

The Politics of Somali Bantu Identity in the United States

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I. Introduction

The pursuits labeled ‘identity politics’ are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private. They are struggles, not merely gropings; power partially determines outcomes and power relations are changed by the struggles. They involve seeking recognition, legitimacy (and sometimes power), not only expression or autonomy; other people, groups and organizations (including states) are called upon to respond (Calhoun 1994: 21).

Although the term *Somali Bantu* did not exist prior to 1991, it has circulated widely. International aid agencies and media outlets coined the term (Menkhaus 2010: 92). Human rights reports and the highly publicized and targeted resettlement of Somali Bantu refugees in the United States served as catalysts for circulations and revealed a rather unknown subaltern population to the international community. In this article, I consider how migration shapes this group’s identity politics. In particular, I focus on the identity politics of Somali Bantu associations in a major U.S. city. In this context, *identity politics* is a tool for enhancing the group’s position vis-à-vis Somali associations. I consider how the American landscape shapes these politics of identity as well as how such configurations are fraught with ambivalence.

The Somali Bantu minority group category is an umbrella term for a diverse population. This diversity is evident in disparate origin narratives, languages, former residence, clans, and cultural traditions. Some are indigenous to Somalia while others are descendants of slaves

brought to the country in the 19th Century. Most Somali Bantus are illiterate and speak *Af-Maay* (also called *Maay Maay*): the dominant language “from the central regions to the south” (Mukhtar 2010: 282). Some speak *Af-Maxaa*, Standard Somali, and fewer speak their ancestral languages such as *Ki-Zegua* (Menkhaus 2010: 93). Most lived in the fertile interriverine area of southern Somalia near the Shabeelle or Jubba Rivers where they worked as agriculturalists. Fewer lived in cities and worked as laborers or domestics. Some retained traditional tribal identities while others integrated into clans of the so-called dominant Somalis (Menkhaus 2010: 94). Those adopted into Somali clans were treated as inferiors (see Besteman 1999; Luling 2002).

Somali Bantus were treated as second-class citizens in Somalia and excluded from many economic, political, and social opportunities. Their shared history of persecution as ethnic and racial minorities in Somalia, widespread atrocities committed against them during the civil war, continued discrimination in Kenyan refugee camps, and denial of safe return to Somalia led to their targeted resettlement.

Catherine Besteman’s work in the Jubba Valley revealed how “Bantu” villagers resisted domination by ignoring humiliation and refusing to construct themselves as subjugated people. Besteman notes that their identity politics denied “any essentialized group identity on the basis of race, history, or oppression” (Besteman 1999: 155, 157). According to Mohamed A. Eno’s survey research with over 2,000 Somali Bantus, the most common response to abuse was obedience and perseverance (Eno 2008: 272). As Markus Hoehne notes, “the civil war not only had enormous negative consequences for minority group members; in some cases, it increased the self-consciousness of minority groups and led to the formation of new identities,” what he refers to as *identity formation effect* (Hoehne 2014: 1). In Somalia, Mohamed Ramadhan Arbo, Chairman of the Somali African Muki Organization (SAMO), united disparate groups under the political umbrella and led large demonstrations in Mogadishu and Afgooye (Mohamed A. Eno, personal communication, November 24, 2009). In Kakuma refugee camp, marginalized groups were separated from the so-called dominant Somalis for their own protection. This policy of separation empowered minorities to establish their own leadership structures, which led to the formation of separate schools (Kusow and Eno 2015: 10). “By 1993, the minority Somalis had developed a shared ethnic self-consciousness” (Besteman 2012: 12). In the mid-1990s, Mohamed A. Eno and Omar A. Eno, Somali Bantu diaspora elite, local media, and

SAMO advocated to prevent the revival of slavery in Somalia's riverine region.

Primary data for this study are drawn from ethnographic research among Somali Bantus in one of the largest cities in the U.S. from 2009–2011. In addition to participant observation, I conducted surveys and interviews. I accessed participants through their community's ethnic associations and others through snowball sampling. The research sample includes 3 youth, 2 boys and 1 girl, between the ages of 15 and 17,¹ and 25 adults, 15 women and 10 men. Four community members fluent in *Af-Maay* (*Maay Maay*) and proficient in English assisted as interpreters. A few participants, primarily youth and young women and men, were fluent in English. This paper also includes data from interviews with 2 employees of local refugee resettlement agencies as well as informal conversations with Somalis affiliated with the "so-called" majority clans who I will refer to as Somali Somalis. This is the term that nearly all research participants used. All names in this article are pseudonyms and the city is unnamed to protect anonymity.

The group is sizeable—about 650 Somali Bantus—in the research city and 15,000 total living in 40 cities around the United States. Nearly all live in Section 8 apartment complexes—federally subsidized housing for very low-income families. Most research participants were unemployed or worked in menial jobs that did not require English language proficiency. Men commonly worked as launderers cleaning linens for hotels and hospitals at commercial laundry facilities, restaurant dishwashers, and custodians. A few men worked as interpreters/translators for refugee resettlement agencies, courts, and hospitals. Most women stayed at home to care for young children. Some women occasionally earned money through informal economic activities such as providing childcare or altering and repairing clothing at home. Young children quickly grasped English whereas many older school-aged children and adults struggled. A number of high school students dropped out of school (see also Besteman 2016). A few planned to continue their studies after high school.

II. On Our Own Terms

The Somali Somali community was already established and had several ethnic associations when Somali Bantus began to arrive in the city in 2003. "The federal refugee resettlement program promotes refugee self-sufficiency in part through the creation of ethnic-based commu-

nity organizations (EBCOS) to undertake self-help projects that, in theory, will take primary responsibility for caring for refugee community members" (Besteman 2016: 392). According to Jillian, an administrator at a local refugee resettlement agency, initially Somali Bantus relied upon that community for food donations and other services. When Somali Bantus visited refugee reception agencies, Somali Somalis working as interpreters and translators assisted them. Jillian did not receive any complaints from Somali Bantu clients about such dealings.

Research participants reportedly struggled with this dependency and realized the Somali Somali organization *could* and *did* benefit from this state of affairs: access to grants to facilitate their integration and impression of a united and homogenous Somali community. Interviewees did not trust Somali Somalis to broker on their behalf. Besteman notes Somali Bantus in Lewiston, Maine share the same estimation (Besteman 2016: 400). Somali Bantus learned they could exercise their right to organize and represent their own community's interests. In 2005, the first Somali Bantu association was founded despite discouragement from some members of the Somali Somali association. Besteman notes, "struggles over limited resources and the perception of a zero-sum game in the world of social services play an important role in the denial of a separate Somali Bantu identity by other Somalis" (Besteman 2016: 404).

In 2008, I began volunteering my grant writing services to one of the Somali Somali associations. After leaving a meeting with the group at their office, I noticed that the Somali Bantu association's office was located directly across the hall. I was curious to learn about this group firsthand, and recognized that they needed my assistance more than the other group. The Somali Somali association was contending with a number of internal and external conflicts. Today, it no longer operates.

At the Somali Bantu office, I introduced myself to a man working there and told about my research in Finland among Somali Somalis,² and my interest in learning about Somali Bantu culture. The man looked at me suspiciously and asked if I was working with the Somali Somali association. He had noticed me several times at their office. I confirmed my involvement, reiterated my interest, left my business card, and took my leave. In the mid-1960s, Virginia Luling experienced suspicion in southern Somalia due to her research among the Geledi, a clan of the Digil-Mirifle clan-family. Luling notes, "The Jareer, on their side, did not trust me—why should they when I was identified with their former masters?" (Luling 2002:7).

I did not hear from the man I met at the office until about six months later. Shortly after this contact, I started facilitating a shelter-housed tutoring program for Somali Bantu youth and later a citizenship exam preparation class for adults. When I spent time at the office, I observed daily interaction between Somali Bantus and Somali Somalis. Somali Somalis frequented the Somali Bantu office to get a drink from the water cooler. In these instances, interaction rarely extended beyond routine greetings.

Several months into my fieldwork, a Somali Somali man whose primary language was *Af-Maay* (*Maay Maay*)—not *Af-Maxaa*, Standard Somali—moved to the city and began volunteering at the office. The particular reason why the man supported the Somali Bantu association rather than one of the Somali Somali associations was never revealed. Perhaps the man felt more at ease with Somali Bantus than with other Somali Somalis, given the shared language.³ It is also possible the man hailed from the same area as some of the group's supporters, might not have friends or clan relatives supporting the Somali Somali associations, or few relatives living in the city.

III. We are Somali Bantu!

In 2009, a faction of the Somali Bantu community established a second association because they did not approve of the original organization's collaboration with another Somali Somali association. Mohamed, a representative of the original organization, said, "In the United States, groups share everything: Whites; Blacks; Mexicans; [and] Asians, *even* President. We cannot be alone. We have to work with other groups."

At one of new Somali Bantu organization's weekly meetings, nearly 40 adults crowded into the living room and kitchen of a modest family apartment. Supporters referred to the apartment as "*The White House*," which functioned as the group's headquarters. A large American flag featured prominently on the wall behind Ahmed, an elderly man, who said:

I am 70 years old. In Somalia, Somali Somalis would not eat or sit with us. They said that we have big noses and kinky hair. They called us names like slave and *jareer*. The government kept us down and did not want us to know anything. Somali Somalis did bad things to us in Somalia. We were happy when the United States government brought us here. There is no discrimination here. We have equal rights. The Somali

Somalis wanted to keep us down. They do not want us to be educated. They did not want us to start our own organization. They discriminated against us in Somalia, and they still do this here [in the U.S.]. I helped start the other Somali Bantu organization. Do you see any Somali Somalis here? There are only Somali Bantus here.

Nearly all of the meeting attendees donned silk-screened t-shirts featuring the new organization's name and logo. The group's name, which includes the words "Somali Bantu," was displayed in large, bold letters across the front of the shirt with an image of a mango tree positioned below. They explained the mango tree symbolizes their agricultural livelihood. During fieldwork, the organization's leadership started working with the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Fostering Agricultural Refugee Microenterprise (FARM) Program⁴ to enable community members to return to farming. Somali Bantus in other U.S. cities such as Denver and Lewiston, Maine also participate in farming projects. Although agriculture had local value, it was not as widely known to cultural outsiders or celebrated on a national level as Somalia's pastoral heritage (Kusow 2004; Lewis 1961, 1994, 1998).

This t-shirt is significantly louder than the original association's understated t-shirt. The original group's name also included the words "Somali Bantu," but rather than spelling out the name of the association on its t-shirts, the group's name appeared only as an acronym, and, in significantly smaller sized font. The new organization's t-shirts were not only reserved for community meetings and events, but became a noticeable feature of everyday life: from the apartment complexes where Somali Bantus live alongside some Somali Somalis and other economically disadvantaged groups, to refugee resettlement agencies, workplaces, health care facilities, schools, and farmers' markets where they sell produce. Youth participating in the community's sports activities wore uniforms that identified them as members of the minority group. Notably, these shirts only used the label "Bantu" as opposed to "Somali Bantu."

Apart from visually marking individuals as Somali Bantu, the t-shirts were indicative of a growing movement toward distinction: distinctive from Somali Somalis and "fake" Somali Bantus (Bjork 2009). In 2010, when I met with the original Somali Bantu association's board members, they stated that the newer group considers themselves as "real" Somali Bantus as opposed to "fake" Somali Bantus. They explained that fake Somali Bantus speak Standard Somali more fre-

quently than *Af-Maay* (*Maay Maay*) or *Ki-Zegua* or frequently interact with Somali Somalis. The new group claims that Somali Bantus cannot understand *Af-Maxaa*, Standard Somali. This is a claim that was not accepted by some members of the original association. While survey data indicate the number of individuals speaking both *Af-Maay* and *Af-Maxaa* significantly outnumber those who only speak *Af-Maay*, the level of proficiency in Standard Somali is likely below that of *Af-Maay*. These findings cannot be generalized for all Somali Bantus and do not diminish the need for translation and interpretation services in *Af-Maay*.

Although this distinction could easily be mistaken as a new feature of life in the U.S., Mohamed, a representative of the original association, reported that this jockeying occurred in Somalia. He explained that persons spending considerable time in urban areas, interacting too closely with the so-called dominant Somalis, or speaking *Af-Maxaa* fluently were met with suspicion. It was not clear if the new organization's outgrowth was also in response to increased discrimination from Somali Somalis or an isolated incident. Also, I did not see the division on the basis of language, village, or clan.

An outgrowth of the apparent division is the fashioning of collective identities through narratives of injustice and oppression. For example, during the newly formed Somali Bantu association's first public presentation held at a local college, the elected President, assisted by an interpreter, told the audience:

Back in Somalia we used to live in the villages. We had a hard life back in Somalia. No food. No medical. We used to be farmers for a living. We were living near the rivers and then our house was like mud—a hut—it's not like one of those beautiful houses in the U.S. We were not educated back in Somalia. We were refused to learn. There are people who are Somali Somalis. They were not letting us learn and do something for family and happiness.

Later during the group's presentation, members performed a skit to reenact an INS interview at Dadaab refugee camp. In the skit, an INS officer and a Somali Somali interpreter interviews a Somali Bantu family. When the INS officer asked family members a series of questions including "Are you a terrorist?" the interpreter told the officer that they said yes. The group explained that the misinterpretation was not only due to a difference in language but a tactic of Somali Somalis to

keep them in Kenyan refugee camps. According to Abdi, a man in his mid-50s, Somali Somalis told them, “Don’t go to the United States. They are Christians. You will only be farmers there.”

These types of public narratives are tactics to gain recognition and legitimacy as a distinctive group. Yet perhaps more significantly, these practices cultivate a group feeling that transcends diversity, uniting on the basis of a shared history of injustice and oppression (Bjork 2015). Privately, some adults shared disturbing experiences of abuse and exploitation from Italian colonists, Somalia’s government, and Somali Somalis. Somali Somalis reportedly hindered their ability to impart knowledge of discriminatory policies and practices to foreigners in Somalia. And, as I found during interviews, many Somali Bantus, especially elders, were still afraid to talk about their suffering.

Abdi M. Kusow and Mohamed A. Eno (2015) argue that minorities do not accept the logic of the dominant Somalis’ stratification system and employ their own counter narratives to inequality: Somali Bantus say they are peaceful and the *true owners of the land*, whereas Somali Somalis are warlike and *newcomers to the land/takers of the land* (Kusow and Eno 2015: 12–13). In this view, Somali Bantus are the original or “real” Somalis which positions them for lands rights claims in Somalia.

How do “Somali Somalis” react to these efforts at distinction and narratives of injustice and oppression? When I first asked Amina, a woman in her 50s affiliated with a majority clan and employed by a local refugee resettlement agency, if I could interview her about the Somali Bantu community, she said, “I don’t know about Somali Bantu. I am not the same.” Later that same day, Amina expressed her discontent with the local Somali Bantu community. She said,

Somali Bantus have changed. Somali Bantus don’t want to be with Somalis. They say they could not get an education. Not true! In Somalia, they spoke Somali. Now they only speak *Af-Maay (Maay Maay)*. Somali Bantus worked in all kinds of jobs [in Somalia]: doctor; nurse; teacher; [and] government.

Most research participants embraced the term Somali Bantu. This minority group category served as a resource for relocating nearly 12,000 persons identified as Somali Bantu from the squalid Kenyan refugee camps of Dadaab and Kakuma—where many lived for nearly 15 years—to the United States.⁵ Also, participants embraced the label Somali Bantu because they did not consider the term to be pejorative

like the lexis Somali Somalis have produced and circulated: *addoon* which translates as “slave”; *gosha* which means “dense jungle” and refers to the lush interriverine area where many lived; *fuuf* which roughly translates as “breathing with big nostrils”; *oji* which means “today” (*oji* is taken from the Italian word *oggi*—this term suggests that Somali Bantus cannot think beyond the present day); and *jareer* which translates as “hard-textured hair” which is seen as African-like as opposed to *jileec* which translates as “soft-textured hair” which is seen as Arab-like. Somali Somalis purport to have *jileec* hair.⁶ Yet these markers are ambiguous. Luling notes “such anomalous characteristics in individuals are noticed and admitted to, often with laughter, but they do not disturb the stereotype” (Luling 2002: 94).

Luling uses the term *jareer* because it “was adopted as a self-designation by many of them” (Luling 2002: 93). More recently, Menkhaus notes “the term *jareer* is now widely used by the Somali Bantu themselves, and carries no pejorative connotations; indeed, the name is employed with a certain sense of pride, perhaps because of its double meaning (suggesting both hardness of hair and hardness of the people themselves)” (Menkhaus 2010: 93). American notions of political correctness likely prompted the term *jareer* to fall out of favor (Bjork 2010).

Research participants reported that they consider all of those other terms listed above as debasing, especially when Somali Somalis employ these, and participants used the terms *oji* and *jareer* when they referred to each other. Kerow, a man in his early-30s, told me that he and other Somali Bantus used these terms to connote sociability and belonging as well as unfavorable behavior. Mohamed, a man in his early 30s, who was present during Ahmed’s interview, told me that these social conventions are similar to those found among African-Americans in regard to the use of the highly politicized and polarizing N-word. This politics of labeling is one example of everyday efforts at distinction and legitimacy of identity in the diaspora.⁷

IV. Challenges to Associations’ Identity Politics

Survey data shed more light on differences among Somali Bantus including their commitment to the identity politics the ethnic associations promote. While about half of participants reported interacting with Somali Somalis during household visits and *arowsyo* (weddings), some claimed only limited interaction with them. Apartment complexes, closely followed by mosques, were other common places for

interaction. However, research participants mentioned these interactions rarely exceeded simple greetings. Four participants reportedly did not interact with Somali Somalis. One of these men said, "No. I don't like them. Why do I need to talk to them?" A male high school student said, "If they talk to me, I talk to them." At school he does not interact with Somali Somali peers. When I asked why, he said, "No, [Somali Somalis] gonna [are going to] give me trouble." He claimed Mexican-Americans and Somali Somalis discriminated against him at school. In contrast, a woman said, "I speak to everybody." Furthermore, some young Somali Bantus form relationships with Somali Somalis at school and in their apartment complexes like a close friendship I observed between two high schools girls who lived in the same apartment complex (one girl self-identified as Somali Bantu and the other as a member of a majority clan).

The surveys conducted with three of the four participants who claimed no interaction with Somali Somalis took place after the second Somali Bantu organization was established. I cannot help but wonder if their responses would have been different if I had contacted them earlier. A longitudinal study with surveys conducted at various intervals together with participant-observation and interviews could illuminate how and why political stances shift on an individual and "community" level.

Not all research participants accepted the labels "Somali Bantu" and "Somali Somali." Three participants, one youth and two adults, born and raised in Mogadishu, did not speak *Af-Maay*. They spoke *Af-Maxaa*, Standard Somali, as their primary language at home. One of the adults, a young woman, explained that she did not like the term Somali Bantu because it meant that she was not Somali. When she was in the company of Somali Bantus, Somali Somalis would say to them, "Why is she with you?" The young woman explained that she did not resemble other Somali Bantus. Yet, more significantly, she did not *feel* Somali Bantu.

V. An Ongoing Project

Somali Bantu identity politics are an ongoing project that is situational and strategic. Stuart Hall notes, cultural identities are "not an essence but a positioning. . . . Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (Hall 2003: 236–237). Ethnic associations will continue to

play key roles in circulations of Somali Bantu identity in the United States. While the original association accentuates their willingness to work with Somali Somalis in order to cultivate productive relationships with grant funding agencies and service providers, the newer group promotes separatism, which tends to hinder such relationships. Both groups accentuate a politics of difference albeit with different intensity. "There are always internal tensions and inconsistencies among the various identities and group memberships of individuals" (Calhoun 1994: 27). A member of the original group said, "We cannot discriminate and work only with Somali Bantu. We help anyone who comes to the office. We can be sued for discrimination in the U.S. and lose our 501(c)(3) status."⁸

What is at stake in these identity politics is the legitimizing of the Somali Bantu minority group. This includes defining the boundary of Somali Bantuness and deciding which labels to use and who may use these. Somali Bantus work toward legitimacy by exercising their freedom of speech and having others recognize their narratives of injustice and oppression. This positions them to access the resources they need to prosper in the United States: volunteers; interpretation/translation; relationships with refugee resettlement agencies; grants; culturally competent service providers; tutoring; job training; and so forth.

As Besteman (2012) notes, most Somali Bantus are illiterate, arrived to the U.S. with little or no education, lack transferable job skills, experienced psychological trauma, face discrimination from majority Somalis and other Americans, and feel pressure to take low-paying jobs in order to meet resettlement goals of self-sufficiency rather than increasing their capacities. How can Somali Bantus access local resources, given that Somali Somalis possess greater access to capital in its various forms including educational credentials, higher salaries and literacy rates, cultural competence, and longer established social networks in the country? Do Somali Somali associations genuinely embrace inclusivity or do they use knowledge of inclusivity and political correctness in the American context to manipulate the system and access resources? In what ways do these identity politics empower and marginalize Somali Bantus? While the identity politics promoted by the Somali Bantu associations can be illuminating for other oppressed groups vying for resources with other ethnic groups, these "politics" cannot be generalized to all Somali Bantus or Somali Somalis.

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Notes

1. Assent was obtained from minors between the ages of 15 and 17.
2. I carried out anthropological research among Somalis in Finland for nearly 3 years between 2000 and 2004. There were few people belonging to Somali minorities living in Finland at that time, and I understand this is still the situation. Some research participants pointed out others whom they suspected of being Somali Bantu or another minority group. There was a prevailing fear that people could easily hide their ascribed status in the diaspora (Bjork 2007a, 2007b). This was a cause of unease given marriage taboos.
3. Siyar Barre's regime adopted *Af-Maxaa* as the official national language and adopted a script unsuitable for *Af-Maay*. This policy disenfranchised *Af-Maay* speakers (Eno et al. forthcoming; Mukhtar 2010: 286).
4. This IRC Program is now called New Roots FARM Program.
5. Somali Bantus join other minority groups such as the Benaadiri and Barawa from Somalia and Hutu-Tutsi marriages from Rwanda given special group refugee status and entry to the U.S. (Barnett 2003: 4).
6. In Finland, if research participants acknowledged African-like hair or facial features among relatives, these exceptions were dismissed in terms of: "They are not beautiful" (Bjork 2007a, 2007b).
7. Outsiders have used various terms for Somali Bantus including *Gosha* (people of the forest), *WaGosha*, and Commoners (Besteman 1999: 150; see Helander 2003).
8. A 501(c)(3) organization is exempt from some federal taxes.

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