

Recollections of War and Displacement from the Somali Global Diaspora

By Natoschia Scruggs

Abstract: In June 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were 68.5 million people displaced worldwide due to wars, violence and persecution; 25.4 million of them were refugees (Edwards 2018). In 1991, Somalia plunged into civil war, causing a mass exodus. Nearly three decades later, there are large Somali diaspora communities around the world. This article highlights the migration narratives and experiences of ten displaced Somalis who fled their homeland in the 1990s – early 2000s and graciously shared their stories with me during semi-structured ethnographic interviews I conducted in Egypt, the UK and the US between 2003-2010. The reflections shared by these migrants illuminate the tension felt by many displaced peoples when they must occupy differing socio-economic and power positions in their receiving societies as well as when they are confronted with external understandings of their identities that often clash with self-perceptions; they also emphasize the need to disaggregate migrant experiences as migrants take different paths, use different strategies depending on context, and live within diverse host societies.

Keywords: *Somalia, refugees, narratives, Africa, diaspora, migration*

Introduction

In 1991, Somalia plunged into civil war, causing a mass exodus of much of its population. Nearly three decades later, the country remains principally unstable and there are large Somali diaspora communities around the world. Many people who self-identify as Somali have never been to their ancestral homeland. Nevertheless, Somalia lives on through the stories passed down by, as well as the replicated cultural practices and transnational ties of, those who were old enough at the time of displacement to recollect what life was like before the war. This article highlights the migration narratives and experiences of ten displaced Somali men and women who fled their homeland in the 1990s – early 2000s and graciously shared their stories with me during semi-structured ethnographic interviews I conducted in Egypt, the UK and the US between 2003-2010. Their reflections explain how they found themselves in other parts of Africa (Egypt), the Middle East (Yemen), North America (USA) and Europe (Italy and Norway) and are interwoven with details on the conditions that led to mass migration, and the effects war, displacement and migration have had on cultural and social practices. The stories shared by Somali

migrants illuminate the tension felt by many displaced peoples when they must occupy differing socio-economic and power positions in their receiving societies as well as when they are confronted with external understandings of their identities that often clash with self-perceptions.

Methods and Delimitations

My decision to use ethnographic methods for my research was deliberate. Ethnography is a holistic method that, among other things, involves firsthand observation and in-depth interviewing (Marcus 1998). Its utility lies in “the delicacy of its distinctions” as it avoids generalizing across cases while seeking to make thick description possible (Geertz 1973). I met each person discussed in this article in one of two ways: through mutual friends who knew of my lifelong interest in the people, customs and cultures of the Horn of Africa, and through volunteering at various nongovernmental organizations (such as the Somali Development Center in Boston, the International Rescue Committee in San Francisco and Africa & Middle East Refugee Assistance in Cairo). Interest in the Horn of Africa and volunteerism fueled my dissertation project, which compared the migration policies of five countries via the exploration of refugee narratives of Somali women who had received citizenship in countries of the global north but chose to relocate to Cairo. Taking an integrative theoretical approach as a framework and employing ethnographic methods allowed me to disaggregate and analyze each woman’s migration decisions as well as the sending and receiving countries, from three levels: (1) macro [global economic and structural conditions]; (2) meso [state policies]; and (3) micro [individual agency]. My approach enabled me to shed light on how these women imagined and related to citizenship and mobility while illuminating the social and public policies of their countries of citizenship, juxtaposing the women’s ideas about Egypt and the global north along the way. Our discussions flowed effortlessly and the conclusions I came to inform and inspired this article. First, the individual resettlement and integration experiences of refugees are as dependent upon when they migrate from their homeland as what policies are in place when they arrive at their receiving society. Further, decisions to migrate are based on what are often seen as obvious reasons, such as safety and economic, but also not so obvious factors, such as cultural and social needs (Scruggs 2009). Years later, other scholars, like Cawo Mohamed Abdi in her book *Elusive Jannah* (2015), followed my path and used the same exact theoretical framework and ethnographic methods to examine Somali communities in other locations, coming to the same conclusions. Much has been written about the many communities that make up the Somali Global Diaspora since the initial

collapse of the state in 1991 and mass outmigration. To be sure, this article does not attempt to be, or claim to be, exhaustive. The ten Somali voices of men and women who ranged in age from 20 to 51 years included herein are meant to add to the pool of experiences extant, perhaps offering different or more nuanced perspectives of war and displacement that are worthy of being heard.

The Road to Civil War: The Conditions that Led to Mass Migration

From 1960 to 1969, the Somali Republic functioned as a parliamentary democracy (Ingiriis 2016; Menkhaus 2004). Omar Eno and Mohamed Eno (2007) assert that, after independence from Italy and Great Britain, the national narrative of the Somali state was predicated on “nomadic superordinates and Bantu subordinates”, resulting in “deep class stratification [...] and the deliberate [exclusion] of the Bantu people” (21-22). Mohamed Haji Abdullahi Ingiriis describes this period as being one in which nationalist activities could be attributed to reactions against European and Abyssinian colonialism. He further rejects the notion of there being a singular Somali nationalism as implied by some scholars (Touval 1963), maintaining that nationalism was a plural process begun in the pre-WW2 era. Nonetheless, the society was divided. There were also divisions among clans that fueled great problems later. In October 1969, President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke was assassinated by one of his bodyguards amid accusations of widespread governmental corruption. A bloodless coup ensued and Major General Mohammad Siyaad Barre and the army seized power (Lewis 1980). Throughout the Cold War years, the Horn of Africa was strategically significant to the US and the Soviet Union. Both countries sought regional allies to ensure a foothold in the Red Sea basin – a window to the Middle East and Asia. At different points in time, Somalia was the ally of the Soviets and the Americans. However, until the late-1970s, it was aligned with the Soviets against Ethiopia, whose interests were protected by that country’s close relationship with the US (Patman 1990). Somali-Soviet relations soured in 1977, when Somalia invaded the contested Ogaden region of Ethiopia and the Soviets sided with the Ethiopians. Feeling betrayed, Barre expelled the Soviets from Somalia and, from 1978 onward, worked on forging stronger ties with the US, Arab countries and Europe (Darnton 1977; Menkhaus 2004). The legacy of the Cold War period was the militarization of the Horn of Africa and the proliferation of weaponry supplied by the Soviets and the Americans. Much of the weaponry that entered Somalia was used in the country’s post-independence civil unrest.

After an unsuccessful attempt was made on his life in April 1978, Barre responded by encouraging clan divisions and retaliation. He especially targeted the Majeerteen, the clan affiliation of those who had organized to kill him and take over the government (Kapteijns 2013). Social tensions had gone progressively from bad to worse, with many dissidents forming opposition movements and plotting to stage coups. By the mid-1980s, Somalia was chaotic and dysfunctional. The Barre administration had degenerated into a dictatorship and the society was rigidly divided along clan lines. Clashes between government forces and opposition claimed the lives of many civilians and prompted the exodus of those who could leave the country (De Waal 1993). In January 1991, Barre's government collapsed, and the president fled to Kenya then Nigeria, where he later died in exile in 1995 (Issa-Salwe 1994; Abdullahi 2001).

With no central government, the country began to splinter off into autonomous segments. The northwest declared itself the independent Republic of Somaliland in 1991 yet remains unrecognized due to "the international community's desire to maintain existing territorial boundaries" (Ismail 2017). In 1998, the northeast remained part of Somalia yet simultaneously declared its regional autonomy as the Republic of Puntland State of Somalia. The former Italian Somalia – the southern portion of the country, including Mogadishu, the capital – has been the most violent and unstable region since the collapse of the central government. Divided and ruled by different warring factions for most of the time, the region has seen varying periods of relative calm only to be followed by renewed outbreaks of violence. When reviewing Somalia's collapse and the years that followed, Tobias Hagmann warns that too many analyses have "focused predominantly on local actors and internal dynamics to account for the continuous political disorder in the former Somali Democratic Republic since 1991" and argues that Somali and foreign elites, along with international aid and external actors should be understood as integral to the evolving conflicts that have frequently undermined state-building efforts in Somalia (2016: 5). Throughout all that has happened, members of minority clans have particularly suffered. Discrimination and prejudice against Somali Bantus and all people who belong to minority clans was pervasive in pre- and post-independent Somalia due to their lack of clan protection and armed militias (Besteman 2016). These people were targeted during the civil war for the same reason, resulting in disproportionate incidents of rape, assault and murder among them (Van Lehman and Eno 2003). Omar, a refugee member of a minority clan,¹ shared the following story about constant assaults he suffered at the hands of majority clan members due to his perceived inferior status within Somali society:

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: "Close encounters in displacement" (2019)

Hawiye² militiamen hit my house with a missile, killing my family in 1996. After living in our house alone for five days, four militiamen returned and attacked me. They told me if I did not leave, they would kill me. When I told them I had nowhere else to go, they started beating me, telling me that they would kill me at that moment if I did not leave. I began living on the streets of Hodan District, Mogadishu and ended up staying there for two-years. No one would hire me so I would go all around Mogadishu collecting plastic bags. I would clean these bags then take them to markets and sell them to the market owners to use with their customers. All the shop owners liked me but Hawiye clan members constantly harassed me. Once a group of them held a knife to my throat and threatened to kill me. I felt unsafe on the streets and I knew the violence against me would not end because I am Benadiri and did not have any clan protection.

Hiba, also a minority clan member, shared her story of repeated attacks:

Five armed Hawiye militiamen attacked my house in the Hamar Weyliye District in Mogadishu. They entered the house and asked where we held our valuables. My entire family was at home at that time. They began searching everywhere for goods. They were looking for gold and money. My father told them that we had nothing of value. When he said this, some of the men immediately began beating him while the others beat the rest of my family. They beat us with the butts of their guns until they found some money that my father had hidden in the house. They took this money and left. My father died due to the severe beating he received. I was left alone with my mother and small siblings. Several months later, I was kidnapped and gang raped by a group of Hawiye men while walking home. They kept making rude sexual remarks to me from their car and I ignored them. When I refused to get into their car, two of them jumped out and dragged me inside. They took me to a place far from my neighborhood and held me there for three days. Each raped me when he felt like it. They called me names and said that they violated me because I was from a minority clan and I refused their advances. I never told my mother the details of what happened. I could not tell anyone.

In 1992, the United States launched two humanitarian assistance initiatives known as “Operation Provide Relief” and “Operation Restore Hope” to assist Somalis suffering from food shortages and drought in addition to the overall dysfunction caused by the war. The United Nations took over these initiatives in 1993 but withdrew in 1995 “having suffered significant casualties” (CIA World Factbook 2001). Xaaji, a refugee living in Cairo, recalls the arrival and departure of UN Peacekeeping forces:

When UNOSOM³ arrived, we moved back to Mogadishu and into our same house that we had left in the Yaqshid District. My father began working for UNOSOM. I am not sure what he did;

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: “Close encounters in displacement” (2019)

I just know that he worked for them. Life was good when they were in the country. My family did not experience any bad things at this time. However, after UNOSOM left, things got bad again.

Making the Difficult Decision to Leave

The period in which Xaaji claims her family began to experience hardships again, Hawa, a single mother whose husband had been killed by militiamen in 1994, found herself having to make a life or death decision:

Things were so bad that I knew I had to leave. My husband of two-years had been killed in 1994 and I had to find a way to support our infant daughter. As a single parent, I felt the pressure to do whatever was necessary for my child so I left her with my mother. First, I went by car to Ethiopia and stayed there for two and a half months, then traveled to Eritrea, where I stayed for a couple days. From there I took a boat to Yemen.

Many Somalis made the courageous decision to leave their homeland believing they would be resettled to a third country only to find later that it would be far more difficult than they could have initially imagined. Samar, a woman in her twenties, had made it from Mogadishu to Egypt. After learning that she would not be resettled, she decided to pay smugglers to help her reach Italy. Samar, a friend and three strangers they met through the smugglers were taken from Cairo into Libya. The plan was for the five migrants to join a larger group in Tripoli, and then take a boat to Italy's coast. The smugglers kept delaying the trip and demanding more money. When they were finally ready to cross the Mediterranean Sea, Tripoli police intercepted them. Some migrants were able to flee while others were arrested and jailed. Samar was arrested and has no idea what happened to her friend:

When the police arrived, I was scared to death. I did not want them to send me back to Mogadishu. They grabbed as many people as they could but there were so many of us at the shore that some were able to jump on a boat and take off quickly. I was separated from my friend and two of the strangers that we had met through the smugglers in Cairo. I had assumed they were with us. When we reached the jail, I realized that they were among the people who had escaped. I stayed in jail for 8-months, then was released and returned to Cairo. Around one year later, some Somalis told me that they had heard that my friend had reached Italy and was working as a domestic in Rome. I'm not sure if that is true or not but I think it is. She made it and I did not. I felt foolish.

Hussein and his older cousin survived a perilous journey out of Somalia and parted ways after reaching Egypt. It was a traumatic event because he was only a teenager at the time and felt his cousin had abandoned him, knowing that they only had each other. Hussein suspects that his cousin resorted to paying smugglers as Samar had done, after finding out that resettlement for two single young men was not likely:

I had an older cousin who was like a brother to me. We decided to leave Mogadishu and try to get recognized by the UN so we could get resettled, get jobs and send money back to our relatives. In Cairo, Somalis warned us that women and children get first priority for any type of services and resettlement. Over time we saw that they were correct. My cousin was crushed. We had no money and only survived because Somalis who had arrived before us gave us food, advice and a place to sleep. My cousin could not take the pressure. We argued one day; he walked off and I never saw him again. I cried a lot because, looking back, I was young and scared. But I made friends with Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, and others trapped in Cairo. I learned Arabic and an Egyptian man hired me to work in his shop. I was not paid much but it helped me to get on my feet and have some money to send back to my family.

Neither the threat of danger nor the violent antics of smugglers deter people like Hawa, Samar, her friend and possibly Hussein's cousin from trying to find a better life. As one refugee in Cairo named Suleymaan put it, "What more is there to lose when you have already lost everything?" The desire to start over elsewhere and the pressure to support relatives who cannot support themselves compels many to take risks they would not ordinarily take.

Since 1991, Somalia has experienced "the proxy wars on Somali territory between Ethiopia and Eritrea; the emergence of clan-affiliated religious groups in the name of the Islamic Courts; and, Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia under the cover of fighting Islamic extremism and global terrorism but with the aim of empowering the administration of [the Transitional Federal Government]" (Eno and Eno 2007:29). The Federal Government of Somalia is currently headed by President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and recognized within the international community. Many Somalis have returned to their homeland to help rebuild and the progress made can be seen in pockets throughout the country (McVeigh 2018). Yet, Somalia's future remains uncertain. The fear of violence is ever-present (Adow 2018). An overall sense of "insecurity [...] lack of state protection, and recurring humanitarian crises" are root causes for the large numbers of Somalis who remain internally displaced and those who continue to flee their homeland in search of peace and security (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Life in The Diaspora: The Effects of War, Displacement and Migration on Cultural and Social Practices

Somalis representing every region, clan, educational level and social status departed their homeland. Many of the fleeing families consisted predominantly of women and children, as men were especially targeted during the civil war. It is estimated that “two-thirds of the global Somali diaspora live in neighboring countries” and “between 1990 and 2015, the total number of people born in Somalia but living outside the country more than doubled” (Connor & Krogstad 2016). The diaspora population will likely continue to grow as Somalia was named one of the top five refugee sending countries in the world in 2018 (Huber & Reid 2018).

Family Dynamics, Gender Roles and Social Positioning

The effects of war, displacement and migration on cultural and social practices vary from one Somali diaspora community, family and individual to another. In Somalia, clan affiliation and one’s immediate family are significant sources of personal identity and security. Somalis are patrilineal, tracing their lineage through their male relatives. *Whom* you are from is more important than *where* you are from (Putnam and Noor 1993). There has always been diversity within Somali households. Many were fluid and comprised of extended relatives living together. Yet the typical pre-war household consisted of nuclear families: father, mother and children. The husband/father was expected to care for his family financially and morally, as well as represent them in the community. The wife/mother was responsible for managing every aspect of the household affairs largely “without interference” (Abdullahi 2001: 120). In post-independent Somalia, women were granted rights and legal protections by the state;⁴ while they could work outside the home, they were not expected to. The expectation was that men would be the main financial source for their family, and they were judged on how they took care of and represented them in public. These gender roles were reinforced by both societal expectations and Islam.⁵ Jamila, a Cairo resident, remembered the role her father played in their home while growing up:

My family had a good life. We lived in a nice house in the Holwadag District of Mogadishu, near Bakaara Market. My father was a medical doctor who worked in a government hospital and we had no financial worries. We children – my eight brothers, sisters and me – attended

good schools. My mother took care of the home. No one worked except my father and he expected us to get good marks, then go to university.

Many Somalis have successfully developed transnational social networks in the places where they have migrated. Stephanie Bjork (2017) masterfully describes how Somalis in Finland navigate life in Helsinki utilizing the social networks they developed. There is still no denying that war has caused a loss of social networks as well as the distortion of traditional gender roles and family dynamics. Men, women and, in some cases, children are placed under enormous economic strain. Many diaspora households are headed by women who have had to take on the role of representing their families in the public sphere and work outside the home while simultaneously handling all household affairs (OCASI 2016). Somalis have struggled with accepting the fact that the social standing they had back in their homeland often has little to no bearing on the social position they occupy in the receiving society of their diaspora community. These experiences are not unique to Somalis. For example, Canadian anthropologist Parin Dossa had the same sentiments of having experienced familial and social status changes expressed to her by Iranian refugee women (2004) and women who fled Afghanistan (2014) and resettled in Canada. Asha left Somalia for Italy before the civil war had started. When it was clear that it was not safe to return home, she had to reluctantly take on a whole new identity in Rome:

My original plan was to go there to attend university. I was not personally fixated on Italy, but since my country used to be an Italian colony, it was easy to get a visa. Initially, I thought it would be a dream come true. On my plane ride from Mogadishu to Rome, I was imagining the friends I would make and having my degree. Because it is Europe, you know, you think...you think you will be able to live and work easily, without hassle. But this was not the case. I was never able to save enough money or reach the level of Italian language needed to enroll in classes full-time. And when the war started, I could not go home. To support myself, I worked as a domestic for Italian families in Milan. I never thought I would be working as someone's maid.

Asha had the support of her family and the financial means to travel to Italy to further her education. Yet, war in her homeland, and Italy's lack of support for asylum-seekers left her vulnerable. She relied on Somali social capital and networks to find employment:

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: "Close encounters in displacement" (2019)

The Italian government had no provisions set up for refugees. There were no asylum or resettlement programs that I knew of. All you had access to was a government permit to work, called a *sejournal*. If you stopped working, your permit became invalid and you could be deported. Most times I felt like a lost child but I did have some cousins living in Rome who helped me a bit. And I knew there was a huge community of Somalis in Rome that I could turn to if I needed help – even if they were complete strangers. I found out about domestic jobs in Milan through some Somali women. That’s how I ended up there.

In total, Asha worked for four Italian families during her six-years in the country. Although she made peace with her new role as a domestic helper, she demanded to be treated with respect:

I worked with Filipina, Ethiopian and Somali women. The families I worked for always treated me well. If they were mean, I left. I have no idea what they said about me behind my back, but in my face, they were kind. One woman, a Filipina, told me that her boss had raped her so she ran away from him. I occasionally heard stories like that but nothing of that nature ever happened to me.

Asha’s exit out of Italy came in the form of a marriage proposal from her cousin who had received asylum in the US:

One of my cousins had been living in the US for several years. We used to chat on the internet and sometimes on the phone. It was fun. He made me laugh a lot, which kept my mind off of my worries. One day, he asked me to marry him. I said yes because I knew he was the type of man I wanted. I wanted a family and he did, too. After I said yes, he immediately began working on getting me a visa to join him. I can’t remember exactly how long it took, but within two and a half years, we were settled in our new life in Maryland.

Asha and Hawa’s experiences were similar in some respects but different in others. Unlike Asha, Hawa was caught up in the war in their homeland and motivated to leave because she felt pressured to support her family financially. As soon as she arrived in Yemen, she registered at UNHCR-Aden. It was clear that resettlement to a third country for a single woman with no children was not a priority for the agency, but that did not bother Hawa. Her goals were to find employment and build her skills. Ironically, Hawa’s exit out of Yemen was due to love, and she and her husband ended up in the US, like Asha:

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: “Close encounters in displacement” (2019)

After working and studying in Yemen for two years, I met a nice Somali man by surprise. We shared common values and goals: to work hard and send money back home to support relatives there. In 1997, we married and had two sons – one in 1998 and the other in 1999. My husband was studying at the university and I was working as a nurse in a health center. We did not feel it was important to socialize and be around a lot of Somalis; we were too busy working. It was nice to know that there was a big community to be part of if we wanted that, but we were just too busy trying to reach our goals to make friends. My husband found out that there was something called the Diversity Immigrant Visa Lottery Program offered by the US government. One had to fill out an application at the American Embassy in Sa'naa to have their name entered in the lottery. If selected, the visa winner and their immediate relatives would be granted permanent residence in the US. My husband was the first person to apply and the first to learn that he had won when the results were announced. We could not believe it. We were moving to the US!

Identity, Processes of Racialization and the Development of Racial Awareness

The significance of clan affiliation and conceptions of self-identification vary from community, to family, to individual throughout the Somali global diaspora. Some Somalis place emphasis on the importance of the clan system and the reproduction of clan identities (Bjork 2007; Kusow 2007; Bjork 2017; and Jama 2018). Others strongly identify as Somali and/or Muslim and, depending on the context African or simply black, with either no mention of clan affiliation or ambivalence towards it (Scruggs 2004; Kabir 2014). There is indication that Somali identities, especially of those born outside the homeland and who have never been to Somalia, “Become increasingly shaped by the cultures of the settlement country because of their daily interactions” as they gradually lose touch with the culture of their parents and their homeland (Omar 2016: 68). There has been much written about how Somalis who migrated as children or who were born to Somali refugees in diaspora communities across Europe, the UK, North America and Australia struggle to balance their parents’ expectations with their own while combatting negative external stereotypes of who they are and navigating the tenuous terrain between adolescence and adulthood (Mulligan 2009; Moore 2010; Stachel 2012; Fellin 2015; OCASI 2016; Boehm 2018; Parveen 2018; and Townsend 2018). Somali Bantu youth in Maine expressed facing an even greater challenge as they have to navigate being Muslim in a predominantly Christian country where being of visible Black African descent has many ascribed negative connotations while also being members of a subgroup within the Somali refugee community that has historically experienced discrimination and hatred based on their heritage and physical features (Besteman

2016). Abdirahman, a young Somali man who moved to Norway as a child, expressed respect for Somali culture while asserting his own ideas about identity:

My father was always making my brothers and me recite the names of our ancestors, saying we need to know this information. But what good is it? Qabil [the clan system] is the reason Somalia is so messed up now! And what good does this information do for me in Oslo? I respect the old ways of Somalis but young Somalis do not see things the same. Here in Norway, I am down [get along] with all people and I do not see a difference between others and myself, whether Africans, Asians or whatever.

Pre-migration out of their homeland, Somalis have an “incomprehensibility of the idea of skin colour as a meaningful category of social understanding” (Kusow 2006: 18). This is because “identity categories in Somalia are inherently tied to clan-based non-racialized classification systems” (28). However, once they migrate out of their homeland, Somalis are forced to learn and react to new classification systems dependent upon the cultural norms and policies of the host society. It is in the diaspora where Somalis become racialized and made aware of the social consequences tied to having a particular skin color and phenotype. While living in Italy, Asha understood that she and all the women she worked with were viewed as foreign, poor, domestic workers. But she also came to realize that Italians saw her as African, making no distinction between her and anyone else from the African continent. Although Rome and Milan are global cities, Asha concluded that Italians were not open or receptive to foreigners:

I mostly lived in Milan and spent short periods in Rome. Rome is more cosmopolitan. I felt more at ease there. I knew three Somali women who were married to Italian men. They never had any problems with the police or any financial issues like I did. However, sometimes when we would walk the streets people would tell us to go back to Africa. From the moment I arrived in Italy until the time I left I felt Italians treated me as if I was invisible. I was an outsider that they barely noticed. When they did notice me, some would make rude remarks.

What she experienced in Rome and Milan had a profound effect on Asha. Upon deeper reflection, she had this to say:

I never thought of myself in relation to the entire continent of Africa; I was just Somali. I did not even think about clan much. But in Italy, it seemed Italians could only see me as an African.

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: “Close encounters in displacement” (2019)

There were many Senegalese and Ethiopian men and women living in Milan and Rome and we felt close to each other since we were in the same place together. We did not focus on our differences in being from West or East, or Muslim and Christian; we felt our closeness as Africans, as blacks, and we helped each other. We felt we had more in common with each other than we did with Italians.

In this instance, Asha's identity is imposed from outside herself. Italians mark her as "an African" and different, a classification that seems to be mostly based on skin color. Over time, she embraces this identity and turns the difference into something positive. By the time she reached America, Asha had a layered identity that downplayed clan affiliation while pushing forth her Somaliness and Blackness – connection with other people of African descent:

There were lots of stereotypes and negative images associated with black people in Italy: we were all illegal and criminals or prostitutes. Our dress, food, music and hairstyles were strange. There were also bad images of Muslims. Of course, this was not true. There was diversity among the blacks I knew. There were some African Americans living and working in Italy when I was there and I had good though not well-established relations with them. There were also blacks that had relocated from other parts of Europe. Knowing that people felt this way about us made me rebel against it. I made sure I put my best foot forward and showed that I was educated and self-respecting; we all did. I wanted them to know that I am just as good as they are. Somalis do not like anyone to look down on them! We are very proud! (laughter) I showed them I am proud of myself as an African, and as a Somali.

When asked to describe herself now, Asha says she is black and her clan is Somali. She refuses to breakdown her clan affiliation, insisting, "Clanism caused our problems [...] Somalis are all one." When asked if she ever describes herself as African, Asha smiled but did not reply. Perhaps now that she is no longer in Italy where people constantly classified her as African, the concept of consistently identifying with an entire continent and its multitude of languages, cultures and customs seemed more abstract than the surface acknowledgement of a visual link between herself and others who have brown/black skin. If this assumption is correct, it would not be unique. While conducting research among Somalis in Canada, Kristine Ajrouch and Abdi Kusow (2007) found that racial categories in the receiving community "do inform the identity experiences of Somalis" as Somalis realize that they "have moved from majority status in the homeland to occupying a minority status" in the receiving community; thus, "a visible minority status in Canada

supersedes any differentiation that may have existed within the country of origin” (87). Identities are situational.

Though Hawa did not suffer through the same indignities that Asha experienced in Europe, she became more aware of herself as an African while living in Yemen. The incidents she witnessed raised her level of self-awareness:

Yemeni people are Muslims, just like Somalis. They have a long history of mixing with people from the Horn [of Africa] and they are less racist toward Africans than Arabs in the Gulf, according to my friend who had lived in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen. Most people were wonderful to me. I found jobs easily and my bosses treated me with respect. Some people would make rude remarks like *abd*⁶ about Africans or make a rude facial expression if an African walked by. If you were African, some places would only offer you low jobs. My husband and I escaped lots of this prejudice because we were educated and spoke Arabic. It was harder for people who didn't have these things. We worked all the time and did not have many friends but I always smiled at other Africans when I saw them and tried to help whenever they needed translations or something. Nobody cared about being Eritrean or Somali or Ethiopian because we were all Africans in that country.

The occasional maltreatment she experienced firsthand or witnessed others experience made Hawa cognizant of being “other,” no matter how pleasant Yemeni people were to her most of the time. What is striking is that she only refers to Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians – people with membership (citizenship) in countries of the Horn of Africa. It is clear that she is speaking about the experiences of recent arrivals, that is, people who claim modern nation-states as their home, and who self-describe by nationality. When we briefly examine Yemeni society the point I am trying to raise here becomes clearer. It is well known that Yemen has its own black population that has been living in the region for 1000 or more years. Most historians trace their origins back to pre-Islamic era Abyssinian⁷ invaders who ruled Yemen from 525 AD to 575 AD (Kour 1981). When the resident Arab tribes received assistance from the Persians and were able to defeat the Abyssinians, the defeated Abyssinians, the story goes, became servants and were systematically excluded from Yemeni society. Their descendants are called *Al-Akhdam* (the servants) and they occupy the lowest rung of the Yemeni social ladder (Worth 2008). As David Keane (2007) explains, why the *akhdam* remain in their current social predicament is baffling to scholars:

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: “Close encounters in displacement” (2019)

Most researchers are unable to explain why the exclusion of the *akhdam* has been carried on from one generation to another; they believe that this is not based on racial discrimination. There are other Yemenis of African descent, including descendants of slaves, that are fully integrated in Yemeni society. Nonetheless, social and economic exclusion of the *akhdam* seems to continue as a hereditary trait. (224)

It is possible that the *akhdam* were as invisible to Hawa as Asha and her friends were to the Italians in Milan and Rome. Because she entered Yemeni society with a higher level of education and skills than the indigenous *akhdam* possess, she was able to live within a social stratum that elevated her above them. Further, since being of African descent does not seem to prohibit social mobility within Yemeni society, Hawa was able to use her attributes to her advantage to secure employment and housing without necessarily having to worry about the effects of her racial heritage. Most importantly, Yemeni people did not associate Hawa with the *akhdam*. This fact is crucial because how migrants are viewed and with whom they are associated by people in the receiving society greatly determines the extent to which integration into the host society will be easy or difficult.

Asha and Hawa's experiences of being racialized in Italy and Yemen changed their worldviews in regard to heritage and race. Asha experienced a more diasporic life in Italy as she was in contact with people of African descent with direct ties to their ancestral societies (Senegalese, Ethiopians and other recent migrants) and those with more removed connections (black Americans, Afro Caribbeans and other descendants of New World slaves). As a result, Asha adopted a self-identification that incorporated her connection with all people of African descent and with her homeland: Black racially and Somali clan. Hawa's experiences in Yemen were less diasporic as she was "other", yet mostly surrounded by co-ethnics and groups with much shared cultural traits to her own (Eritreans and Ethiopians). To be sure, when she left Yemen, Hawa's way of self-identifying had been altered. Although she still chiefly identified as Somali, she followed it up with African, referring to herself as Somali-African. Hawa expressed that she felt connected to other Africans in a place-specific way more than having developed an understanding or connection to all people of African descent based solely on skin color.

While the cultural norms and expectations of their homeland influenced their self-identification to an extent, the daily lived experiences and processes of racialization undergone by Abdirahman in Norway, Asha in Italy and Hawa in Yemen had the most impact on their understandings of how others viewed them and how they viewed themselves in relation to others in their receiving society. The classifications

and gazes projected upon them by others also made each of them either create an image for the first time, or reimagine Africa as a site with a vast diaspora of people who are perceived as linked – regardless of whether they are directly from the continent or descend from people who were human trafficked out hundreds of years ago.

Conclusion

When Somalia collapsed millions of people fled their homeland, resulting in the development of a modern global Somali diaspora. Locating Somalis within the larger debates around migration and diasporas, this article has posited that the social dynamics within micro Somali communities around the world have undergone changes while the Somali people have expanded their ideas of their culture, social practices and self-identification based on their daily lived experiences and what they remember or were taught about their homeland culture. The recollections of their experiences of war, displacement and resettlement shared by Omar (Egypt), Hiba (Egypt), Xaaji (Egypt), Hawa (Yemen and the US), Samar (Egypt), Hussein (Egypt), Suleymaan (Egypt), Jamila (Egypt), Asha (Italy and the US) and Abdirahman (Norway) emphasize the need to disaggregate Somali migrant experiences as each migrant has chosen different paths and live within diverse receiving societies. As such, they are faced with political and socioeconomic realities that are influenced by the host society's history and contemporary conditions. These new conditions encountered have the ability to heavily impact the dynamics of old relationships, such as the relationship between Somali Bantus and other Somalis in Maine (Besteman 2016). Generalizations are not useful. It is necessary to examine Somalis – or any migrants, for that matters – as well as the sending and receiving countries from three levels: (1) macro [global economic and structural conditions]; (2) meso [state policies]; and (3) micro [individual agency]. Examining the experiences of individuals at these three levels aids in our understanding of the diverse influence migration has had on their lives. Lastly, these shared migration narratives remind us that the same migrant may use different strategies and make different decisions at different points in time, depending upon the context. Moreover, migrants experience and react differently to being racialized (Dossa 2009; Besteman 2016) just as they remember home and refashion their identities and social networks (Ingiriis 2016; Bjork 2017) based upon the context.

References

Close Encounters in War Journal, 2: "Close encounters in displacement" (2019)

- Abdi, Cawo. *Elusive Jannah. The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Abdullahi, Mohamed Diriye. *Culture and Customs of Somalia*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Adow, Mohammed. *Fears persist as Mogadishu dares to rebuild itself*, «Al Jazeera», April 26, 2018 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/fears-persist-mogadishu-dares-rebuild-180426104626172.html>, accessed 01/08/2018).
- Ajrouch, Kristine and Abdi Kusow. *Racial and religious contexts: Situational identities among Lebanese and Somali Muslim immigrants*. «Ethnic and Racial Studies», 30, 1 (2007): 72-94 (<http://citeseer.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.706.1592&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, accessed 01/09/2018).
- Badawi, M. *The Culture and Tradition of Women in Somalia Part I: Background* (pp.1-6). Center for the Strategic Initiatives of Women, 2000.
- Besteman, Catherine. *Making Refuge. Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Bjork, Stephanie R. *Somalis Abroad. Clan and Everyday Life in Finland*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017.
- Boehm, Eric. *The War on Terror is a War on Minnesota's Peaceful, Entrepreneurial Somali Immigrants*. «Reason», January 3, 2018 (<https://reason.com/archives/2018/01/03/war-on-terror-minnesota-somali-immigrant/amp>, accessed 01/08/2018).
- Central Intelligence Agency. *World Factbook: Somalia Country Report*. 2001.
- Connor, Phillip and Jens Manuel Krogstad. *5 Facts about the Somali Global Diaspora*. «Pew Research Center», June 1, 2016 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/5-facts-about-the-global-somali-diaspora/>, accessed 31/08/2018).
- Darnton, John. *Somalia Expelling all Soviet Advisers, Halts Use of Bases*. «New York Times», November 14, 1977.
- DeWaal, Nicolli. *Violent Deeds Live On. Landmines in Somalia and Somaliland*. London: African Rights and Mines Advisory Group, 12 December 1993.
- Dossa, Parin. *Politics and the Poetics of Migration. Narratives of Iranian Women from the Diaspora*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004.

- . *Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- . *Afghanistan Remembers: Gendered Narrations of Violence and Culinary Practices*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.
- Edwards, Adrian. *Forced Displacement at Record 68.5 Million*. UNHCR. 19 June 2018 (<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494/forced-displacement-record-685-million.html>).
- Eno, Omar and Mohamed Eno. *The Journey Back to the Ancestral Homeland: The Return of the Somali Bantu (Wazigwa) to Modern Tanzania*. In *From Mogadishu to Dixon. The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context*, ed. by Abdi Kusow and Stephanie Bjork, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2007, pp. 13-43.
- Fellin, Melissa. *The Impact of Media Representations on Somali Youth's Experiences in Educational Spaces*. «Landscapes of Violence», 3, 3, Article 5 (<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol3/iss3/5>, accessed 31/08/2018).
- Geertz, Clifford. *Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Hagmann, Tobias. *Stabilization, Extraversion and Political Settlements in Somalia*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016.
- Huber, Chris and Kathryn Reid. *Forced to Flee: Top Countries Refugees Are Coming from*. «World Vision». June 26, 2018 (<https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/forced-to-flee-top-countries-refugees-coming-from>, accessed 03/01/2019).
- Human Rights Watch. *Somalia Events of 2018: World Report 2019* (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/somalia#>, accessed 25/01/2019).
- Ingiriis, Mohamed Haji. *Many Somalia(s), Multiple Memories: Remembrances as Present Politics, Past Politics as Remembrances in War-Torn Somali Discourses* «African Identities», 14, 4 (2016): 348-69.
- . *The Suicidal State in Somalia. The Rise and Fall of the Siad Barre Regime, 1969-1991*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2016.
- Ismail, Nimo. *Somaliland: A Stable and Independent State, but no Recognition*. «World Policy», February 21, 2017 (<https://worldpolicy.org/2017/02/21/somaliland-a-stable-and-independent-state-but-no-recognition/>, accessed 31/07/2018).

- Issa-Salwe, Abdisalam M. *The Collapse of the Somali State*. London: HAAN Associates, 1994.
- Jama, Hassan. *Somalis Hope to End Inter-Clan Marriage Discrimination after Violent Dispute*. «Special Broadcasting Service», October 22, 2018 (<https://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/somali/en/article/2018/10/22/somalis-hope-end-inter-clan-marriage-discrimination-after-violent-dispute>, accessed 31/10/2018).
- Nahid, Afrose Kabir. *Young Somalis in Australia, the UK and the USA: An Understanding of Their Identity and their Sense of Belonging*, «Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs», 34, 3 (2014): 259-81, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2014.939556.
- Kapteijs, Lidwien. *Clan Cleansing in Somalia. The Ruinous Legacy of 1991*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Keane, David. *Caste-Based Discrimination in International Human Rights Law*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007.
- Kour, Zaka Hanna. *The History of Aden, 1839-72*. London: Routledge, 1981.
- Kusow, Abdi M. *Migration and Racial Formations among Somali Immigrants in North America*. «Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies», 32 (2006): 533-51.
- Kusow, Abdi M. and Stephanie Bjork, eds., *From Mogadishu to Dixon. The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context*. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2007.
- Lehman, Dan Van and Omar Eno. *The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture. Culture Profile*. Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics. Washington, DC. February 2003 (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED482784.pdf>, accessed 20/07/2018).
- Lewis, I. M. *A Modern History of Somalia. Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*. London: Longman, 1980.
- Livingston, Ian. *Order from Chaos: Somalia, facing severe challenges, also shows signs of hope*. Brookings Institution. 3 May 2018 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/03/somalia-facing-severe-challenges-also-shows-signs-of-hope/>).
- Marcus, George E. *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- McVeigh, Tracy. *“Sense of duty” sees Somali refugees head home*. «The Guardian», March 24, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/global>

- development/2018/mar/24/somalia-refugees--head-home-sense-of-duty-rebuild-country, accessed 01/08/2018).
- Menkhaus, Kenneth. *Somalia. State Collapse and the Threat of Terrorism (Adelphi Series)*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Moore, Michael Scott. *What makes Somalis so different?* «Pacific Standard», December 22, 2010 (<https://psmag.com/social-justice/what-makes-somalis-so-different-26347>, accessed 01/08/2018).
- Mulligan, Scott E. *Radicalization within the Somali-American Diaspora: Countering the Homegrown Terrorist Threat*. Naval Postgraduate School. December 2009 (<https://www.hsd1.org/?abstract&did=25736>, accessed 03/09/2018).
- Omar, Yusuf Sheikh. *Identity and Sense of Belonging of Young Somali Men in a Western Context: Case Studies from Melbourne and Minneapolis*, «Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies», 16, Article 11 (2016) (<https://digitalcommons.mcalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1185&context=bildhaan>, accessed 21/09/2018).
- Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI). *Somali Refugee Settlement in Canada*. March 2016 (http://ocasi.org/sites/default/files/OCASI_Presentation_Somali_Resettlement_Metropolis_2016.pdf, accessed 28/08/2018).
- Parveen, Nazia. *UK Somali teenagers taken 'on holiday' and forced into marriage*. «The Guardian», August 26, 2018 (<https://amp.theguardian.com/society/2018/aug/26/british-somali-teenagers-taken-on-holiday-only-to-be-forced-into-marriage>).
- Patman, Robert G. *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa. The Diplomacy of Intervention and Disengagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Putnam, Diane Briton and Mohamood Cabdi Noor. *The Somalis: Their History and Culture, CAL Refugee Fact Sheet #9*. Washington, DC: The Refugee Service Center, October 1993.
- Scruggs, Natoschia. *Assessing Somali Attitudes toward Abuse*. In *Family Violence and Abuse: International Perspectives*. Ed. by Kathleen Malley Morrison. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers, 2004, pp. 223-243.

- . *Multiple Exiles, Myriad Motives: Somali Female Migrants in Egypt* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2009, indexed by ProQuest), 2009.
- Stachel, Melissa. *Somali Children and Youth's Experiences in Educational Spaces in North America: Reconstructing Identities and Negotiating the Past in the Present*. *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository* 983 (2012) (<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/983>, accessed 01/09/2018).
- Terrazas, Aaron, Jeanne Batalova and Velma Fan. Migration Policy Institute. Oct. 2007: *US In Focus Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants in the United States* (www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=649).
- Townsend, Mark. *Police Abandoned us, Say Somalis in Wake of London Knife Killings*. «The Guardian», February 24, 2018 (<https://amp.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/25/camden-knife-killings-somalis-police-abandoned-us>, accessed 01/08/2018).
- Touval, Saadia. *Somali Nationalism. International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Worth, Robert F. *In Slums without Hope, Yemen's Untouchables*. «New York Times», December 7, 2008.
- Zong, Jie, Jeanne Batalova and Jeffrey Hallock. Migration Policy Institute. Feb. 2008 *Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States* (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>).

¹ Omar, like most others I spoke with, declined to identify his clan.

² The Hawiye clan is believed to be the largest clan in Somalia. Located predominantly in the southern and central part of the country, they are the dominant group in Mogadishu. Many minority clans claim that they were/have been targeted by the Hawiye since the outbreak of civil unrest in 1991.

³ Per the United Nations, “UNOSOM I was established to monitor the ceasefire in Mogadishu and escort deliveries of humanitarian supplies to distribution centers in the city. The mission’s mandate and strength were later enlarged to enable it to protect humanitarian convoys and distribution centers throughout Somalia. It later worked with the Unified Task Force in the effort to establish a safe environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.” See “Department of Peacekeeping Operations.” UN 2 June 2003. 12 Nov 2004 <www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/unosomi.htm>.

⁴ Women were granted rights in divorce and property inheritance under the Family Law of 1975. They were granted additional rights when Somalia became a one-party socialist state and a new

constitution was adopted in 1979. Constitutional articles “provided guarantees of social, cultural and political rights” and specifically promised “equality of the sexes” (Badawi 2000: 2).

⁵ Somalis are almost always described as being 99.9 % Muslim (CIA World Factbook 2001).

⁶ This word means slave in Arabic and is used as an insult particularly against people of visible black African descent.

⁷ Abyssinia is present-day Ethiopia. Some scholars question the validity of this story, wondering if it is accurate or if it is an attempt to “other” a group that is, in fact, just as indigenous to Yemen as the Arab tribes whose origins are never questioned. There is also dispute as to whether the “conquerors” were Abyssinians or Axumites (Worth 2008).