ebook Central.

One aspect of identity that all three of my older informants emphasized was that of provider. This was likely more keenly felt as they had been old enough to work in Somalia, and was thus something they prized to be able to do again after their time in Kenya. Aden, as mentioned previously, risked life in Nairobi so that he would have a chance to provide. In America, he noted that his first job in Utah “was the first time I worked for someone, working on a production line, but again, I was proud to do that, because I wanted to provide for my family and so I don’t have to depend on welfare.”⁹⁸ Osman expressed similar sentiments, noting he worked two jobs when he first arrived and had never had to rely on welfare.⁹⁹ Ali wanted to largely focus his interview on his commercial endeavors in America, presenting his life as a sort of rags-to-riches event, where he went from homelessness to the proud owner of a taxi company.¹⁰⁰

The identity of being a successful provider was likely also prized because it is difficult for new refugees to get good work. Abdirizak and Omar noted that the work available to newly arrived Somali men is often work that does not require English proficiency, such as warehouse work.¹⁰¹ This kind of work is not always high paying, and 59.1% of Somalis lived in poverty in the US as of 2001.¹⁰²

Abdirizak noted that while Somali men are able to find jobs such as warehouse work, it is more difficult for Somali women to find good work. He said that the only work most Somali women are able to find in the Salt Lake area is at Deseret Industries, which pays minimum wage and only employs people for about a year. Abdirizak said that single mothers had the most

⁹⁸ Aden, interview.

⁹⁹ Osman, interview.

¹⁰⁰ Ali, interview.

¹⁰¹ Abdirizak, interview.

¹⁰² Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 206-207.

difficult time making it in Salt Lake.¹⁰³ It is worth noting that the Somali word for welfare is *cayr*, which best translates to ‘destitute.’ While Cawo Abdi suggests this is merely an acknowledgment of reality rather than a stigma, it is easy to see why my informants prized the opportunity to work, especially with so many negative stereotypes about welfare and poverty abounding.¹⁰⁴ This seems to be compounded in Utah, as Abdirizak and Omar noted that the social services in Utah are not enough for new refugees.¹⁰⁵ In my own observations, Utahns, who are largely conservative, generally also look unfavorably on welfare. Thus, refugees who can provide for their families could feel more confident that they are accepted by their neighbors. This accomplishment is not without costs, as both Ismael and Aydrus had to give up opportunities for schooling to help make ends meet for their families.¹⁰⁶

Despite the challenges in finding good work, most of my informants also prized their roles working in charity and aiding others. Of the eight men I interviewed, six identified some kind of involvement in community service or nonprofits. The other two identified generosity and sacrifice in other ways. Osman noted that once he was settled and no longer needed to work two jobs, he focused on giving back to the community. In addition to his work at the mosque, he also volunteered at the homeless shelter and was involved in a Utah coalition against pornography.¹⁰⁷ Aden, Abdirizak, and Ismael all founded nonprofit organizations to help their communities, and Abdulkhaliq worked for a University of Utah extension that tries to “decrease systemic barriers to higher education.”¹⁰⁸ Abdirizak noted charity work was his focus, and what kept him in Utah.

¹⁰³ Abdirizak, interview.

¹⁰⁴ See Adbi, *Elusive Jannah*, 178.

¹⁰⁵ Abdirizak, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Aydrus, interview, Ismael, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Osman, interview.

¹⁰⁸ Abdulkhaliq, interview; Abdirizak, interview; Ismael, interview; Aden, interview. Aden and I also discussed his nonprofit work on other occasions.

“I’m worrying about the people live here, right now. If I leave here, maybe these people, they will collapse. That’s always the sticking me here, to stay here.”

Aydrus discussed his involvement in sending remittances back to others still living in refugee camps, a practice common among Somalis living in America.¹⁰⁹ Cawo Abdi notes that remittances are common practice among Somalis in America, but can be a heavy burden, as they both create emotional stress and limit the capital with which one can invest in one’s own future and the future of their children. She cites examples of some elderly Somalis sending at least half of their Social Security Income back to Africa.¹¹⁰ While difficult, Aydrus noted that “you have to [send remittances], because, you know the life, the struggle they have. And the struggle you have here, it’s not the same.”¹¹¹ Having been given an opportunity that so many refugees lack, my informants felt they needed to give back to those less fortunate than them, both in America and in Somalia.

Religious Identity in Utah

Another identity that all of my informants emphasized to me was their Islamic identity. While life in Kenya would have made this identity more pronounced than it was in Somalia, living in America, and Utah, drew additional attention to this identity. There are many negative associations with Islam and terrorism, as well as Islam and an un-American identity, especially since September 11, 2001. This translated to increased scrutiny from the US government and an increase in hate crimes from other Americans (500 hate crimes against Muslims were reported in 2001 and spiked again following the 2016 presidential election).¹¹² All of my informants stated

¹⁰⁹ Aydrus, interview;

¹¹⁰ Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*, 215, 221, 241.

¹¹¹ Aydrus, interview.

¹¹² Brian R. Calfano and Nazita Lajevardi ed., *Understanding Muslim Political Life in the Twenty-First Century* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 7, 87. Accessed January 7, 2020, Proquest Ebook Central.

that they had not encountered discrimination for their beliefs in Utah, and several emphasized the positive treatment they had received. Aden's family is the only Muslim family in their neighborhood in the Salt Lake area, but he noted that his neighbors had been respectful and reached out to them in kindness when they arrived. His relationship with his neighbors, he said, was one of mutual respect.¹¹³

Despite the affirmations of positive treatment, there were some passing statements that implied that there have been religious discrimination problems in Utah. Yussuf stressed that there were no problems in Utah. "Maybe in other states, yes. But Utah, we don't have not any issue."¹¹⁴ He continued, however, by noting that his message to high school students would be to be kind to girls attending school who wore the *hijab*. "So, if you see, be okay with her, she's not a terrorist, she's not ISIS, she's not doing any bad." Although he laughed while saying this, it is likely this statement was based on negative treatment some girls in his community or family faced.¹¹⁵ Likewise, in an NPR piece that Aden did with his son, his son noted that he had been bullied after the 9/11 attacks, with other students calling him a terrorist.¹¹⁶ Perhaps discrimination is more common among youth, or perhaps my informants were trying to accentuate the positive or match what they thought I hoped to hear. It is also possible in the cases of Abdulkhaliq, Osman, and Ismael, that they felt better received in Utah than in the states they had previously lived in.

Life in America does not always cater to Islamic needs, which meant my informants had to articulate their Muslim identities in a culture that did not cater to them. Ismael recalled being

¹¹³ Aden, interview.

¹¹⁴ Yussuf, interview.

¹¹⁵ Yussuf, interview.

¹¹⁶ Aden, NPR interview.

unable to eat the food on the airplane ride to the United States, even though he was hungry, because it was not what he was used to eating (and likely because it was not *halal*). When he arrived in Houston, he was still unable to eat, even though his sister had prepared the food, because “the oil is different, and the taste was different. And everything was different.”¹¹⁷ Abdulkhaliq recalled similar difficulties attending high school in Nashville. He recalled not being sure what he was being given to eat and having to ask constantly if something contained pork.¹¹⁸ Aden recalled that food was the biggest difficulty when they arrived. Aden and his family, resettled in the Salt Lake area, were unable to purchase *halal* meat when they arrived in the 1990s and had to track down and purchase livestock in order to prepare it instead.¹¹⁹

Generally, a unified Islamic identity was emphasized positively among my informants. Aydrus emphasized the harmony that existed in Islam in America. Islam, he said, “is always brotherhood and sisterhood. You may see people praying together, they don’t know each other. And they will talk like they’ve been knowing you forever. Because it’s a brotherhood. Muslim is a brother to a Muslim.”¹²⁰ Variations on this sentiment were echoed by several of my informants, and even when differences were acknowledged within Islam, my informants drew attention to the fact that they were not divisive to the community.¹²¹ Ismael said he was used to attending the multi-ethnic Khadeeja mosque and said he did not worry about them emphasizing a different *madhhab* than the one he practice. He noted that all sorts of Muslims attend Khadeeja, including Shi’ites, though they do not identify themselves.¹²² Aden and Osman are both leaders in the

¹¹⁷ Ismael, interview.

¹¹⁸ Abdulkhaliq, interview.

¹¹⁹ Aden, interview.

¹²⁰ Aydrus, interview.

¹²¹ Abdulkhaliq, interview; Ali, interview; Osman, interview; Aden, interview.

¹²² Ismael, interview.

Khadeeja community as well.¹²³ In my time observing at the various mosques, I saw quite a few instances of cooperation and coming together of the larger Salt Lake Islamic community, and flexibility and unity seemed to be a key aspect for the community as a whole. It is understandable that unified Muslim identity is emphasized, as Muslims make up a very small percentage of the population of Utah and would not want to be divided as an already small minority.

Even with this emphasis on unity, several of my informants chose to articulate their Somali Islamic identity within the larger Salt Lake Islamic community. According to Abdulkhaliq, the major mosques around the Salt Lake area are largely run by Pakistanis who ascribe to the Hanafi *madhhab*. Most Somalis are Shafi'is, so after there were enough Somalis in the area, they founded two Somali-run mosques.¹²⁴ Both Abdulkhaliq and Abdirizak attend Somali majority mosques, and Yussuf is an Imam at one of them.¹²⁵ Thus, within the larger framework of Muslim cooperation, many Somalis in Salt Lake still find a way to emphasize their unique Islamic culture and interpretations.

My informants not only emphasized religious identity within Islam, but also within the greater religious community in Salt Lake. Osman works as part of an interfaith initiative to promote religious understanding and cooperation between different faiths in Utah.¹²⁶ Yussuf, who is an Imam at Madina mosque, also noted the commonalities between Muslims and Latter-day Saints, who are the largest religious denomination in Utah.

We have a lot of common [with Latter-day Saints]. Like, they don't drink, no alcohol. We worry about that, we don't drink also alcohol....we don't gamble...It's not allowed

¹²³ Aden, interview; Osman, interview.

¹²⁴ Abdulkhaliq, interview. These mosques are mostly attended by Somalis, but there are many other attendees.

¹²⁵ Abdirizak, interview; Abdulkhaliq, interview; Yussuf, interview.

¹²⁶ Osman, interview.

for our religion, we don't do that. So, when I'm in California, it would be very hard for my son or my daughter, to convince them, don't drink, don't alcoholize that. But once they come here, and they see there's no alcohol in the stores, nothing, they only sell limited place, right? So, they also think, they say, "Oh, know what? We have to keep our religion."¹²⁷

Yussuf emphasized that positive commonalities between Islam and the surrounding Latter-day Saint culture were a boon to Islam, and that he tells his children they need to stay in Utah: "never move from Utah. Stay in this city."¹²⁸ Emphasizing these commonalities also may have been a way my informants took steps toward assimilating where possible into the larger surrounding culture.

Layered Identity in America

While most of my informants did not speak on it freely, Ismael indicated that divisions within Somali identity still had a place in America. Ismael founded a nonprofit for the Somali Bajuni community in the Salt Lake area. This was not without opposition within the greater Somali community.

We have the barriers, especially Somalis, they were on top of us: "Oh, you cannot make this. You need to join us." I say, "Yeah, we can join you guys in larger, but right here? We are the Bajunis we need to do this the Bajuni way too"...[Clannishness] is the Somali problem, until now. To be honest, I don't scare to say this, I'm in America here. These the problem, on the government right now. If you follow the news, if you follow the Somalian politics, it's tribalism. Until now. Even in our area, they made an election last month. they have three president right now. Three....They [others, not necessarily the presidents] still sometimes, bullying other people here, but we tell them, "here, we are strong. You're not going to do nothing."¹²⁹

Several of Ismael's points offer insights into the nature of clan identity in Utah. First, he identified pressure from the greater Somalis on the Bajunis not to form their own group. This may suggest an attempt at creating a unified Somali identity, similar to attempts at creating a

¹²⁷ Yussuf, interview.

¹²⁸ Yussuf, interview.

¹²⁹ Ismael, interview.

unified Islamic identity. It could also suggest continued strains on the Bajunis, although Ismael suggested that the Bajunis could be involved in both. His statement on three presidents of a local community suggests that clan identity still has a role in Utah. I tried to speak about clan identity with Abdulkhaliq, and he indicated it was not a major factor for the younger generation in America, but I was unable to get more information from him on it than that, except that clan identity was still big in Somalia.¹³⁰ It seems fair to say that Somali clan identities face many of the same challenges that different Islamic identities do in Utah. They exist, but being such a small community in Utah, there is an expediency in emphasizing a unified Somali identity, as divisions here would not be beneficial to the community.

Finally, an identity that several of my informants emphasized was American identity, and what it meant for them. Ali, speaking of his family's life in the USA, said, "my kids, if I say, in back home, he doesn't believe. He say, "I'm from USA"...and I'm glad."¹³¹ In many of my visits to mosques, however, there was an emphasis in the *khutbahs* on making sure not to let Americanization destroy religious heritage. Aden believed that there was a compatibility between Somali identity and American identity. He made comparisons between Somalis and the pilgrims, and emphasized what Somalis bring to America. "We wanted to contribute. We wanted to give back. I think, religion shouldn't divide us. Nationality shouldn't divide us. We're all American. This is all our America. It's nobody else's America, not a specific group belongs to America."¹³² Aden's emphasis on pluralism in America seemed to capture well how my informants viewed things in America. They were here to contribute and work, but they could do it while maintaining their Somali and religious heritage as well.

¹³⁰ Abdulkhaliq, text message to the author, September 17, 2019.

¹³¹ Ali, interview.

¹³² Aden, interview.

Conclusion

Like most people, my informants' identities were historically complex, and different identities were brought to the foreground by their circumstances. Some of these identities, such as refugee or victim, often would have been considered undesirable before the war. The Somali Civil War made clan identity paramount, while diminishing the ability to emphasize one's role as provider for one's family. Somali and Islamic identities were more keenly felt in the camps than they would have been in Somalia, and clan identity had the potential to gain the coveted status of victimhood and increase one's chances of being resettled. Often life outside of Somalia meant embracing aspects of identity that could feel degrading, such as refugee or victim. Resettlement in America and life in Utah further complicated the meanings of Islamic, Somali, clan, and even American identity. The events that my informants experienced, and the opportunities they found in America led most of them to do a large degree of volunteer or humanitarian work to help others. They also emphasized their positive contributions as working citizens and Americans, who had much to offer to America, specifically a pluralist vision of America. The identities and roles of Somalis, especially the rising generation, will continue to adapt, and bring new meanings to what it means to be a Somali American.

Appendix: Informants (listed in interview order)



Osman: Osman worked for the Red Crescent in Somali before fleeing to Kenya and then the United States, settling initially in Los Angeles and then Utah, where he works for the state government. He is a member of the interfaith board at Khadeeja Mosque.



Aden: Aden studied law in Mogadishu until the war started. His son died because of an accident where they could not get medical aid and he decided to head to Kenya on foot. He worked in Nairobi and settled in Logan, later moving to Salt Lake. He works in refugee services for Catholic Community Services, and is a prominent member of the Utah Somali Community.



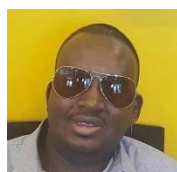
Ali: Ali flew to Nairobi then to Salt Lake, where, after a rough start, was able to purchase Yellow Cab in Salt Lake, and runs a large fleet of taxis. He is grateful for the opportunities he has here, and after traveling around the US, decided Utah is the best place to live.



Abdulkhaliq: Abdulkhaliq fled on foot with his family as a child to Ethiopia when the war broke out, then went to Kenya, eventually ending up in Kakuma camp. He was resettled in Nashville where he had a difficult time in high school but was able to graduate through his perseverance. He moved to Utah to be reunited with his Mother who was resettled in Salt Lake. He works for Hartland Partnership Center, working to reduce systemic barrier to higher education.

Ismael: Ismael, a Somali Bajuni grew up on the Kenyan border in a fishing village. His family sailed to Mombasa when violence broke out in their village and eventually ended up in Mombasa. He runs an NGO helping resettled Bajunis in Salt Lake, as well as helping with a Soccer team to help youth find community and avoid delinquency.

Aydrus: Aydrus, A Somali Bajuni, fled Southern Somali with his family when his grandfather was murdered by militants. He spent 23 years in refugee camps, mostly in Kakuma, where he became a preschool teacher. While in Kakuma, he was robbed and shot by Turkana. He now works at the airport in Salt Lake.



Abdirizak: Abdirizak was 12 when the civil war broke out and did not want to discuss his experiences in Somalia or Kakuma in much detail. He works at the airport, but runs an NGO that teaches Somalis English, helps with social services and partners to provide food security and other services.



Yussuf: Yussuf is Imam at Madina Mosque. His family fled Kismayo and he grew up in the Ifo refugee camp, part of the Dadaab camp complex. He came to California in 2005, studied IT, then decided he wanted to serve both the Muslim and greater community as a religious leader.

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