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Three Stories of the Journey to Canada

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In 1990 a civil war began in Somalia that would change the state of the country for decades. With the war came the countless people who fled from the conflict for a safer life. Since the 90s the rise of Islamic Terrorism has made the conflict even more complicated, further creating more refugees in the 2000s and today. In the Somali diaspora, there are a number of communities in many countries including in Toronto, Canada. As the world has more refugees today than in modern history, understanding the journey they take both physically and mentally is important as it is a traumatic and often grueling experience. Using the many tools from anthropology this article seeks to understand three women who took such a journey to Canada and how it plays into larger themes in the Somali Diaspora.

KEY WORDS refugees, Somali Civil War, terrorism, diaspora

“No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark, you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well (Warsan Shire, 2017).”

In 1960 Somalia was declared an independent State bringing an end to the colonization of the country by Italy and the United Kingdom since the late 19th century. Somalia's situation was unique because of the deeply embedded tribalism that still permeates the country. Abdi Mohamed Kusow elaborates, “even the indigenous Somali government of the early 1960s, despite its legitimate authority and strong nationalistic will, never reached its subjects across the land (Kusow 1994).” The government established in 1960 did not last for long as it could not maintain power over the entire country. This led to Siad Barre seizing power in 1969 which would establish a united Somali government that had control over the entire country in a way both the colonial powers and the following government could not. “Two important factors helped the Siad Barre government to achieve cohesiveness. First, the writing of the Somali language enabled the government to reach the people through its publications. Second, the restriction and the ban on tribalism in the country helped facilitate integration (Kusow 1994).” This ban on tribalism forced Somalis who were divided across clan lines to work together as a single united country. However, by 1975 the Siad government was unable to distance themselves from the deep-rooted

tribalism that had created and maintained the Somali political organization for hundreds of years (Kusow 1994). As time went on clans that had felt targeted by Barre had voiced opposition, in response to this Barre began surrounding himself with people of his own clan further alienating members of other clans (Kusow 1994). These events coupled with the disastrous Ogaden War in 1978 set the groundwork for a coup and civil war that began in 1991 and is still ongoing today. When Barre was ousted a power vacuum emerged where different clans vied for power. Over time this has shifted from a clan-based war to a more complicated situation. One that has been affected by the rise of Islamic extremism in the last twenty years.

Both my parents lived in Somalia during Barre's regime but were lucky enough to leave the country two years prior to the war for Canada. However, in the capital of Mogadishu, many of my family members had to suddenly leave the city they had spent their entire lives in. My aunts and uncles, like many other Somalis, fled to countries around the globe. Many settled in countries such as England, Sweden, and Canada not only because of the social safety nets offered by these countries but the opportunities their children would have in their future. This scattering created a large diaspora so much so that virtually every Somali person I have met has family overseas in Europe, North America, Asia, or other parts of Africa. Evelyn Hu-DeHart expands on the meaning of 'diaspora' further by describing how the traumatic experience of forced removal or even voluntary departure for political or economic reasons and subsequent scattering of people over many destinations has become increasingly stretched to cover a range of phenomena. Hu-DeHart goes on to draw from Khachig Tölölyan who states that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community (Hu-DeHart 2015). Feeling a disconnect from your ancestral homeland is not uncommon for the generation of Somalis born outside of the country. Although Somalis do preserve their culture well wherever they go, as marrying outside of the culture is uncommon, it still is not the same as experiencing it where Somalis are not the minority (Somalis make up less than 2 percent of the Canadian population) (Statistics Canada 2016). For those born outside Somalia like me, there is a sense of not belonging anywhere. Even when visiting Somalia, as someone born overseas, there is also a sense of not fitting in as most people will know you were not born there (they will call you 'Fish and Chips' to playfully make fun). When I visited Somalia in 2019 it was painfully obvious to the locals of Mogadishu that my sister and I grew up overseas, as people would point out the ways we would pronounce words, dress, or the knowledge that we had about the country. These moments did affect my overall experience a bit as I tried not to speak too much Somali to locals because the conversation would almost always end up in them invalidating my "Somaliness" even if it was not their intention. This raises the question: with 2 million Somalis living outside of Somalia does one have to be born and raised in Somalia to be truly Somali (Pew Research Center 2016)? With the ongoing refugee crisis that is seemingly getting worse, how can one identify with a single nationality, and what does nationality mean in a world that is becoming more and more interconnected? Reflecting on my time there I wish I had not let these moments cloud my experience but there is something strange about seeing an entire country of people that look like you, speaking

a language you understand and a culture that you grew up with but still somehow feeling out of place. What does it mean for the countless people of a diaspora who also experience this odd feeling? With more and more diasporas growing larger this notion of identity and where one belongs is something a lot more people relate to. Whether it is a young British-Somali girl who has never been back home or a 30-year-old Swedish-Somali man who left Somalia as a young kid.

The three women I interviewed when starting my research all had different experiences with the system and they also varied in age. Halima, Ayan, and Idil, whose names have been changed for the purpose of anonymity, all came from the same city my mother was born in and my father grew up in, Mogadishu, which is sometimes called Xamar (pronounced Hamar), at least ten years after they had left. I aim to not only understand this unique perspective on life but to also examine the ways in which a diaspora operates. This article will further examine the ways things such as religion and culture are used by the Somali diaspora to keep a hold of our history and to cope with the trauma of war. Furthermore, I will aim to also understand the journeys that refugees take both physically and mentally and what this speaks to as we enter a world where refugees are becoming more commonplace than ever. I argue that it will also reflect on the unique nature of being a refugee, the waiting that is endured in the process, and the ways in which they are seen as humans by governments but not given the rights of humans.

Methodology

In my interviews with the three women I talked to I found myself using different types of methods to get their stories. As I spoke to them, I remembered to tread carefully. Instead of asking questions directly, I had to think of how to adjust the way I asked questions as these women were also dealing with the trauma that they had endured. I had to subtly introduce ideas and topics so the women would not be jarred. I also knew that with my identity as a Somali woman I would also be able to produce work that could be more accurate than the coverage done by most, who do not have the same proximity to the subject I have. Being a child of Somali migrants to Canada I am in a unique position to understand a lot of the feelings migrants have about coming to a new country. As my parents arrived before the time the majority of people started fleeing Somalia, there were not nearly as many Somali people in Canada as there are today. Although they had quite a few Somali people they knew living around them, for the most part there was not the growing and substantial Somali community that is seen today. Therefore, with my perspective I can paint a picture for just how much the Somali diaspora has grown since my parents moved to Quebec in the late 1980s.

I first had to establish my subject position and understand what I brought to the field. Most anthropologists who do research in Somalia (and Africa in general) must deal with a history of outsiders using marginalized groups for the benefit of colonial powers. Even in the 21st century this is something people must consider when doing research. However as someone who is Somali and the relative of several refugees, I had some experience around them but never had in-depth conversations with them about the process. It also helped that as a woman talking to other women it would be easier to have conversations about things such as forced marriage and the dangerous situations for women in Somalia. I also

considered the power structures that could influence what the women decided to tell me and what they kept from me. For example, something like religion, which is extremely important to Somalis, will influence what they decide to tell me. Furthermore, I had to remember to be a lot more careful when talking to Ayan and Idil because they are newer to Canada than Halima who has been here since 2016. I had to understand that although I was surrounded by many family members who were asylum seekers, I still had a lot to gain from listening to their stories.

In approaching the research, I take cues from James Clifford and George Marcus' work on reflexivity. This was very integral to my research. Talking to refugees already has a political connotation as the reason for their displacement is itself political in nature. Being reflexive would not only help in my research but would be essential to present my interlocutor's stories in context. As I mentioned, I was raised my entire life around Somali culture and someone like me doing this kind of research would be advantageous as I have a better understanding of that culture than an outsider. On the other hand, my life as someone who was not born or raised in Somalia could have also affected my understanding of what I was told by the three women. But analyzing what I was told using interpretive anthropology with a lot of reflexivity would allow me to not only write whatever they were telling me but to address the contexts, cultural and social reasons behind why exactly they tell me the things they do. Furthermore, what they choose to keep from me and what they believe in by telling me certain things. Somalis are known for being very conservative Muslims and having religion influence almost every aspect of their lives, this was something I had to consider when the women were telling me their stories. What mattered most to me when approaching how to conduct this research was that the story and ethnography had to be polyphonic and contain multiple voices that spoke to the experiences these women endured.

Halima

I had spoken to my mother about wanting to interview refugees, and she informed me about a woman she knew, Halima. I quickly took the chance to speak with her as she was someone who would give a lot of insight into my research. Once I had set up an interview, I quickly made my way to the West end of Toronto to speak with her. Halima welcomed me into her home in an apartment building. She lived with her five young children who vary in age. As we sat down one of her daughters brought me a bowl of grapes while Halima told me about her children. She had four girls who are 13, 11, 9, and 5 in age and one boy who is 7 years old. They were surprisingly calm for children of that age who usually cannot sit still from my experience. I spoke to the children for a little bit talking to them about online school but as Halima and I began our interview she told them to go to another room in a tone very reminiscent of my own mother. Once her children had gone to their rooms, we commenced our interview. Halima began her story by telling me she arrived in Canada in 2016 by herself. She had left her children in Uganda where they had initially fled from Mogadishu. She explained her experience with the system, "I left Uganda without my children for Canada. As soon as I came into the airport I applied for asylum, and I was told to wait for a judge to hear my case and whether I could stay or not." She went on to tell me she waited six months for the judge to ultimately hear her case and let her stay.

I asked her what she thought about waiting for six months and she assured me that she was, in fact, luckier than most because other people wait much longer than six months.

Halima told me about how what you say to the judge can impact whether you stay or not, and she remembered hearing stories that would make her cry. This makes the case that the more tragic the story the better chance one would be granted asylum. This was a stark reminder of the ways refugees must use and sell their trauma and compete with others who are also in danger in order to survive. She told me that she lived here for three years without her children, taking ESL (English as a second language) courses, and working towards getting her Permanent Resident status to sponsor them.

When I asked her about how she would cope with being away from her children for so long, she told me she had trouble sleeping and would not be able to sleep for long periods of time. Her youngest who is five years old now was just a baby when she had left them back in 2016. She told me she wrote numerous letters to her MP asking to bring her children to her but she never heard any response. When I approached the question of why she had left Mogadishu in the first place Halima told me it was mainly for safety reasons, with the number of bombings and attacks that happen she hadn't felt safe living there, but she had also mentioned the topic of forced marriage but did not elaborate beyond that. I wondered why she would bring that up so I told her about how several years before I had met a sixteen-year-old Somali mother from Mogadishu who was married off when she was fourteen. I brought this story up to Halima and she informed me that this was common. I used this story to ask Halima if one of the reasons she had left Mogadishu was because of a forced arranged marriage, and she told me that it was. Because of the hold extremism had on Mogadishu especially, for a long time, young girls and women getting married against their will became normalized. She was arranged to be married to a man she did not want to and left Somalia with her—at the time—three small children, for Uganda where they would live for a couple more years before coming to Canada by herself in 2016.

Ayan

My next interview was with a woman named Ayan. When I told Halima about my research, she was the one to put me in contact with Ayan. They both had met when Ayan arrived in Canada seven months ago. Ayan was a 34-year-old mother of a 14-year-old son who lived in Kenya. Like Halima, Ayan left Mogadishu for Indonesia where she lived for a long time before claiming asylum. She lived there by herself leaving behind her son in Kenya. Like most Ayan left Mogadishu because of the civil war. She left in 1999 when the conflict was already ongoing for eight years and saw no chance of stopping in the near future. She left for Kenya, which is home to the most Somali people outside of Somalia with 2.4 million Somalis living there (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Ayan is currently taking ESL courses because she can barely speak the language but hopes that her son could join her soon as she has not seen him since 2013 when she left Kenya. Although Ayan still longs to see her son she feels more mentally at peace here than she did anywhere else.

From both of these interviews what I gathered the most and what kept coming up was the theme of waiting. Whether it was Halima, who was away from her children for two years, or Ayan who has not seen her son in seven years, waiting has come up a lot for both. Apart from waiting to see their children, there was also the time both endured while

waiting for a judge to hear their case. Refugees spend so much of their time waiting for things that are out of their control and whether the desired outcome happens they have to abide by it. Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles explain, “Waiting among refugees has become the rule, not the exception (Hyndman and Giles 2011).” Ayan and Halima had no promises of citizenship or that their cases would be accepted after being heard from the judge, but they still opted to face not only the wait which caused them to be away from their children but also the possibility of waiting for a long time only to be rejected. Both women’s experiences of being away from their families bear a close resemblance to the experiences in an ethnography written by anthropologist Livia Wick. Wick spent time with women in Palestine and wrote about the waiting that dictates so much of their lives due to checkpoints that stop them from seeing their family members. For one woman it was especially painful when it came to the loneliness she felt as her family could rarely visit her from a neighbouring village because of the checkpoint and because her husband had to work long hours on a construction site. Her loneliness would physically manifest itself into a choking sensation at night (Wick 2011). This especially reminded me of Halima mentioning how she could not sleep at night being away from her children. For Ayan this process of waiting is still ongoing, she doesn’t like to dwell on being apart from her son she tells me, it makes it easier after all these years to not think about being apart from him, but to think about what can happen once she gets her PR status and is able to sponsor him.

For both Ayan and Halima, Canada represented a new life for themselves and their families. They both expressed to me that they value so much of what the country has to offer. Things such as free education for their children, free healthcare, and the general peace they feel here compared to where they fled from. Both mothers had almost decade(s) long journeys leading them to where they are now, a process not uncommon for almost all refugees, and one that takes a severe toll on their mental health. Cindy-Lee Dennis, Michael Kariwo, Kaysi Eastlick Kushner, et al write about how migration and parenthood in a new country increases risks of mental health problems including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder for refugee parents and children. Furthermore, loneliness, which is a key index of social support effectiveness, predicts poor health outcomes including depression (Stewart et al. 2015). This reminded me of what Halima and Ayan had told me about their time apart from their children. Growing up I was told by relatives and family members that things such as depression were in our control as humans, that the most powerful thing to wield against it is prayer. I saw this when both Ayan and Halima told me the best way they coped with being apart from their children was prayer. Before the war, Somalia was not nearly as religious as it is today, this sudden shift to religiousness could be the way Somalis coped in the aftermath of the war. Turning to religion helped them with the immense trauma that comes from war. Kiesha Ross, Paul Handal Eddie Clark, et al examine the relationship between religion and coping: they cite that the role between religion and mental health is an essential one. Furthermore, the use of religious coping in stressful situations assists in positive adjustment (Ross et al. 2009). Religion gives many a purpose to keep going when all hope is lost, and this is also another way in which a power structure has had a role in the way people cope. In Somalia, mothers are the backbone of the family. Although it is a patriarchal society the mothers play the biggest role in children’s lives. For Halima, she has started a new life with her children

where she feels safe and content, but for Ayan and for many more refugees they continue to wait for their new lives to truly begin as they have for a very long time.

Idil

I met my next interlocutor through Halima as well, who wanted to help me find more refugees to interview. Idil was a 27-year-old woman who also came to Canada seven months ago. But while Ayan and Halima were mothers, Idil did not have children. She came to the country with her husband very recently after living in a refugee camp in Uganda since 2013. Halima and Ayan both left for different reasons, Halima had to leave to escape an arranged forced marriage, while Ayan had left because of the overall dangerous situation in Xamar. Idil's situation was one that was more specific than Ayan's and one that involved Al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab is a terrorist fundamentalist group that was founded in 2006 in East Africa. Born during what was arguably one of the most unstable periods of the civil war, Al-Shabaab gained notoriety and eventually pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2012. Since its creation, the terrorist organization has been responsible for numerous devastating attacks including the 2014 Westgate mall shooting in Kenya. The English translation of Al-Shabaab is "the youth" and this name is fitting as many members are unemployed young men. As the civil war left most young men aged 14–30 unemployed and a 73 percent of the total population living under two US dollars a day, Al-Shabaab became a viable alternative (Farquhar 2017). For Idil, the problem with Al-Shabaab hit very close to home. As we spoke she took many pauses to prepare herself for the trauma of retelling the events that forced her to flee. Idil, with a sad tone to her voice, told me about her father who was murdered by Al-Shabaab. While undertaking this research project I knew that this kind of trauma was something that I would come across but hearing about the things Idil went through made me even more astonished in the ways in which people like Idil can overcome such an experience. Although Idil's voice did give away her feelings somewhat, she spoke very matter of factly. Something I have witnessed among many people in Somalia when discussing traumatic things such as experiences with terrorism. This further exhibits the ways in which people cope with trauma. Idil would not spend too much time talking about her father and when she would, her words were not emotional even if her voice was emotional. To retell this sort of trauma is very triggering and from the fact that she was using as little detail as possible, it was evident she was trying her best to prevent herself from re-experiencing this trauma. Idil and her husband would spend six years at a refugee camp in Uganda before applying for asylum in any country that would take them. I asked her what she thought of Canada and the first thing she expressed to me was how grateful she was to have some semblance of rights. After living in a refugee camp for six years Idil and her husband were used to not being thought of as 'citizens' rather just inhabitants of a space. Hyndman and Giles explain that "refugees in long-term limbo are stuck within a shrinking humanitarian space, many without access to livelihoods, mobility and the protection of citizenship (Hyndman and Giles 2011)." Even when a refugee has entered a country, there is not any guarantee they will be allowed to stay. So, there is a feeling of not being seen as a human without the government protection citizenship provides.

For the last decade fleeing from terrorism has been one of the catalysts in the recent refugee crisis. Places like Syria and Iraq have been hotbeds for the Jihadi Fundamentalist group ISIS to commit its attacks against the people of the region. Stephen Zunes writes, “Many of the refugees crossing into Europe are from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia, all countries where the violence and turmoil are attributable primarily or at least in part as a result of U.S. military intervention (Zunes 2017).” With the emergence of Al-Shabaab and ISIS in Africa and the Middle East coupled with the West’s hand in their creation, it is not unfathomable to understand the influx of refugees to Europe and North America. I considered this when asking Idil about what she thought about the people who believe refugees only come to North America and Europe to ‘spread’ Islamic extremism and enact Sharia Law. Idil reiterated what Halima and Ayan told me, that she wouldn’t be in Canada if she could stay home. She also told me that what people in the West need to understand is that the refugees coming to places like Canada are here because of the terror groups they are accused of being a part of. She got visibly emotional at this point, and it was clear why. For Idil and her husband to be accused of being a part of the same organization that had killed her father was unthinkable to her. What reinforces Idil’s comment is the fact she hadn’t left Somalia until 2013 and only after her father was killed when she and her husband were directly in danger of being targeted by Al-Shabaab.

Another thing Idil has in common with Halima and Ayan is what she is appreciative of when it comes to her new life in Canada. Idil is grateful for the benefits the government gives to refugees, and the fact that schooling is free for when she and her husband decide to have children. Because of the years of being stuck in a system that leads to nowhere for many, being allowed to thrive was something all women were very grateful for. It also raises the question of the way in which humans are valued and the differences government papers make. As discussed before, refugees are always in a constant state of not knowing their future. Along with this, they depend on the trauma they faced to be used as a way to survive when it comes to pleading their case to stay in a country. This coupled with the fact these same nations have exacerbated or had some hand in the issues in their homelands brings about this strange situation of depending on the system that had, in a way, made refugees out of them. Idil doesn’t like to speak about what happened to her father or get into specifics as she still suffers from the mental health ramifications of losing one’s father in such a violent manner. Like Halima and Ayan, Idil turned to Allah to help her grieve after her father’s murder and help ease the trauma she had faced. Today Idil and her husband take ESL classes and prepare to start a family and their new lives in Canada.

Three Women’s Stories and The World Today: A Conclusion

After my visit to Mogadishu in 2019 what stuck with me the most was the way in which the city’s people lived their lives. While my sister and I were overly cautious and tried not to be in the busy areas of the city too long, the locals did not let the terror of both the war and Al-Shabaab stop them from going on about their days. Halima, Ayan and Idil all endured things no person should. Their stories all speak to the way in which Islam is heavily embedded in the culture of Somalis and how it has been instrumental in helping people cope. Speaking to them helped me in understanding how the power structures of religion influenced the ways in which these women dealt with their trauma. For Halima and Ayan their

strife came from being separated from their children for so long and for Idil it came from being forced to flee her city and dealing with the aftermath of her father's murder.

The experiences of these three Somali refugee women speak to many who have been stuck in this limbo of existing as a human when one has none of the rights of a human. In a way, the same ways in which people of a diaspora are in limbo between identities. Talking to the women gave me a new view of my experiences as a first-generation Somali person. As more and more Somali children are born outside the country there are going to be more people not knowing Somalia as a country but with women like Halima, Ayan and Idil there can be a closer connection to the country as it is today. And with the diaspora expanding more every year, what in the end, is the definition of 'Somali?' In the end there is no meaning, especially in the world we live in today. Romanticizing the past is something many Somalis do, something I am also guilty of, but as the situation of today leaves many hopeless, instead of looking to the past we should be looking to the future of the large young population of Somalia and hopefully the change they can bring. Right now, as the Covid-19 pandemic is occurring families are separated and everyone has been experiencing their own form of waiting. In the United States, undocumented families of refugees are being separated and put in cages waiting for months for fleeing the same situations Halima, Ayan and Idil were. With the impending climate crisis, the world will see more refugees in the years to come and there needs to be a reexamination of who is considered 'human' and worthy of protection and rights. Today, according to the United Nations, there are 70 million displaced persons around the world (UNCHR 2019). Many of them are facing a perilous journey, one that Halima, Ayan, and Idil faced. The journey of being a refugee, one that involves waiting, trauma, and the uncertainty that guides so much of their life.

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