

# Somali Bantus in a State of Refuge

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## I. Introduction

In 1999, the United States government decided to accept up to 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees for resettlement. The refugees, who had lived in Kenyan refugee camps since fleeing Somalia's civil war in 1992, were the largest group of African refugees ever accepted for resettlement in the United States. As illiterate, non-English speaking, uneducated, rural subsistence farmers, they were also markedly different from most previously admitted refugees. Only a miniscule number of African refugees had been accepted for resettlement during the Cold War years, when the U.S. defined a refugee as someone fleeing communism and almost all admitted refugees came from Soviet Bloc countries, Cuba, and Indochina. To many observers, the decision to accept Somali Bantu refugees appeared to mark a new direction in U.S. refugee resettlement policy from one motivated by foreign policy concerns and national interest priorities to one defined by an ethic of humanitarianism.

## II. The Background

The 1999 offer of refuge to Somali Bantu refugees was based on their identification as a persecuted minority group who could never be expected to return to Somalia. The majority of those identified as Somali Bantu came from farming communities along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers in southern Somalia and who were considered physically distinct from other Somalis and inferior in status because of their

non-Somali ancestry and occupation. Some are descended from East African slaves imported into Somalia in the 19th century; others are descended from farming communities that were already settled along the Shabelle River prior to the arrival in the Horn of Somali-speaking pastoralists centuries ago.<sup>1</sup> While the majority of Somali Bantu shared linguistic, cultural, and religious practices with other Somalis, their racialized identity, distinct ancestry, and sedentary life as farmers distinguished them from other Somalis and made them vulnerable targets in Somalia's civil war.

After the 1991 collapse of Somalia's government, Somali militias ravaged farming villages along the Jubba Valley with rape, murder, pillage, torture, kidnapping, and extortion in an onslaught of violence that Somalia expert Kenneth Menkhaus has called "a holocaust."<sup>2</sup> Human rights organizations at the time catalogued the horrors experienced by Somalia's minority farmers, describing how they were attacked by all factions and defended by none.<sup>3</sup>

Like other Somalis escaping the militia violence, Somalia's minority farmers also fled to the sprawling Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya where they experienced further abuse from other refugees. Camp administrators and international aid workers reported the humiliating treatment of minorities in the camps, where they had greater difficulty accessing food, shelter, and firewood, and suffered higher levels of rape, assault, and the looting of food by their fellow refugees.<sup>4</sup> Minority Somalis also performed most of the manual labor in the camps, such as construction, portage, digging latrines, and hauling water.<sup>5</sup> By 1993, the minority Somalis had developed a shared ethnic self-consciousness and a leadership that had begun to investigate resettlement options. Along with camp administrators, the leaders began using the term "Somali Bantu" to distinguish and encompass minority Somalis in order to seek additional forms of protection.<sup>6</sup> By 1995, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) had identified the Somali Bantu as a "priority protection case worthy of third-country resettlement," according to a former UNHCR field officer in Dadaab.<sup>7</sup> Efforts in 1993 and 1997 to resettle the Somali Bantu in Tanzania and Mozambique—from where some of their ancestors had originated—had failed and the UNHCR began negotiating with non-African countries for a resettlement solution.<sup>8</sup>

### III. A Humanitarian Choice?

Cold War politics dominated U.S. resettlement priorities from the 1950s until the early 1990s, during which time the U.S. resettled over two million refugees, more than 90 percent of whom were from Communist countries.<sup>9</sup> Although the Refugee Act of 1980 broadened the definition of refugee to include people from other areas of the world, the number of Africans accepted for resettlement in the United States remained tiny, especially in relation to the growing number of refugees within Africa. Legal scholar Heidi Boas argues that the U.S. offer of resettlement to Somali Bantu (as well as to the Sudanese “Lost Boys”) demonstrated that the power of interest groups and the ethic of humanitarianism had become more significant than foreign policy objectives in the decision about who would receive refuge.<sup>10</sup> Members of the Congressional Black Caucus, some of whom participated in NGO-hosted trips to African refugee camps during the 1990s, successfully lobbied to raise the ceiling on African refugees accepted for resettlement. Aware of this pressure, the UNHCR advocated for Somali Bantus as a particularly vulnerable group. In response the United States offered them P2 status, which is a status given to groups “of special humanitarian concern.” It is noteworthy that the Center for Immigration Studies, a partisan anti-immigrant organization, lamented the offer of refuge to Somali Bantus as indicative of a shift from foreign policy and national interest to a “global human rights agenda” as the guiding force of U.S. refugee resettlement.<sup>11</sup>

Following the announcement of the resettlement plan, news reports across the U.S. promoted the image of U.S. humanitarian benevolence in choosing the Somali Bantu for resettlement. Because of their illiteracy, lack of education, rural background, large families, and history of persecution, Somali Bantu were widely described as particularly needy and unprepared for modern life. Descriptions such as “Africa’s lost tribe” (*New York Times* 2003), “feudal serfs” (*Refugees Magazine* 2002), and “among the most persecuted people on earth” (*National Geographic* 2003) highlighted their vulnerability, simple background, technological naiveté, and history of exploitation as the descendents of slaves.<sup>12</sup>

News accounts also revealed acute fascination with a primitive-meets-modern theme, demonstrated in the repeated contrast between Somali Bantu pre-war life and the life that awaited them in the U.S.: “Most have never seen a light switch or telephone, or even a building

that wasn't made of mud" (*Newsweek* 2002); "They are sturdy farmworkers with few other skills, who have never turned on an electric light switch, used a flush toilet, crossed a busy street, ridden in a car or on an elevator, seen snow or experienced air conditioning" (*Refugees Magazine* 2002); and they are "almost completely untouched by modern life...They measure time by watching the sun rise and fall over their green fields and mud huts" (*New York Times* 2003).<sup>13</sup>

A Horatio Alger undercurrent accompanied their characterization as contemporary primitives. An editorial in *Refugee Magazine* (2002) called them "a lucky few" and a *New York Times* article lauded the U.S. as "A Place of Miracles" for the refugees, while the Center for Immigration Studies complained that Somali Bantu refugees won "the jackpot" with the "dazzling" opportunity to come to America.<sup>14</sup> While celebrating the "dazzling" opportunity afforded by the resettlement plan news accounts and policy documents nevertheless predicted that the transition to life in the U.S. would be difficult and challenging for resettled Somali Bantu. That the United States was willing to accept such people implied that a humanitarian ethic, rather than national self-interest, had motivated the resettlement offer. This coincides with the argument of legal scholar Heidi Boas, who published the first academic analysis of the Somali Bantu resettlement. Noting that Somali Bantu needed "round the clock help in navigating through a culture so different from their own," Boas writes, "Given the extreme difficulty the Somali Bantu were predicted to have in adapting to American life, it seems particularly significant that the U.S. government selected them for resettlement."<sup>15</sup> Her article documents how the hard work of refugee activists, along with a push by the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus to correct the racial imbalance of refugee acceptance during the 1990s, spurred the humanitarian choice to select for resettlement a very small group who brought no relevant skills, education, resources, family ties, or international significance with them.

#### **IV. The Resettlement Process**

The attacks of September 11, 2001 challenged the humanitarian rationale for Somali Bantu resettlement. Although the U.S. State Department announced the Somali Bantu P2 designation in December 1999,<sup>16</sup> it took almost four years to resettle the first Somali Bantu family because of numerous delays. Indeed, congressional testimony about the post 9/11 fate of the Somali Bantu raises questions about the initial

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humanitarian commitment. Bill Frelick, Director of Policy for the U.S. Committee on Refugees, expressed his frustration with the attitude of the government toward resettling refugees in his February 12, 2002 testimony to the Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee:

I will hasten to add that very few of the groups that I would mention would be ones that would unfamiliar [sic] to the State Department. We have been in discussions with them for years on some of these groups, Somali Bantu in Kenya, for example, or the Baku Armenians in Moscow, and I'd have to say that the response has often been bureaucratic, passive, and at times downright uncaring and cynical.<sup>17</sup>

Leonard Glickman of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society broke in to add that although the State Department had appeared to be reforming the resettlement process:

It sort of ground to a halt this end of the summer, this past fall, and nothing has happened, and I think one of the most startling examples of that is the Somali Bantu. I mean, it was clearly identified as a group that were in need of resettlement, in need of the protection of the United States. Everybody was on the same page, including PRM [U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration], that this was a group that—and UNHCR, that this was a group that needed our services, and not a single Somali Bantu has arrived in the United States. It's outrageous.<sup>18</sup>

Defending the resettlement policy, Gene Dewey, the newly minted Director of PRM, reminded the Senate Subcommittee: "Perhaps only in America are the people and its leaders capable of waging a major military campaign while keeping the imperatives of humanity both in assistance and refugee admissions at the top of the national agenda." In fact, refugee admissions were not a priority that year, when the U.S. filled far less than half of the 70,000 slots designated for refugees. Despite the fact that the Somali Bantu had already been accepted and screened for resettlement, they were given none of the 2002 slots and only 803 of the 70,000 slots in 2003.<sup>19</sup>

The primary reason for the delays, catalogued in a State Department "Case Study of Processing Complexity and Unforeseen Delays," was security concerns.<sup>20</sup> The Somali Bantu had been through a screening process in 1997 after the failed resettlement effort in Mozambique. In 2001, the UNHCR and State Department completed a thorough

re-verification of the Somali Bantu from the 1997 list, but because the Dadaab refugee camp was deemed too dangerous for U.S. personnel to visit for the final screening, the agencies decided to truck all 11,860 re-verified Somali Bantu over 900 miles to distant Kakuma refugee camp in the northwest corner of Kenya at a cost of US \$2.7 million. (In a wry aside, *The Economist* commented, "They have been through a lot—persecution in their homeland, civil war, a decade languishing in refugee camps, and the tragi-comic experience of being trucked across Kenya to meet American officials who dared not visit them."<sup>21</sup>)

The first planned visit to Kakuma by Department of Homeland Security officers was cancelled because of fears of insecurity for U.S. personnel in the camp. Processing was further delayed by a corruption scandal. An unexplained post-approval processing delay blocked any resettlements in 2002 and 2003. With no hint of irony, the State Department report explained, "This lag necessitated a new round of security and medical clearances, because such clearances are good only for a limited period." New security concerns, and then flooding, further delayed the processing of new cases until 2004, by which time the processing of most Somali Bantu had taken five years.<sup>22</sup> By the advent of their resettlement, they, like other refugees who experienced similar processing, were "one of the most heavily screened groups of prospective immigrants to the U.S."<sup>23</sup>

Bill Frelick argues that during this period, U.S. policy toward refugees had shifted to a new, post-9/11 "security model": "[I]n the early twenty-first century, refugees often came to be regarded with deep suspicion, sometimes seen as being terrorists themselves or as being the sea in which the terrorist fish could hide and swim. Fear of terrorism often exacerbated preexisting xenophobic and racist tendencies."<sup>24</sup> Whereas during the Cold War years, refugees were viewed as heroic, freedom loving, and politically valuable, Frelick says that after 9/11 they were suspected of colluding with terrorists: "Under the security paradigm, refugees are devalued to the point where providing asylum or intervening to provide source-country solutions are trumped by the desire to keep terrorists out."<sup>25</sup>

After the first few hundred Somali Bantu finally began arriving in 2003, the bulk of the population arrived during 2004–06. Their transition to life in America raises many questions about how "humanitarianism" is conceived within the American system of refugee resettlement.

Since 2006, I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork with the large Somali Bantu community in Lewiston, Maine, augmented

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by visits to the Somali Bantu communities of their family members in Hartford, Connecticut, and Syracuse, New York. Many members of the Somali Bantu community come from the village in Somalia where I conducted ethnographic research in 1987–88 and thus I know their family histories well. My research in Lewiston has many different components and has included personal and group interviews with refugees, citizens, service providers, journalists, police officers, teachers, physicians, and city officials; focus group interviews with local service providers and ethnic mutual assistance associations; dozens of hours in schools, ESL (English as a Second Language) courses, citizenship classes, and after-school tutoring programs for refugees; support work for the boards of local service agencies, advocacy groups, community groups, and ethnic mutual assistance associations that aid refugees; and public outreach projects developed collaboratively with members of the refugee community such as museum exhibitions for two local museums, public lectures and presentations, ESL booklets, public reports, and media interviews.

#### V. Life in America

As noted earlier, many observers predicted a rocky transition in store for Somali Bantu refugees in the U.S. Like the Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia, who were resettled in the 1970s and 1980s, the vast majority of the Somali Bantu refugees did not speak English, were illiterate even in their own language, and had made their living as small-scale farmers in rural areas unserved by electricity, paved roads, running water, schools, or modern medical facilities. Unlike the Hmong, they arrived in the U.S. under the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology, strong anti-immigrant sentiment, and fear of Muslim terrorism. Furthermore, whereas many Americans understood the connection between the United States and the regions from where Hmong originated because of the Vietnam War, the relationship of the United States to the Horn of Africa was far less clear.

Although there was plenty of warning from those involved in the resettlement process that the Somali Bantu would need a great deal of support to make the transition to life in the U.S., no special allowance was made for their adjustment. For example, the information clearinghouse for refugee resettlement, Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS, [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)) posted numerous online reports about resettlement issues for Somali Bantu. A *Newsweek* article about

the impending arrival of Somali Bantu muses: "What happens next is surprisingly unclear...Some relief officials worry that the government isn't doing enough to ready the Bantus for life in America, and that those who are unable to find jobs will wind up trading one kind of poverty for another." "We are doing them a disservice by not preparing them properly," says Kate Hilton-Hayward, who co-chairs the Somali Bantu Task Force at the Refugee Council USA. "If the economy bottoms out, we may have trouble finding them jobs," she admits. The article concludes by quoting one man awaiting resettlement: "'I hear the government lets you keep a cow wherever you want in America,' he says with obvious pleasure. 'I need a cow, because I need fresh milk.' Imagine his surprise."<sup>26</sup> In fact, Somali Bantus received far less support than had the Hmong. Hmong refugees received up to three years of direct federal support, as well as greater support for English language classes. Somali Bantu were expected to be entirely self-sufficient within eight months of their arrival in the U.S.

This expectation of near immediate self-sufficiency reveals a great deal about the guiding principles of refugee resettlement in the U.S. Heidi Boas flatly states that the policy of rapid self-sufficiency condemns refugees to an intergenerational cycle of poverty and "is hardly a humanitarian act on the part of the United States."<sup>27</sup>

Refugee resettlement in the United States is handled by ten different nonprofit agencies (called VOLAGS, for voluntary agencies) that, in effect, bid on the number of refugees they can resettle in their respective locations. Every year, each of the VOLAGS submits its bid to the State Department, which apportions the refugees arriving that year amongst the VOLAGS who resettle them in various locations across the country. The VOLAGS are responsible for meeting the arriving refugees at the airport, providing some cultural orientation training, settling them in housing, enrolling the children in school and the non-English speaking adults in ESL classes, and if possible helping those over the age of sixteen to apply for jobs. Their contracts for assisting new refugees end after 90 days.

The role of VOLAGS in the resettlement process has its contradictions because they are self-identified as humanitarian but through the competitive bid system and attenuated resettlement schedule, they must operate like businesses. They are contracted and funded by the federal government to provide caseworker assistance to refugees during their first weeks in the U.S., but have no enduring connection or obligation to those they resettle after their contracts cease. There is



little follow up or accountability from the government to assess how the resettled refugees are faring.

In addition to support from VOLAG caseworkers, refugees who qualify could receive \$230 per person per month (in 2010) through the federal Refugee Cash Assistance Program for their first eight months. The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement is quite clear that when these funds end, refugees are expected to be self-sufficient and no longer in need of federal, state, or local support. As a VOLAG manager in Maine told me, "The ultimate goal of the reception and placement program is that clients will be self-sufficient within 90 days." VOLAGS are supposed to try to keep refugees off the welfare rolls and thus one of their primary concerns is moving resettled refugees as quickly as possible into available jobs, which are usually poorly paid, undesirable, unskilled jobs with no opportunities for training or career development. After their first year, refugees are also required to begin repaying the cost of their airfare from the refugee camp to the U.S.

Following the resettlement of Somali Bantu in cities across the country, news articles began appearing about their shock at the high cost of living; their challenge to find jobs that do not require English, literacy, or any education; and their struggles to make ends meet. Many families found they could not afford the rent for the apartments where they were settled by the VOLAGs after their federal support ended. Some families fell immediately into debt because they did not understand how to turn down the heat or realize the high cost of long-distance phone calls and thus ran up enormous bills that they could not pay. Those who acquired jobs found that the \$7–8 per hour they could earn barely supported their family.

Anthropologists have had harsh things to say about the expectation of nearly immediate self-sufficiency for war-traumatized resettled refugees, especially those who lack English and relevant job skills. Writing about Cambodians resettled in California, Aihwa Ong traces the administrative logic that constructs new subjectivities for resettled refugees. She describes how the "helping professions" who work with refugees focus their assistance on providing training to make resettled refugees into "cheap labor for America's postindustrial economy," expected to work in any kind of high flexibility "junk job" that comes their way. She concludes that newcomers are taught by VOLAGS and social service providers to constitute themselves as neo-liberal citizen-subjects who are supposed to replace their networks of reciprocal care and tight community integration with an emphasis on independence,

autonomy, and individualism, even though there is no assurance that they will ever obtain economic security.<sup>28</sup>

Both Ong and Fethi Keles, who has worked with Balkan refugees in upstate New York, argue that the neo-liberal emphasis on economic independence and self-sufficiency is fundamentally dehumanizing for resettled refugees. It strips them of a positive sense of connection to broader immigrant networks who pool resources, of self-esteem because of the expectation that they are destined for the lowest quality jobs, of their own cultural values, and of the validity of their personal history. It almost ensures that they will enter the American underclass and struggle with poverty. Keles writes of the impact on mental health of refugees who are struggling to make ends meet and who feel inadequate and socially unmoored from their past: "The neo-liberal work ethic hermetically seals possible avenues to socialization, emphasizes economic independence and self sufficiency above all else and seems to expect refugees to continually rewrite their fates anew, never looking back at either their past jobs and skills or their past identities."<sup>29</sup>

Read through this lens, the resettlement process for refugees like the Somali Bantu in the U.S. appears strangely uncharitable. Is the "humanitarian charity" provided by resettlement defined only by geography, in that Somali Bantu refugees were allowed to come here, at their own expense, and receive a few months of very limited support? Does humanitarianism only extend to the concept of refuge in a physical sense: that the U.S. will provide a relatively safe physical environment within which refugees can attempt, with very little assistance, to create a new future?

## **VI. What Happened in Lewiston**

My family came here without a dime in their pocket. There was no welfare system to leech off. They had to make it work and they did. They made Lewiston/Auburn what it is today. They didn't do it so refugees could rape our system till it's dry.

liam, blog in response to a January 30, 2010 *Lewiston Sun Journal* article about Lewiston's experience with refugees.

These are NOT United States citizens on United States Soil and are a threat to National Security just as any other terrorist is. These are terrorists.

ArmyMom, blog in response to a December 17, 2009 *Lewiston Sun Journal* article about a police investigation of alleged attacks by Somalis in downtown Lewiston.

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Am I disgruntled that federal and state dollars are being used to supply immigrants with housing food clothes and vehicles? YOUR DAMN STRAIGHT.

Dee In Maine

They [Somali refugees] are human leaches brought her to suck off the liberal maine system...When did maine become the welfare state to house and feed the worlds misfits.

Megalito

The Somalis over-populated Lewiston, drained it's money and resources, and cried discrimination constantly...They are at DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services] requesting welfare daily. The majority of Somalis are unemployed. Our schools are overcrowded with children who don't speak English. Lewiston...is down the tubes.

cojr

Online blogs (with original spelling) in response to a January 2009 article in *Newsweek* claiming that the arrival of refugees saved Lewiston.<sup>30</sup>

Lewiston was not prepared for the arrival of refugees. The city of about 35,000 is an old mill town built largely by French Canadians who came to work in the textile and shoe mills a century ago. Although Bates College brings a temporary influx of students every year, the city's population has remained predominantly Franco-American, Catholic, and insular. When the late 20th century wave of deindustrialization closed the mills, Lewiston started losing its youth to more prosperous places and few immigrants chose Lewiston as their new home. The densely packed tenement apartments in the downtown area had many low rent vacancies and the city's almost entirely white population was shrinking.

In 2001, a few Somali refugee families relocated to Lewiston from their initial resettlement sites. After refugees are resettled by a VOLAG they are under no obligation to remain in that location and VOLAGS are under no obligation to track those refugees. Many Somali refugees were initially settled in public housing projects in large cities like Atlanta and St. Louis, where they felt unsafe and insecure. After their first few months, a few families relocated to Portland, Maine, to join relatives, and gradually more families began moving up to Maine. By early 2001, public housing in Portland was full and the city sent a few Somali families further north to Lewiston. After settling in Lewiston,

those families invited their relatives to join them from their primary resettlement cities, and the number of Somalis arriving in Lewiston began to grow throughout 2001. Within a year about a thousand had arrived. The city and the school district were totally unequipped for the arrival of so many secondary refugees.

The City of Lewiston's General Assistance staff helped locate housing for the new arrivals, but by 2002 city staff felt administratively, economically, and socially overwhelmed by the influx of Somalis and by the lack of support from the state as well as area nonprofits and charitable organizations (including the sole VOLAG that operated in Maine, which was initially uninvolved in supporting secondary Somali migrants to Lewiston). City staff, who had little experience with refugee resettlement or cultural diversity, were trying to manage the provision of social services and educate themselves about the laws concerning refugees' entitlements for benefits.<sup>31</sup> The mayor addressed the matter by writing an open letter in 2002 to the Somali community asking them to stop moving to Lewiston, suggesting that they had emptied the city's coffers and taxed city government to a breaking point.<sup>32</sup> The ensuing storm of controversy brought a white supremacist group from Illinois to rally in defense of the city's right to bar the door against black refugees, which shocked and upset many Lewistonians who did not perceive the mayor's letter to be racist but rather driven by budgetary concerns. The white supremacist rally was met with a pro-diversity rally that attracted people from all over the state, including Maine's Governor and U.S. Senators.

As the controversy faded, more Somalis continued to arrive. Drawn by the presence of a Somali-speaking community and by the promise of physical security, safe schools, and low rents, Somali Bantus began relocating to Lewiston in late 2004 from their primary resettlement sites. By 2009, perhaps 5,000 Somalis and Somali Bantus had relocated to Lewiston (including a few hundred living in Auburn, the city adjacent to Lewiston). About 1,000 Somali-speaking children were enrolled in the Lewiston public schools. Somalis and Somali Bantus had become about 15 percent of the city's population and a fifth of the school population.

Because Lewiston had not been designated a primary resettlement site, it took many years to develop programs and services that supported the new refugee population. With the exception of the city's hardworking General Assistance staff and the nonprofit Trinity Jubilee Center (which redistributed donated food and clothing, provided

caseworker services, and ran an afterschool homework help program), most existing nonprofits and other service providers did not expand their services or client base to include refugees. As had happened in other cities, a complaint filed in 2006 against the School system for its failure to develop an appropriate ESL program brought in the U.S. Department of Justice to oversee its creation.<sup>33</sup> Complaints against the hospitals obligated them to provide adequate translation services. The only VOLAG in the state, after an initial reluctance to become involved with the Somali refugees, finally agreed to work with federal grants to provide very basic services for secondary migrants, which primarily consisted of cultural orientation and citizenship classes and caseworker assistance. Even the federally funded downtown enterprise zone organization ignored the presence of a large population of refugees in their targeted area and did not invite or include them in planning or funding projects.

In short, the overwhelming initial response in Lewiston to the arrival of thousands of refugees was business as usual. The expectation was that refugees would have to conform to local ways; that they deserved no special outreach, services, or programming; that their presence should have a minimal impact on the city; and that they should not diminish the resources available to Lewiston's prior citizens. The many complaints about the new population quickly condensed into a set of powerful narratives that often began, "I'm not a racist, but... ." The narratives reveal the ways in which Lewistonians felt that their city was under cultural and economic siege. In op ed essays, letters to the editor, blogs, and private conversations, Lewistonians complained that Somalis were not learning English fast enough, that the women's distinct dress (including the hijab) was an affront to American norms, and even that Somalis kept live chickens in their kitchen cupboards. Many compared the assimilationist trajectory of their French-Canadian parents and grandparents with what they perceived to be the cultural isolationism of the Somalis. Simply put, many Lewistonians believed Somalis and Somali Bantus were not becoming American quickly enough and many suspected that the newcomers did not intend to embrace American cultural values. Many Lewistonians feared that the Muslim faith might even ally refugees with terrorist networks abroad. Somali women, in particular, were regularly targeted in public by people yelling things at them like "Go home" and "Dress like an American."

Especially virulent comments circulated in private discussions as well as in articles and on-line comments in the two local newspapers, the *Lewiston Sun Journal* and the *Twin City Times*, about the economic impact of the newcomers. Taking a cue from the mayor's 2002 letter, Lewistonians reiterated to each other and to me that Somalis were an economic drain on the city, using up welfare benefits and public and low-income housing, and ravaging the school budget because of the need to create an ESL program. Myths circulated that all Somalis were unemployed and, in fact, did not want to work because they had become accustomed to welfare support. One particularly resilient rumor circulated that Somali refugees received free new cars from the government even though city officials repeatedly denied it. (In fact, most Somalis do hold jobs, adult ESL classes are in such great demand that there is a waiting list, and welfare statistics provided by Maine's Department of Health and Human Services show that only a small percentage of the predominant forms of welfare assistance, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and food stamps, go to refugees.)

To be sure, some Lewistonians embraced the arrival of refugees and worked hard to befriend and offer assistance to the newcomers. A former city employee who devoted countless unpaid hours in 2001–02 to community education efforts about refugees and cultural skills classes for refugees recalled: "To be a local [working with refugees] during that time was awful. You were never not defending Somalis wherever you went. You were never able to turn off your job." More recently, a blogger writing in response to an article in the local newspaper chastised some of the bloggers quoted above for their racist and condescending comments by arguing, "It is our capability to love and to care that define us, where is this humanity, when we are shutting our doors to neighbors where opportunities can be discovered. We now have a whole new culture to learn about, and we do not even have to leave our own backyard, what a beautiful gift."<sup>34</sup> Those who expressed support for the newcomers in blogs or private conversations emphasized the benefits of diversity brought by the refugees. But the interviews, conversations, and media reviews I conducted as part of my research suggest that the far more universal sentiment was antagonistic and unsympathetic. Most Lewistonians did not want their city to be a refuge and viewed the refugees as an unwelcome foreign presence and a great economic burden.<sup>35</sup>

The slow and resistant extension of assistance and support to Lewiston's new refugees by most city agencies and organizations and the

outright hostility of many Lewistonians toward the refugees cannot be viewed as peculiar to Lewiston but rather are indicative of broader American patterns. The reaction to the arrival of refugees by the citizens of Lewiston demonstrates how easily the rhetoric of economics trumps all other concerns and eviscerates arguments about humanitarianism and the benefits of diversity. While racism and fear of the foreign undoubtedly played into Lewiston's reaction, the primary objections to the arrival of refugees were framed in terms of their economic impact. Even though the facts show that the presence of refugees has brought economic resources and vitality into the area (including, for example, at least \$9 million in grant funding during 2001–2010 and about 18 new stores downtown owned and operated by Somalis),<sup>36</sup> the public discourse about how much the refugees cost the city has only grown over the past decade. Talking about money allows people who are unhappy about refugees in their city to avoid accusations of racism and silences dissenting humanitarian voices as out-of-touch “softies” and tax-and-spend liberals.

## **VII. Refuge?**

While criticisms of the refugee presence circulated in the hallways of office buildings, schools, and businesses as well as in private conversations, online blogs and published editorials, the refugees themselves were far more occupied with the daily challenge of creating refuge. In cultural orientation classes held in the refugee camps that were supposed to prepare them for life in America, they were taught to expect freedom, safety, the ability to have an education and a job, and the benefits of democracy. Once they arrived in America, however, their experience was far different from what their classes led them to expect. What has refuge meant to Somali Bantus who are now living in Lewiston?

Despite the emphasis in the news articles cited above about the projected challenges of new technology, Somali Bantu refugees easily mastered everyday American technology. Within a few days Somali Bantu refugees were flushing toilets, using washing machines, chatting on cell phones, crossing busy streets, and cooking with gas and electricity. Within a few months they were driving. The real challenges were overcoming the burden of grief and trauma, defining a new identity in the U.S., adjusting to American cultural norms, and struggling to earn an income and meet the expectation of economic self-sufficiency.

For nearly every resettled Somali Bantu refugee, refuge in America has meant abandoning family members in Kenya. During the process of screening and rescreening, many Somali Bantu people were rejected for resettlement because their American interviewers suspected they were lying about their ethnicity or their kinship relations.<sup>37</sup> While about 10,000 were ultimately resettled in the U.S., at least 3,000 were rejected and remain stuck in Kenya's refugee camps. Families were torn apart as the interviewers accepted some siblings for resettlement and rejected others or accepted one spouse for resettlement but not the other. Parents had to choose whether to come to the U.S. with some children while abandoning others; husbands and wives had to decide whether to come if it meant leaving their loved one and possibly their children. Refuge in America has thus meant daily grief about those left behind.

In addition to the grief of loss, many Somali Bantu refugees suffer from terrible memories of the things that happened to them during the war and experience daily stress from the challenges of adjusting to life in America. Treating trauma and issues of mental health are left to the private sector and voluntary organizations. Mental health is not prioritized as part of refuge, and the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which manages funding and policy for resettlement, offers little beyond an acknowledgement that trauma and grief can hinder a refugee's ability to perform as a worker. In their first decade in Lewiston, no mental health agencies offered refugees culturally competent services or programs.

For nearly every resettled Somali Bantu refugee, refuge in America means living with a new identity and family constructed through the resettlement process. People's names were changed and birthdays were assigned by interviewers (most adult Somali Bantu refugees in the U.S. now have a birthday of January 1, which, paradoxically, police and social services workers often view as an indication of fraudulent identities). Extended families were restructured to conform to U.S. kinship norms. Polygamous marriages were dissolved as husbands were told to choose one wife only, while the divorced wives and their children were resettled separately or left behind. Parents accepted for resettlement whose adult children were rejected often tried to claim their grandchildren as children, becoming their "parents" rather than their grandparents. Many rejected for resettlement tried to send their children with other relatives or friends, thereby constituting new families. Thus refuge means living in both kinship worlds: the world of the ref-



ugee camp where one's family loyalties and pre-resettlement identity require ongoing support in the form of remittances, and the world of Lewiston with a different name and a new family structure. Refugees know that their juggling of identity to conform to resettlement criteria is called fraud by U.S. authorities, and thus refuge has meant creating a web of secrecy about their past and their dearest family members still living in camps.

Somali Bantu refugees have quickly learned that refuge in the U.S. means poverty. In the Orwellian words of one resettled Somali Bantu woman, "There is freedom here. But you need a job to be free."<sup>38</sup> The expectation that everyone over the age of sixteen will be employed means that refugees—even those in high school—must emphasize work over education. It imprisons those with limited English and literacy in the lowest wage, least secure, least desirable jobs for the rest of their lives. It closes the doors to opportunity, to education, to professional development, and it turns the refugees into worker drudges at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. For those with competent English but less competent writing skills and no professional credentials, it means their best option often lies with seeking employment as cultural brokers and oral translators, jobs that offer limited professional mobility or development. Many refugee adults in their 30s, who work at minimum wage jobs as cart pushers, cleaners, and box cutters in places like Walmart, Dunkin Donuts, and LL Bean, have told me that they now recognize that this country offers no career opportunities for them and their only hope is that their children might have a chance for a better job.

"Since its enactment, nearly three million refugees who were once persecuted in their home countries have resettled in the Land of the Free," says the Director of ORR in a poster celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Refugee Act of 1980. But the Land of the Free inhibits many basic freedoms viewed as normal by Somali Bantus refugees. The freedom to live without war has come at the cost of the freedom to follow cultural practices. Somali Bantu refugees recognize that many of their cultural practices are unacceptable in America—for example, polygyny, spiritual healing practices that include trance and possession, the desire to observe Muslim prayer practices and holy days in the workplace and at school, and the freedom to speak about their frustrations and challenges with life in this country. They have learned that these activities provide fuel for those who object to their presence

and speculate about links between Muslim refugees and terrorists. What does refuge mean in the context of racism and xenophobia?

Because refugees are supposed to be grateful and politically docile, refuge can be experienced as a loss of political agency in relation to their lives in their new communities. Their voices are silenced in local public discourse because refugees are seen as economically impotent and politically disenfranchised because they cannot apply for citizenship for five years—and even then only once they have learned enough English to pass the test. Quoting Hannah Arendt's observation (offered in a different context) that refugees are denied the right to an opinion, Peter Nyers comments, "Without citizenship, refugees are denied not only political rights but also something more fundamental—the capacity to speak politically and the expectation that they will be heard."<sup>39</sup> Despite their public visibility in Lewiston, refugees are politically invisible. They have few political advocates because as nonvoters no one is accountable to them. As citizens-in-waiting, Somalis cannot run for office and have even been barred from serving on city task forces and committees. The local NGOs that provide support services for refugees are not necessarily political advocates or activists for refugees because their funding depends on maintaining good relationships with donors and administrators, most of whom treat refugee affairs with great caution. (One remarkable exception in Lewiston is the former mayor, Larry Gilbert, whose term ended in 2011, who often spoke out forcefully and publicly about the benefits to Lewiston of the Somali population.) Furthermore, the practice of deportation for criminal convictions means noncitizen refugees are actually held to a *higher* standard than citizens, for whom rehabilitation rather than deportation follows jail time.<sup>40</sup>

Evaluating the humanitarianism of U.S. resettlement practices thus appears complex. A resettlement agenda that insists on low wage, dead-end jobs rather than educational growth and economic support for those making an enormous cultural and geographic transition slots refugees into a generic illegitimate immigrant category. They are treated as lucky to have the chance to be here, responsible for their own future, devoid of political agency, and obligated to conform culturally. The idea that refuge might include support for managing trauma, social support for the enormous life transformation resettled refugees experience, and economic support to ensure that refugees have adequate time to develop language and job skills is absent because the U.S. lacks a developed public discourse that refuge should include anything other than physical relocation. As one resettled Somali refugee

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asked rhetorically in a conversation with me about his experiences in coming here, “What is the basic reason that you bring me to an ocean and then tell me to go swim by myself?” The sink-or-swim attitude is a neo-liberal definition of refuge, steeped in economic rationalities and valuations.

### VIII. Conclusion

The resettlement of Somali Bantu refugees in America was to be a humanitarian act to bring persecuted refugees from the desperation and danger of refugee camps to the safety and opportunity of the United States. For this privilege, Somali Bantu paid for their own airfare (travel on U.S. carriers was mandatory), redefined their identities and family relationships to meet American criteria for resettlement, and left behind family members who failed to meet the criteria. In the U.S., they learned that refuge is an obligation to become a low-wage earner and that the basis of their humanity as a refugee is limited to their ability to earn an income.

There is no doubt that the resettlement program saved lives and is a far better option than life in a refugee camp. But the Lewiston case shows that refugees who cannot quickly adapt to their new life because they lack the skills relevant for the American context experience a lack of support from the American government and society during their adjustment. In Lewiston, the city found itself utterly unprepared and unsupported, trying frantically to help refugees adjust, while city citizens complained and the state’s only VOLAG, local churches, and nonprofits remained on the sidelines. For the city, as evidenced in the mayor’s letter, the primary consideration was cost: the presence of refugees would become an economic burden that they did not want to shoulder. The dissenting voices who suggested the refugees brought a revitalizing potential, desirable diversity, and a common humanity that should provoke empathy were roundly dismissed in blogs and private and public conversations. Their views were rejected on the basis of assumptions about how much refugees cost, even when they cost very little at all.

A blog conversation in response to an article in the *Lewiston Sun Journal* about a Somali language class taught at Lewiston’s Adult Ed program summarizes the common sentiment. A long series of responses decrying the Somali language course and opining that Somalis should

learn English and get jobs concludes with this exchange between two bloggers identified as joeziehmer and whcosta:

Joeziehmer: "They do want to learn English but in truer form English is one of the hardest languages to learn. I think this speaks volumes about the intellectual failings on display of racism and prejudice concerning learning a language as opposed to learning empathy. Imagine if you cared enough to pay attention to immigrant cultural developments in history class whcosta."

whcosta: "I don't though. I care about economics."<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, the claim that refugee resettlement is a noble expression of humanitarianism is actually a shallow humanitarianism, guided more by an ethic of punitive neo-liberalism than one of generous humanism. The example of Somali Bantus is illustrative. By choosing a group defined as one of the most vulnerable, impoverished, and subjugated, the government is making a symbolic statement of the U.S. as a welcoming nation. Yet the refugees' incorporation into the nation positions them with other vulnerable, marginalized groups whose inclusion is defined by surveillance, discipline, moral judgment, humiliation, and a neo-liberal calculus that defines one's worth as equivalent to one's earning power.

If the humanitarianism of a country can be evaluated by its treatment of its poorest, most vulnerable members, scholars like Brett Williams, T. M. Luhrmann, and Philippe Bourgois have shown that the U.S. treats its most vulnerable (such as the poor, the mentally ill homeless, the drug-addicted homeless) with punitive and humiliating policies rather than humanist ones.<sup>42</sup> Resettled illiterate refugees join others who struggle against enormous barriers to live a decent, satisfying, sustainable life but who are judged for their failures in a system in which everything is stacked against them. The help they are given is so modest compared to their needs. However, the rationale that they are being saved from the horror of refugee camps and being given the opportunity for a new life seems to excuse the extension of limited generosity in assisting their resettlement.

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**Notes**

1. See Catherine Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Class, and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Mohamed Eno, *The Bantu-Jareer Somalis: Unearthing Apartheid in the Horn of Africa* (London: Adonis and Abbey Publishers, 2008).
2. Kenneth Menkhaus, "The Question of Ethnicity in Somali Studies: The Case of Somali Bantu Identity," in *Peace and Milk, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics*, edited by Markus Hoehne and Virginia Luling (London: Hurst, 2010).
3. See John Prendergast, "The Bones of our Children are not yet Buried: The Looming Spectre of Famine and Massive Human Rights Abuse in Somalia" (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, January 1994a); John Prendergast, "The Gun Talks Louder than the Voice: Somalia's Continuing Cycles of Violence" (Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, July 1994b).
4. Daniel James Van Lehman, *Expanding Protection for Marginalized Refugee Minorities: Resettling Somali Mushungulis to Southeast Africa* (M.A. thesis, Cornell University, 1999); Sasha Chanoff, "After Three Years: Somali Bantus Prepare to Come to America," *Refugee Reports* 23, no. 8 (2002): 1–11; Francesca Declich, "Fostering Ethnic Reinvention: Gender Impact of Forced Migration on Bantu Somali Refugees in Kenya," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 40, no. 157 (2000): 25–63; Menkhaus 2010.
5. *Ibid.*; Cindy Horst, *New Issues in Refugee Research: Connected Lives: Somalis in Minneapolis, Family Responsibilities and the Migration Dreams of Relatives* (Oslo, Norway: International Peace Research Institute, 2006).
6. Declich 2000, pp. 25–63; Menkhaus 2010, p. 99; Catherine Besteman, "Translating Race Across Time and Space: The Creation of Somali Bantu Ethnicity," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19, no. 3 (2012): 1–18.
7. Van Lehman 1999, p. 30.
8. Although Tanzania did not agree to a group resettlement, Somali Bantu refugees made their way to Tanzania, where hundreds eventually gained citizenship status. See Francesca Declich, "Can Boundaries Not Border on One Another? The Zigula (Somali Bantu) between Somalia and Tanzania," in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, edited by Dereje Feyissa and Markus Virgil Hoehne (Suffolk, U.K.: James Currey, 2010), pp. 169–186.
9. Gil Loescher and John A Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. xviii.
10. Heidi Boas, "The New Fact of America's Refugees: African Refugee Resettlement to the United States," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 21, no. 3 (2007): 438.
11. Don Barnett, "Out of Africa: Somali Bantu and the Paradigm Shift in Refugee Resettlement," *Center for Immigration Studies* (October 2003).
12. Rachel L. Swarns, "Africa's Lost Tribe Discovers American Way," *New York Times* (10 March 2003); *Refugees Magazine* 3, no. 128 (1 September 2002), available online at [unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3d9ac1502&query=refugees%20magazine%20somali%20bantu](http://unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3d9ac1502&query=refugees%20magazine%20somali%20bantu); Stefan Lovgren, "Refugees in the U.S.: One Family's Story," *National Geographic News* (20 June 2003).
13. Donatella Lorch, "Following Freedom's Trail," *Newsweek* (2 September 2002); "Editorial: A Lucky Few," *Refugees Magazine* 3, no. 128 (1 September 2002); and Swarns 2002.

14. "Editorial: A Lucky Few," *Refugees Magazine* 2002; Rachel L Swarns, "U.S.: A Place of Miracles for Somali Refugees," *New York Times* (20 July 2003), p. 11; Barnett 2003, p. 12.
15. Boas 2007, pp. 463, 455.
16. Unclassified State 239014 cable from PRM on Designation of Somali Bantu Refugee Group in Kenya for Resettlement Processing, sent from Secretary of State to all African diplomatic posts (19 December 1999).
17. Transcribed Testimony of Mr. Bill Frelick, Director of Policy, U.S. Committee on Refugees, before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary (12 February 2002).
18. Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary (12 February 2002).
19. Office of Refugee Resettlement Report from the 2003 National Consultation Somali Bantu Planning Workshop, contained in a letter sent to State Refugee Coordinators, nd.
20. David A. Martin, "The United States Refugee Admissions Program: Reforms for a New Era of Refugee Resettlement" (August 2004), available online at [state.gov/g/prm/](http://state.gov/g/prm/).
21. "A Home at Last, but Not for Many," *The Economist* 367, 8326 (May 2003): 29–32.
22. The report comments that lengthy processing delays "allowed for misunderstanding and resistance to grow in some of the U.S. destination communities, among people who were uncertain of what to expect and who sometimes gave public voice to fearful worst-case scenarios that were widely off the mark." Anti-refugee activists in several cities selected for resettlement, including Hadley, Massachusetts, and Cayce, South Carolina, successfully blocked the resettlement of Somali Bantu refugees in their communities.
23. September 21, 2004, Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing, Global Refugee Problem, Testimony by Mr. Charles Kuck, Managing Partner, Weathersby, Howard and Kuck, LLC.
24. Bill Frelick, "Paradigm Shifts in the International Responses to Refugees," in *Fear of Persecution: Global Human Rights, International Law, and Human Well-Being*, edited by James D. White and Anthony J. Marsella (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 34.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
26. Lorch 2002.
27. Boas 2007, p. 464.
28. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 229, 231.
29. Fethi Keles, "The Structural Negligence of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Policy," *Anthropology News* 49, no. 5 (2008): 6.
30. Jesse Ellison, "The Refugees Who Saved Lewiston: A Dying Mill Town Gets A Fresh Burst of Energy" (16 January 2009), available online at [newsweek.com/id/180035/output/print](http://newsweek.com/id/180035/output/print).
31. A description of the arrival of Somalis in Lewiston is provided in Phil Nadeau, "The Somalis of Lewiston: Effects of Rapid Immigration to a Homogenous Maine City," *Southern Maine Review* (2005): 104–146. Phil Nadeau is Lewiston's City Administrator.
32. See the documentary film, *The Letter: An American Town and the 'Somali Invasion'*, Ziad H. Hamzeh, Director, Hamzeh Mystique Films (2003) about this incident. According to city officials, the General Assistance budget was not, in fact, in peril when the mayor wrote the letter. Rather, the letter was a reaction to perception rather than reality.

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33. News articles reported similar complaints in Boston, Pittsburgh, and Springfield, Mass. See James Vaznis, "US Inspects Boston's Language Instruction: Schools Neglected English Learners," *Boston Globe* (26 August 2009); Joe Smydo, "City Schools Settle Complaint Filed for Somali Refugees," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (23 May 2006); and Jonathan Glater, "Agreement is Reached for Students from Somalia," *New York Times* (2 March 2006).
34. Dani Potvin blog in response to *Newsweek* article (31 January 2009), online at [newsweek.com/id/180035/output/print](http://newsweek.com/id/180035/output/print). Another blogger, grsct, echoed this sentiment, "What a sorry mess we Mainers are, alone in our frozen over cold hearted white world never knowing the richness the rest of the world offers."
35. This sentiment was recently demonstrated in the December 2011 election of Robert MacDonald as Lewiston's newest Mayor, whose platform included anti-immigrant rhetoric and condemnation of Lewiston's newest immigrant and refugee arrivals for their dependence on welfare. For a statement criticizing MacDonald's anti-immigrant stance, see Elliott Epstein, "MacDonald Crossed the Line," *Lewiston Sun Journal* (20 November 2011), available online at [sunjournal.com/news/columns-analysis/2011/11/20/macdonald-crossed-line/1117913](http://sunjournal.com/news/columns-analysis/2011/11/20/macdonald-crossed-line/1117913).
36. See "Refugee Economic Impact Study," C. Besteman and I. Ahmed, 2010, unpublished document; Bonnie Warshuck, "Somali Stores Bring People Back To Lisbon Street," *Lewiston Sun Journal* (29 August 2010), online at [sunjournal.com/city/story/897656](http://sunjournal.com/city/story/897656).
37. Because the ethnic category "Somali Bantu" was invented in the refugee camps as an umbrella term for many of Somalia's minorities, the boundaries of who was considered Bantu were fuzzy and thus subject to negotiation and various interpretations. The American interviewers therefore had great discretion in determining who was a "real" Somali Bantu. Many of those who should have qualified were rejected, even though academics and activists personally familiar with Somalia's minorities offered assistance, but were rebuffed.
38. Ben Jacklet, "Refugees Find Freedom isn't Free: Life is Confusing and Expensive for Portland's Somali Bantus," *Portland Tribune* (31 August 2004). See also, Angie Wagner, "The New Land: A Somali Bantu Clan Readjusts in America," *Seattle Times* (10 August 2003); and Rob Manning, "Somali Bantus Find a Home in Oregon," *Oregon Public Broadcasting* (23 June 2004).
39. Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.
40. See Nathalie Peutz, "Embarking on an Anthropology of Removal," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 217–241.
41. Bonnie Warshuk, "Somali Language Class Teaching Basics," *Lewiston Sun Journal* (17 May 2010).
42. Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman, eds., *The Insecure American* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2010).