CHAPTER 3

# Becoming Somali Bantus

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

The misplaced assumption that high dependency ratios in camps or among self-settled refugees deprived them of a capacity for enterprise is belied by the historical evidence, although this is not to overlook the fact that refugees might emphasize their vulnerability for tactical reasons, such as to improve access to resources. . . . Refugee life in camps has, so to say, never stood still.
—Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*

Describing what happened when the armed Somalis took over Banta, my former field assistant Garad explained, "Before the fighting started I thought I was Somali, but after the Somalis pushed us aside I understood I was different. Before that all I knew was I was Somali, same culture, same religion, but when they took over Banta and ordered everyone around and called us adoon I realized I was different. After we escaped to Kenya was the time we understood we had another name, Somali Bantu."

Even though middle Jubba residents had been loath to speak about their experiences of abuse during my residency in Banta, at the Bates MLK Day panel the panelists departed dramatically from their previous script, speaking

passionately about the significance of the Somali Bantu identity and how this identity as a racially stigmatized minority targeted them for abuse and exploitation in Somalia and in the camps. They described how their history of enslavement and minority status led to their marginalization, poverty, illiteracy, lack of education, and assaults they regularly experienced guarding their fields against encroaching pastoralists in prewar Somalia, as well as the rapes, theft, and humiliation that characterized their lives in the refugee camps. Although their unequal status was patently obvious during my year in Banta, and although I had written extensively on the jileec-jareer prewar hierarchy, I had never heard any Jubba Valley farmers talk so publicly like this before the war. To the contrary, as noted in chapter 1, whenever Somali pastoralists assaulted or abused villagers the matter was handled through clan mediators, who attributed any violence to individual malevolent personalities, while middle valley villagers resisted the idea that they shared an overarching identity around which they could unite. But in their 2006 MLK Day panel presentation, each speaker claimed a deeply felt sense of historic injustice on the basis of this group identity, making it clear that a new overarching identity based in the collective experience of racism had emerged from the violence of Somalia's war and the farmers' experiences in the Kenyan refugee camps. The emergence of Somali Bantu identity is a remarkable story of how cultural creativity, bureaucratic mandates, and social entrepreneurship combined to produce a new identity out of ethnic ambiguity and injustice.

Not only had the Somali Bantus found a collective voice with which to articulate their historical grievances, they also claimed an active role in negotiating a future free from injustice. As I visited friends from Banta in their new homes in Lewiston, Hartford, and Syracuse, I realized that their version of their resettlement story departed considerably from the popular story of their utter victimization and rescue by UNHCR and the U.S. media recounted in chapter 2. In place of describing themselves as apolitical, dependent, premodern victims, Somali Bantus in the United States recall their leaders as architects of their group resettlement who actively pursued resettlement options, crafting an identity that met with UNHCR approval, partnering with UNHCR staff to delineate who could participate in the resettlement program, and introducing the various criteria for evaluating the legitimacy of Somali Bantu applicants. Their story is one in which they created an essentialized identity in collaboration with UNHCR's need for clear definitions to determine refugee legitimacy and worthiness. In the process, they embraced the Somali Bantu label as personally meaningful, claimed precolonial tribal and linguistic associations that were required of Somali Bantu identity, crafted a narrative of suffering that matched UNHCR's desire for victimization, and reconfigured families to



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

conform to U.S. family forms. In their version, which is nevertheless replete with instances of failure and compromise, they were the planners, strategists, and actors, and UNHCR was a reluctant but powerful collaborator.

Refugee camp administrators see like a state, so to speak.[1] They count, name, categorize, ration, assign ID cards, and require stable identities, stable camp residence, and respect for borders. Refugees behave like (many) citizens, evading state surveillance, strategizing to maximize their opportunities, negotiating relationships to access resources, moving for better opportunities, superimposing their models of kinship on top of official (camp) models of kinship, shifting their identity registers to match the context, and agitating for civil rights. These are all forms of refugee agency, even if they often get identified as noncompliance or fraud by humanitarian agencies and are ignored in the scholarly and popular focus on bare life and disempowerment.

Departing from the focus on the international refugee regime as a technology of power, this chapter flips the lens to view humanitarianism from the vantage point of refugees, who figure out how to navigate top-down bureaucratic structures of decision making in ways beneficial to them.[2] This chapter contributes to a new focus on refugee agency in the scholarship on humanitarianism, a focus that explores how refugees find and create spaces for action, collaborate with activists to elude and challenge structures of control, and articulate an alternative politics of identity and self-determination beyond their identity as exemplars of bare life. Attending to the political strategies pursued by refugees requires a multilayered approach that takes into account how refugees conjoin local currents, such as cultural discourses and regional politics, to what is happening globally as diasporic refugee and global activist networks articulate new forms of political subjectivity.[3] Adopting this perspective, this chapter tries to see like a refugee.

## The "Weird Name Bantu"

In his discussion of Somali Bantu ethnicity, political scientist Kenneth Menkhaus observed that the rapid creation of Somali Bantu identity after 1991 is particularly remarkable "because the community possesses almost none of the features typically associated with a cohesive ethnic group."[4] Prior to the onset of Somalia's civil war, the Jubba Valley villagers who carried the jareer label did not speak a common dialect, share a common kinship system, or even subscribe to a common history. Many villagers in the lower Jubba River valley continued to identify with their preenslavement East African ethnicities such as Yao and Makua. One group who lived in the lower Jubba Valley, the Mushunguli, still spoke Zigua over a century after their Zigua ancestors from Tanzania had arrived as slaves in Somalia. In contrast, farmers in the middle



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

valley claimed no relationship with their ancestors' pre-Somali ethnicities. Jareer members of Somali clans in the interriverine area felt strong affiliations with their Somali clan identity, not their connections to other jareer. Scholars and Somali Bantus agree that prior to the civil war, those identified as jareer perceived no common identity and no one used the term "Somali Bantu."

Italian colonial authorities may have been the first to use the term "Bantu" to describe villagers in the Jubba Valley. As with colonial regimes elsewhere in Africa, Italian colonial authorities treated the Jubba Valley villagers as free labor for colonial projects. Beginning in 1935, the Italian colonial government required all Jubba villages to send a quota of men and women to work on colonial plantations on a rotating basis, a practice bitterly remembered during my stay in Banta by elderly villagers as the *kolonya* and the *teen*. The colonial authorities used the term "Bantu" to distinguish the riverine farmers (encompassing the range of ethnic identities then recognized in the valley, such as "Shabelle, Shidle, Makanne, Eyle, Elay Baydabo, Shanbara, Zigula, Gosha, Mushunguli"[5]) whose labor could be commandeered for colonial projects, from the pastoralist (jileec) Somalis, who were not required to provide free labor. Colonial authorities eager to claim the labor of riverine farmers thus reinforced the jareer-jileec distinction by introducing administrative categories to clearly distinguish between farmers as jareer-Bantu, who were subject to coerced labor campaigns, and the pastoralists as jileec–ethnic Somalis, who were not.[6] Recounting the multiple abuses suffered by his father's generation during the era of Italian colonialism, one elder from Banta now living in Lewiston reflected, "The Italians were only colonizing the jareer, not the Somalis."

But while the jareer-jileec distinction clarified status in social encounters and identified those subject to colonial labor expropriation, it did not create an overarching ethnic identity among those recognized as jareer, nor did it introduce the word "Bantu" into popular Somali discourse. For most of the twentieth century, riverine identities remained diverse, localized, and, in many regions, as in Banta, negotiated in relation to surrounding Somali pastoralist groups. Although everyone knew that many of the ancestors of valley farmers were slaves, during my stay in Banta, middle valley farmers were unwilling to speak of themselves as holding a unified group identity on this basis. As the great Banta historian Iidow Roble had told me during the first of our many interviews in 1987 about valley history, "Everyone here is descended from slaves, but no one talks about it."

The term "Bantu" reappeared after 1991 during the civil war when foreign humanitarian workers struggling to ensure the delivery of emergency food rations to riverine farmers adopted it as a catchall term for the farming populations along the Jubba and Shabelle Rivers targeted by Somali militias.[7]



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

Menkhaus, who worked with the UN peacekeeping effort in the early years of the civil war, notes that Western relief workers were appalled at the indifference of Somalis to the plight of the jareer because the relief workers did not immediately understand that the Somalis did not consider the jareer part of their society. "This point is critical," Menkhaus writes, "because it suggests that the virtual holocaust visited upon low-status groups such as the jareer in 1991 and 1992 was not just a tragic result of warlords and young gunmen run amok; it was also the result of conscious decisions by clan elders and militia leaders over who lived and who died, an 'allocation of pain' which reflected the ethics and logic of the existing social order in crisis, and which betrayed the fact that low status members of the clan simply did not matter enough to live."[8] Menkhaus explains that humanitarian workers revived the use of the term "Bantu" to describe the jareer populations who were suffering so much during the early years of the war. When the media picked up on the term in 1992, "In the eyes of the external world, if not yet inside Somalia, a new ethnic category was taking shape."[9]

The widespread violence against jareer Somalis in 1991–92 precipitated a growing political consciousness among jareer people that began to grow within Somalia and the refugee camps in Kenya over the next few years. Somali Bantus now living in the United States recall that a UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) officer from southern Africa stationed in Mogadishu with the UN peacekeeping force from 1992 to 1995 encouraged the use of the term "Bantu" to describe jareer Somalis.[10] When Somali minorities complained to him about their treatment by other Somalis, he reportedly suggested that they should self-identify as Bantu. The few educated Bantu started using the term "Bantu," and Somali Bantu activist Omar Eno recalls that the term quickly gained currency with educated minority political elites who founded the Somali African MUKI political organization to represent minority interests on the national scene.[11] Omar Eno and his brother Mohamed, both academics, became outspoken advocates of the rights of Somalia's jareer minorities, persistently campaigning for recognition and international support.

Their flight across the Kenyan border into the refugee camps in 1992–93 brought together jareer from across southern Somalia and across Somali clan affiliations for the first time.[12] One elder in Lewiston explained,

> In earlier times, jareer in Baay [interriverine] and Kalafo [Ethiopia] areas didn't ever have the chance to encounter each other. . . . Baay jareer and the Gosha [Jubba Valley] jareer lived too far away to intermarry, but once they encountered each other in the camps it is no problem for them to marry. But they cannot marry Somalis because the Somalis considered themselves



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

> superior and called them adoon. They would tell their daughters and sons that jareer were inferior, with a nose as big as a heel, idiots, and if they married one no one would cry for them when they died.

Jareer Somalis quickly learned they would be on the bottom of camp hierarchy. Somalis within the camps who had access to funds from remittances or camp administration jobs hired jareer Somalis, who lacked such connections, as the camp's manual laborers to work as porters, to dig and clean latrines, to gather wood (a perilous occupation due to attacks and rapes), and as domestic servants and builders. In my interviews with Somali Bantus about their memories of Dadaab, I repeatedly heard, "You'll never find a Somali man digging a latrine!" One Somali Bantu refugee in Lewiston related his memories of assaults suffered by so many Somali Bantus in the refugee camps:

> The land [in the camps] was for the Somalis and they controlled everything. They sexually abused the women and beat brutally the men because they claimed control of the land, and if they caught Somali Bantus gathering wood they attacked. The Kenyan government believed the land was for Somalis, so no one policed it. They had permission from the government to do what they were doing. The men's job was to gather building materials, women's to gather firewood. They paid Somalis to get access to the wood for building. The women wouldn't negotiate—if they got caught they'd start running. The men would negotiate. They'd take money with them and if they got caught they'd try to negotiate payment. The women would go in groups and if they got caught they'd all start running and whoever was grabbed would get sexually assaulted. They'd keep her hostage, beat and rape her, and then let her go and her community would take her to the hospital to tend to her injuries and to the police to file a report. It happened weekly. We had no way to protect the women. Women have much worse memories than men.

Furthermore, as noted in chapter 2, Somalis were put in charge of the few key positions in the camp staff structure available to refugees, which ensured that access to paid jobs within the camps remained limited to Somalis and was not extended to jareer camp residents, thus further enabling the ongoing hierarchy of jileec and jareer Somalis. Somali Bantu elders living in the United States told me that as jareer Somalis began to grasp how their experiences of subjugation in Somalia and in the camps extended across all Somali clans, their leaders began articulating a common experience of subjugation based on their separate ancestry and history of discrimination by Somalis. The leaders of one of the most organized jareer minority groups in the camps,



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

the Mushunguli, were among the first to advance a request to resettle on the basis of their ancestral and linguistic connections in Tanzania, which is where the ancestors of the Mushunguli originated before being sold into slavery in Somalia.

One of the oldest Somali Bantu leaders in the United States, a Hartford resident I'll call Abdulle, described to me how in 1992 the Mushunguli leaders decided that every block in the refugee camps where Mushunguli lived should elect a leader who would represent the minority residents of the block. The leaders met to discuss their options, deciding to appeal to Tanzania on the basis of ancestral connections, which had been sustained through the movement of people traveling back and forth between the lower Jubba and Tanzania in earlier years. The Mushunguli leaders sent representatives from the camps to Tanzania to pursue the possibility of an official resettlement program there and asked UNHCR to invite an official Tanzanian delegation to the camps to meet the refugees, who were asked to perform traditional dances to prove their cultural connections. Dan Van Lehman, the UN field officer in Dagahalley (one of the Dadaab camps) who had witnessed their exploitation in the camps and supported their efforts to seek a resettlement solution for themselves, remembers the Mushunguli leaders as "the drivers of the process."[13] Van Lehman learned about the minority community after witnessing an altercation in Dagahalley camp one morning in early 1992 at the water pump when an ethnic Somali woman attempted to bar a Mushunguli woman from accessing water. When he intervened, Van Lehman was startled to discover the Mushunguli woman spoke Swahili and Zigua. Because of his fluency in Swahili he was able to forge relationships with the Mushunguli leaders who spoke Swahili, including the Mushunguli leader in the Dadaab camps, Mberwa Haji. He learned of their marginalization in Somalia and in the camps, and, furious that such racism persisted in the camp he was running, determined to assist their efforts to find a resettlement solution. Van Lehman explained to me that he and the Mushunguli leaders decided to use the term "Mushunguli"

> to encompass all native Zigua and all native Maay Maay–speaking Bantu as long as they were the descendants of people originally from Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, and Kenya. . . . The slave ancestry of the Mushunguli seemed to put them at a distinct social and security disadvantage compared to the other Bantu from farther up the Jubba River and even those from the Shabelle River Valley. The Mushunguli refugees had already began [*sic*] migrating "illegally" to Tanzania when their leaders approached me for help. I recognized [that] the slave ancestry of the Mushunguli, possibly for the first time in their history, could possibly be used to their



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

advantage by appealing to the Tanzanian, Mozambican, and international diplomatic communities to do the right thing to help these descendants of slavery finally gain their human and civil rights through intra-African resettlement. . . . The Mushunguli—loosely defined as the descendants of the East African slave trade who either retained their ancestral language, culture, or both—recognized the potential of their historical story and organized themselves according to their East African ethnic group.[14]

When the delegation from Tanzania arrived in Dadaab in response to the invitation from the Mushunguli leaders and Van Lehman, they recognized and affirmed the historic ties between Mushungulis from Somali and Zeguas in Tanzania. Ultimately, however, the Tanzanian government decided the country could not afford to accept more refugees for permanent resettlement, a decision Van Lehman blames on UNHCR ineptitude and unwillingness to support the refugees' initiative. Van Lehman claims that even though several donor nations indicated their desire to contribute funds to support the resettlement process, the UNHCR response was "brutally diplomatic" and slow. He told me, "The Tanzanians were willing to welcome the Mushunguli, but the UNHCR dragged its feet on guaranteeing financial and diplomatic support. The Tanzanians only rescinded their offer after Rwanda blew up."[15]

Despite Tanzania's refusal to officially accept Mushunguli refugees, Mushunguli and other jareer refugees started an "underground railroad" to Tanzania, through which Van Lehman estimates about 5,000–10,000 refugees relocated to Tanzania, some to Mkuyo refugee camp and others into the general population.[16] Van Lehman, Mberwa Haji, and other Mushunguli leaders continued to discuss other possible African resettlement sites, deciding in 1994 that Mozambique might be a good fit, a possibility Van Lehman pursued when he left the UN that year to return to graduate school at Cornell. His master's thesis analyzed the failed Tanzanian resettlement effort, argued that the UN was hobbled by an institutional and cultural bias toward European and U.S. resettlement based on an incorrect assumption that African countries are bureaucratically incapable of managing refugee resettlement, and developed a plan for how to successfully engineer an inter-African refugee resettlement program.[17]

In 1996 Van Lehman returned to East Africa in a series of jobs with CARE that he thought might help him pursue a plan for Mushunguli resettlement in Mozambique. The Mushunguli elders performed cultural dances for Van Lehman's video camera, which he used to make their case to Mozambican politicians and UNHCR officials in Maputo, returning to Dadaab in 1996 to keep the Mushunguli informed about his efforts on their behalf. After a debate



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

in the Mozambican Parliament, a delegation was sent to Dadaab to interview the Mushunguli leaders.

Abdulle remembers the delegation from Mozambique arriving in the refugee camps to meet with the Mushunguli leaders, once again asking for a performance of cultural dances "to see if [they] were authentic." In preparation for their visit, the Mushunguli leaders from each of Dadaab's three camps laboriously compiled handwritten lists of jareer refugees who would qualify for resettlement in Mozambique on the basis of ancestral ethnic connections, although many jareer did not sign up because they feared relocating to a non-Muslim country, were suspicious of the resettlement plan, were away from the camps during the time period when the lists were being created, or because they weren't entirely sure they qualified under the Mushunguli ethnic label. Sheikh Ahmed Nur refused to sign up for resettlement in Mozambique because, according to his children who eventually resettled in the United States, he was uncertain whether the list would be used to benefit those who signed up and he held out hope that he could return to his farms in Somalia. His adult children disagreed and put their names on the list. Isha, Cali Osman's wife, also refused to sign up for resettlement because she was wary of relocating to a non-Muslim country, but her daughter Rabaca stole Isha's identity documents one day while she was away from her house and registered Isha along with Isha's other children, whom Rabaca believed would have an opportunity for education only if they left the camps. Caliyow Isaaq's surviving family members all added their names to the list. The final set of handwritten lists included about 10,000 names.

In 1998, Mozambique responded that as a poor country struggling with the aftermath of devastating floods and a long, brutal civil war, they could not accept refugees. The Mushunguli leaders felt deflated and Van Lehman was furious with UNHCR for refusing to offer greater assistance. After years of work on the Tanzanian and Mozambican resettlement efforts, Van Lehman says he finally realized "the UN just didn't want to do it" because of its biased view that only Europe and America are appropriate locations for third-country refugee resettlement. But the years of active attempts at resettlement by the Mushungulis and Van Lehman, in addition to the lobbying by Eno and other educated Bantus for the recognition of Somali minorities by the international community, raised their profile for UNHCR administrators, who responded by designating the Mushunguli as a vulnerable population in need of a resettlement solution. They had made themselves visible as a group with a coherent ethnic identity and a history of exploitation, and they fit the profile sought by the United States in response to the Congressional Black Caucus's charge of racist resettlement priorities.



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

Although Van Lehman recalls that he and the Mushunguli leaders decided to use Mushunguli rather than Bantu or jareer as the basis for inclusion on the 1997 list because they thought the latter terms would be too broad, jareer leaders were beginning to articulate a shared identity that included more than those who claimed the more specific Mushunguli identity associated with farmers from only the lower Jubba Valley. Jareer leaders from throughout the Jubba Valley viewed the resettlement effort on the basis of minority status as relevant to them as well because of their shared jareer status, and thus many non-Mushunguli minorities also signed up for possible resettlement in Mozambique. That the term "Mushunguli" initially became an umbrella ethnic term was not as significant as the emerging recognition by jareer Somalis that they had experienced similar patterns of discrimination and violence specifically because of their jareer identities, patterns that continued to dominate their lives in the camps through hierarchies in access to camp jobs, cultural broker positions, food rations, remittances, and the experience of constant, everyday acts of racism. The efforts of the Mushunguli leaders and Van Lehman led to the eventual acceptance of "the weird name Bantu," as one elder in Lewiston amusingly put it, by most jareer Somalis in the camps.[18]

Recalling the impact of the Mushunguli leadership in the refugee camps to enlist other jareer Somalis in their efforts to find a third-country resettlement, Sadiq explained:

> Mushungulis were the ones convincing us to use the term. They spoke the language of Tanzania and northern Malawi so they were having this nice connection. They would go back and forth and convince us what to do next. They didn't want to go back to Somalia because they were killed the most. They were not integrated with the Somali tribes [clans] like we were [e.g., jareer from the middle Jubba Valley] and were brutally killed because of it. They tried to convince us not to return. They did a lot of work to convince us. Sometimes they brought someone who lived in Tanzania and had lived in Somalia a long time ago to convince us. Somalis also tried to convince us that Tanzania and Mozambique would enslave us. But we didn't believe them.

Alongside the efforts of Mushunguli leaders to generate a broader consciousness among jareer Somalis in the camps, non-Mushunguli jareer leaders prompted by the political efforts of Mushunguli leaders also pursued connections among jareer refugees. During our conversation in his Hartford home, Abdulle showed me an elaborate, hand-drawn map he created in 1993–94 in the refugee camp in order to document the shared experiences of jareer all over southern Somalia. From painstaking research involving hundreds of



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

interviews in which he asked jareer Somalis to name their village and the next villages to the north and south as far as they had traveled, he drew a color-coded map depicting the location of every jareer village in the Jubba Valley from which refugees fled to Kenya. He drew another color-coded map of the entire country to show the location of other jareer communities as well as the origins of the militia groups who attacked them, so he could show other jareer "where those who killed us came from." These maps provided his fellow jareer refugees with a visual image of their collectivity and helped them understand their shared victimization as jareer under attack from Somalis from throughout the country.[19] He believes his map was important for consolidating a group identity among jareer refugees, and indeed I heard about the influence of his map from numerous Somali Bantus in other U.S. cities. A major incident in 1998 further confirmed the distinction between Somalis and Somali minorities in Dadaab. Because of their suspicions of rampant ration card fraud, camp administrators mandated that all resident refugees had to surrender their ration cards and be issued new ones, an exercise rejected by Somali refugee leaders, who demanded a boycott of the process. But when Somali Bantu refugees refused to comply with the boycott and lined up to be reverified, Somalis attacked them and in the ensuing violence, which lasted for three days, the camp was shut down. Several Somali Bantus were killed and scores wounded. Many Somali Bantus told me that this event solidified any remaining uncertainty about Somali Bantu identity among jareer camp residents. As a Somali Bantu man in Seattle explained, "If you fought with the Somali Bantus and tried to reregister, you were a Somali Bantu. If you didn't, you were a Somali Somali."

While the elders claim their leadership produced a broad understanding of a shared identity among Somalia's diverse jareer population, young adult Somali Bantus in Lewiston, Hartford, and Syracuse lay their own claim to the Somali Bantu label, recalling that they learned the term from their Kenyan teachers and security guards in the refugee camps who told them they looked Bantu, like other Kenyans, rather than Somali. Their school textbooks taught them about the Bantu migrations and the distinction between Bantus, Cushites, and Nilotes, offering a connection to Bantus elsewhere in Africa and to their teachers that made the label appealing to jareer teenagers, who experienced camp life as profoundly racist. Abdirisak remembers the taunts of his Somali schoolmates about his participation in school: "Wow, the world has changed. Now you can see ooji wearing a uniform, going to school!" Sadiq, one of the first young jareer Somalis to pass the high school entrance exam in the camps, remembers a fellow Somali student pointing to him in order to mock other Somali students who failed the high school entrance exam, saying,



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

FIGURE 3.1 Abdulle, Catherine Besteman, and Haji Adan pointing to the middle Jubba region on Ibrahim's hand-drawn map. Photographer unknown.

"Even monkeys can pass the exam to go to high school!" Their success in the camp schools emboldened young Somali Bantus, for whom the Bantu label offered a positive self-identity that allied them with their Kenyan teachers. I heard from numerous young adult Somali Bantus that their generation introduced the term "Somali Bantu" to their elders, who adopted it as an English-friendly moniker for jareer people. The U.S. government adopted the term "Somali Bantu" in the announcement of the special resettlement program.

When the U.S. government decided to grant Somali Bantus P2 status, a 1999 State Department cable sent to all African diplomatic posts announcing the decision to accept the Somali Bantu included a point of clarification: "Note on nomenclature: This group is sometimes loosely referred to as 'Mushunguli.' However, that name is sometimes used more restrictively for a single subgroup of the larger group 'Somali Bantu,' which is the term employed here. It must be stressed that not all Somali Bantu are part of the P-2 designation, but only those whose names are on the lists provided to the department by UNHCR."[20]

The list provided by UNHCR was the 1997 list compiled for the failed Mozambique resettlement. Since the final list of those to be included for P2 resettlement identified Somali Bantu rather than only Mushunguli as the target population and since several years had passed since the creation of the original list, the



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

authorities faced the significant challenge of reverifying who qualified. Following the announcement of the U.S. resettlement program, Van Lehman recalls, "All of a sudden, everyone was a Somali Bantu," and Somalis as well as Somali Bantus not initially included on the list began jockeying and strategizing to be included. The result was confusion and ambiguity on the part of the administrators (all non-Somali) who were charged with reverifying the names on the list although they had no clear idea about who actually qualified.

### Self-Essentializing, the "Anticorruption Committee," and Family Restructuring

Somali Bantus recall the reverification procedures as a test of wits as much as of legitimacy. As word of the U.S. resettlement program spread throughout the camps, refugees whose names were on the Mozambique list had to find a way to prove that they still belonged, jareer refugees whose names did not appear on the list had to convince the interviewers that they should belong, and non-jareer Somali refugees who wished to claim a spot tried to reinvent themselves as Somali Bantus. Although the interview and screening procedures were controlled by foreign staff and ethnic Somalis employed by international organizations and later by U.S. immigration authorities with Somali translators, Somali Bantus nevertheless attempted to assert control over whatever aspects of the screening process they could access. Because of the slippage between the terms "Mushunguli" and "Somali Bantu," the jareer leaders attempted to control the definition of Somali Bantu to ensure those with historically legitimate claims to jareer identity would be included while excluding those they defined as ethnic Somalis.

A special reverification team was brought in by UNHCR, headed by a man named Andrew Hopkins, to review each claim, a process that initially rejected 10,000 new claimants. Of those remaining, the team interviewed 14,000 individuals, rejecting another 2,000 as illegitimate. The initial reverification review concluded in December 2001, but because the Dadaab refugee camps were deemed too dangerous for U.S. personnel to visit for the final screening due to heightened post-9/11 security concerns, in 2002 the agencies involved in the resettlement process decided to truck all 11,860 reverified Somali Bantu over 900 miles to the distant Kakuma refugee camp in the northwestern corner of Kenya at a cost of U.S. $2.7 million, a task managed by the International Office of Migration (IOM). In a wry aside describing the experiences of Somali Bantus in this process, the *Economist* commented, "They have been through a lot—persecution in their homeland, civil war, a decade languishing in refugee camps, and the tragi-comic experience of being trucked across Kenya to meet American officials who dared not visit them."[21]



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

Somali Bantus recount how their leadership worked closely with the UNHCR reverification team to ferret out fakers: Somalis masquerading as Somali Bantus by changing their names or physical appearance or claiming kinship connection with someone on the 1997 list, efforts sometimes facilitated by complicit or corrupt Somali interpreters, or even by Somali Bantus who desperately needed the money they could gain by selling a spot in their family to a non–Somali Bantu. Somali Bantu leaders offered a list of stereotypical physical features to guide the non-Somali reverification staff in how to recognize and distinguish Somali Bantus, including markers like hard curly hair, broad flat noses, and short muscular bodies.

Ethnographic descriptions of the asylum interview process across a range of settings—refugee camps, UNHCR offices, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (or the former Immigration and Naturalization Service), U.K. Home Office, French National Court of Asylum—reveal a set of confrontational interview strategies used by refugee admissions interviewers intended to trip up applicants by repeatedly asking confusing questions about chronology in order to find inconsistencies.[22] Ethnographic accounts report that interviewers presume applicants are not telling the truth and demand from them a coherent life story rooted in "a place, a culture, a language, and a religion";[23] that interviewers focus on questions about language, ethnicity, identity, indigeneity, and culture that often make no sense to applicants; and that interviewers expect applicants to use particular terms and discourses to describe their victimization (such as genocide, rape, etc.) that may not be familiar to applicants or may not be the words they would use to describe what happened to them and their families.[24]

These practices characterized the Somali Bantu reverification process as well, where jareer Somalis quickly learned that they had to adhere to a very narrow set of criteria to claim an identity as a legitimate Somali Bantu. In addition to the physical criteria noted above, a confluence of tribal, linguistic, and geographic markers emerged during the reverification process as definitive indications of legitimate Somali Bantu identity. All applicants had to claim to speak either Mushunguli or the Jubba Valley regional dialect of Maay Maay, and all had to claim membership in one of the five East African tribes from which the enslaved ancestors of the jareer Somalis who had settled in the lower Jubba Valley originated, even though jareer Somalis from elsewhere no longer recognized these ancestral associations. (As one former Banta resident now living in Lewiston cheerfully told me, "Now we are all Yao and Makua!") Finally, because their collective status as a persecuted minority group was the basis for preferential treatment for Somali Bantus, Somali Bantu applicants understood that a narrative of victimization was a required part of the inter-



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

view process. Somali Bantus learned to narrate personal stories of abuse and attack by Somali militias, and were asked to repeat these stories for verification at different points in the resettlement interview process. "We all have our story," one man told me, as he recounted his version of the personal trauma narrative he was asked to recite for each interview during the resettlement process, "even if the things we had to describe aren't exactly what happened." In a conversation with a friend from Banta about the resettlement process, he said, "My mother was killed. My father died. I was left alone." "Really?" I asked, upset to hear this news. "No!" he responded, realizing I had missed his point. "That's what I had to tell the interviewers. That's not what really happened."

In their study of the emergence of trauma as a trope of contemporary life, Fassin and Rechtman observe, "Trauma offers a language in which to speak of the wounds of the past—of slavery, colonization, or apartheid. Claimed by the protagonists themselves, trauma becomes once again an argument in struggles for recognition of the plurality of memory—even if this violates historical reality."[25] Condensing a general experience of marginalization into a personal narrative of individual trauma is a strategy used by asylum seekers everywhere to conform to the requirements for personal victimization desired by resettlement authorities. As the Somali Bantu experience shows, such shape-shifting of facts is not illegitimate, for everyone applying for resettlement suffered numerous losses of various kinds—of immediate or extended family members, of homes and land, of a way of life, of security—whether or not they themselves experienced intimate forms of violence against their persons.

By working with the UNHCR representatives to develop a set of criteria for determining Somali Bantu legitimacy, Somali Bantu leaders helped craft a coherent identity of ethnic uniformity where none had existed before. The mirage of uniformity came at a high price for those whose physical features or narratives did not conform closely enough to the model adopted by the foreign staff of interviewers, however. Many Somali Bantus in Lewiston remember the pencil test, for example, used to distinguish between those with "hard hair" and those with "soft hair," although many legitimate jareer failed the test and were rejected.[26] Sadiq recalls the anxiety he felt after being asked to walk across the interview room, since the interviewers were told that the gait of Somali Bantus differed from that of ethnic Somalis. Other Somali Bantus recall interviewers scrutinizing the shape and size of their noses and hands, since Somali Bantu noses are supposed to be flat and broad and their hands short and thick.[27]

Although the reverification process in Dadaab for boarding the buses to Kakuma was, by all accounts, messy, confusing, and complicated by the ignorance of foreign interviewers, the ambivalent role of Somali interpreters,



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

and the efforts of ethnic Somalis to find a way to be included, Somali Bantus claimed it gave their leaders another opportunity to assert some control over who got to continue in the resettlement program. I heard about the Somali Bantu anticorruption committee that developed an elaborate system of dots and stars to identify fakers on the UNHCR registration lists for those reverified for the bus trip to Kakuma, which would allow Somali Bantu leaders to identify interlopers as they lined up to board the buses. Recalling how some Somalis attempted to pass as Somali Bantus by rubbing dirt in their hair to make it "harder" and dressing in shabby clothing, the Somali Bantus working with Andrew Hopkins's verification team pointed out the "infiltrators," who would be pulled out of the line at the last minute to ensure that those who identified them would not suffer retribution in the camps.

Although the decision to relocate the final stages of the Somali Bantu resettlement program to Kakuma was intended to minimize opportunities for infiltration by ethnic Somalis and to protect Somali Bantus from the persistent efforts by Somalis to claim resettlement spots through threatening or bribing Somali Bantus into accepting non–Somali Bantus as family members, in Kakuma the Somali Bantu community itself was riven by accusations that some of its leaders were selling resettlement slots to ethnic Somalis and that some people were identifying others as fakers in retribution for personal vendettas.[28] After Dan Van Lehman learned in 2001 of the U.S. resettlement plan for Somali Bantus, he visited Kakuma with activist Omar Eno in 2002 after hearing about the accusations of fraud, eventually exposing the corruption in an international scandal that shook up the administering agencies and resulted in the firing of staff and the hiring of more Somali Bantu staff and interpreters. Van Lehman recalls,

> The Heads of the US government, the UNHCR, and the IOM dealing with the Somali Bantu in Kenya—usually all having little or no knowledge of Somalia, the Somali Bantu, or even any African language, ran the registration process. These heads, mostly foreigners, depended on the translation and guidance of more literate and educated dominant clan Somalis. To say the least, it was a BIG mess with lots of corruption and even a UNHCR scandal with European and African UNHCR staff caught for taking bribes from the Somali Somalis who were trying to get to the USA as Bantu refugees. We think that anywhere from 5–15% of all Bantu resettled, especially early on, were not Somali Bantu.[29]

Accusations of corruption resulted in more stringent criteria in the next stage of reverification, during which several of my Banta friends were rejected. When Isha's daughter Rabaca appeared for her final verification interview in



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

Kakuma with her husband of twenty years, the American interviewer scrutinized their physical features and announced that he did not believe Rabaca's husband was really a Somali Bantu. He applied the pencil test, which Rabaca passed but her husband failed (the pencil stuck in her hair, but moved more easily through his hair). While she was accepted for resettlement, the interviewer rejected her husband and seven children, giving her the choice of continuing in the asylum process alone or remaining with her husband and kids in the camp and giving up the opportunity for resettlement. She gave it up.

Isha's oldest son, Ciise—the son who had been one of the first kidnapped in Banta—was also rejected, along with his family. The interviewer studied his face and decided he was not a real Somali Bantu, rejecting him on the spot. Isha faced the horrible choice of continuing the resettlement process with her youngest kids and leaving behind her two oldest children, or consigning all her children to life in a refugee camp. At the urging of her children, she ultimately chose to continue the process.

Sadiq's story had a better ending. At the conclusion of their final reverification interview in Kakuma, the interviewer asked Sadiq's small daughter, "Do you like video games?" His daughter had no idea. She'd never heard of them. Through this question, Sadiq learned they were accepted for resettlement in the United States.

In addition to creating and conforming to a coherent ethnic identity and repeating a narrative of personal victimization, Somali Bantu refugees also learned how to reshape their families to match American kinship criteria. The fact that so many households had different members than when they had first signed up for resettlement in 1997 created a dilemma in the reverification process. Although once identified as a bona fide refugee and awarded a ration card, refugees are supposed to remain inside the confines of the camp and not engage in economic activity across its boundaries, in fact refugee camps are dynamic places and refugees can be highly mobile; they move between the camp and outside towns looking for economic opportunities; they move (illicitly) back and forth across borders to get news from home or to visit family members in other countries; they move between households as people marry, divorce, foster, and adopt. Households expand as new refugees arrive in the camps. Probably most of the households on the 1997 list had changed a great deal by the time of the reverification process in 2001, and everyone was scrambling to present a portrait of the household that conformed to the expectations of the interviewers.

In the calculus of resettlement, the American standard of economic dependents defines who can count as part of a family. Juvenile children ages seventeen and under are considered economic dependents and parents can thus include



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

them in their family unit for resettlement. Children eighteen and older, even if unmarried, even if living in the same household, are not economic dependents and thus must be considered separately. Siblings and cousins occupy the same relational category for Somali Bantus, but not for American interviewers, for whom one's children are one's economic dependents but one's nieces and nephews are not. After they grasped the family model being used to manage the resettlement process, refugee families figured out ways to turn extended families into nuclear families while trying to avoid having to lop off those family members who could not fit into the new model.

For example, one friend who signed up for resettlement in 1997 later took in a girl who was not on the 1997 list for resettlement because she had no family and no one had signed her up. My friend presented her at the resettlement interview as a new, still juvenile, daughter-in-law. This came as a surprise to my friend's sixteen-year-old son who, during the interview, suddenly became a husband. It was the only way to include the girl in the family resettlement, or she would have been left behind. Additionally, my friend was raising several orphaned nephews as her own children in conformity with the Somali understanding of kinship. My friend, all her children, and the new daughter-in-law were all reverified.

In addition to turning nieces, nephews, and orphans into one's children, families also turned their children into orphans to enhance their chances for resettlement. A friend's eldest son, Jamal, was unmarried but over the age of eighteen, and since young men in that demographic category are often treated with particular suspicion by American interviewers, the family reconfigured itself to improve his story in the resettlement interview. Some of Jamal's adult siblings had already been rejected for resettlement although his parents had been accepted, so the family decided to present Jamal with one of his young cousins as a family unit of orphaned brothers in which eighteen-year-old Jamal was the caretaker for his sixteen-year-old cousin. Everyone traded names to make this presentation of the family unit work, and they were approved.

In similar and creative ways, families successfully and unsuccessfully strategized to turn cousins into siblings, nieces and nephews into children, orphans into family members, and family members into orphans in order to present family structures that were legible and desirable to American interviewers while also being as inclusive as possible. Polygynous households faced a particular challenge. Since polygynous marriages are forbidden in the United States, all polygynous households accepted during the reverification interview were dissolved. Polygynously married men had to choose one wife with whom to be resettled, leaving their other wives to resettle separately as single-parent households in an enforced separation that was often a great hardship



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

for cowives who depended on each other for support and for children who were separated from their father and siblings. Abdiya was settled separately from her husband and cowife, becoming a single mother of five juvenile children. Her eldest, beloved son, Abdullahi, was rejected.

The married children of Sheikh Axmed Nur and Caliyow Isaaq, Xawo and Mohamed, also passed all the reverification tests for resettlement. They had taken into their family all of Mohamed's half siblings when Mohamed's father Caliyow Isaaq and two of Caliyow's three wives died from the diarrheal disease, thus presenting themselves for reverification as a nuclear family of two parents and six children. Since Sheikh Axmed Nur had never signed up for resettlement, he remained in Dadaab refugee camp after Xawo and Mohamed and all their dependents were taken to Kakuma. Wanting to see their daughter one last time before her departure for America, Sheik Axmed Nur and Habiba, Xawo's mother, traveled three days by bus to Kakuma, arriving just hours after Xawo and her family boarded a bus to Nairobi to begin her journey to the United States. They never had the chance for a farewell.

After years of waiting in Kakuma, those who had passed all the reverification tests were subject to yet one more final screening in Nairobi before being allowed to board the airplane for the United States. If they failed their screening in Nairobi, they were sent back to Kakuma and prohibited from appealing the decision or reapplying. If they passed, they had to sign a promise to pay back the cost of their airfare and then boarded the plane.

Many Somali Bantus describe the final predeparture Nairobi interview as the most terrifying moment in their long journey of interviews and background checks. Knowing that they were on the cusp of departure, and that any small mistake would cost them their opportunity to resettle, Somali Bantu families carefully took note of the errors that had destroyed the resettlement chances of those ahead of them. In contrast to the earlier stages of the resettlement process, I heard no stories of Somali Bantu control or effective intervention in the final verification screening in Nairobi, in which interviewers seemed to have absolute authority over the fates of the applicants. Abdirisak's parents were rejected because the translator misunderstood the term used by the husband for his wife, translating their relationship as clan based rather than a marriage. Because of this one translation error, they were rejected from the resettlement process and returned to the camps. Another family was split after the interviewer questioned the family members separately about their breakfast that morning. While the mother said she had rice with camel meat, her teenage sons reported rice with goat meat. The interviewer decided that the children were not actual family members and gave the mother the choice of boarding the plane for the United States with only her four younger children



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

or returning with her teenage sons to Kakuma with no chance to appeal their rejection. The mother chose to board the plane with her four other children and leave her two teenage sons behind, hoping to be able to apply for family reunification for her sons after arriving in the United States.[30] A news report from the *Los Angeles Times* tells of a fourteen-year-old boy returned alone to Kakuma after his responses to interview questions in Nairobi differed from those of his family members, who were allowed to board the plane: "Hussein is one of scores of Somali Bantu refugees who say their dreams of relocating to the United States were shattered when immigration officials broke up their families, sending some to America and others back to Kakuma. Husbands have been separated from wives, children from parents, brothers from sisters." The article reports that because of new interview procedures introduced in August 2004, between August and October 2004, 305 of 5,407 applicants interviewed in Nairobi were sent back to Kakuma. In 103 cases, the rest of the family decided to continue to the United States, but in 96 cases they decided to give up the opportunity for resettlement and returned to Kakuma with no right of appeal.[31]

A friend from Banta was luckier. He knew many families had been sent back to Kakuma after failing their Nairobi interview because different family members had given different answers to questions, or because the interviewer decided they were lying about their family composition. Since the 1997 registration and the 2001 reverification, he had added to his family an orphaned relative who was not on the original list. For the final interview, he claimed the relative as his wife's brother and their juvenile dependent. Because the relative was a new addition to the roster, the interviewer compared every feature—the shape of his eyes, nose, ears—with my friend's wife, who cried throughout the interview, distraught with worry, saying, "He is my brother! He is my brother!" My friend had instructed his kids to stay completely silent during the interview. Two days after their interview, they learned they had passed and would be leaving that night, after promising to repay the $3,200 cost of their airfare. When I asked why he was willing to put his family and his dreams of education at risk for a relative who was not an actual brother in the American sense, my friend shrugged and responded, "My relative's family was dead and he had been left alone. When he got to the camps he lived with us. He became part of our family. There was no way we could leave him."

## Conclusion

What is remarkable about this account is the insistence by my Somali Bantu interlocutors on their involvement in almost every step of the resettlement process. As I argued in chapter 2, the Eurocentric discourse of humanitarian-



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

ism imagines refugees as people who through their territorial displacement and violent loss are stripped of agency, reduced to a bare life of simple survival and dependence on charitable intervention. The figure of the refugee simultaneously carries the stigma of destitute humanity, a person out of place, and an implication of moral responsibility. The offer of refuge is thus imagined as a reprieve to their state of bare survival: an act of humanitarian charity and a gift of renewed life so they can (re)attain a qualified life—but only if they are judged to be truly worthy.

From the vantage point of refugees, however, the space of refuge is clearly a landscape of mistrust, suspicion, and militaristic control. Ethnographic accounts reveal that almost no one involved in the management of refugee camps actually sees camp space as a pacific refuge or believes the refugees housed there are uniformly apolitical innocent victims. Refugee camp administrators do not see refugees as destitute victims, as evidenced by their efforts to contain refugee political agency, constrain refugee mobility, reject refugee efforts toward democratic camp decision making, and exert rigid control over the interview process for determining resettlement candidates. Resettlement administrators do not see refugees as innocent victims, but rather understand refugees to be strategic and manipulative, as evidenced by the insistence on stringent reverification practices and resettlement officers' suspicions of refugee fraud. Host country citizens who live outside refugee camps do not see their neighbors living inside the camps as suffering victims stripped of agency, but rather often see them as competitors (for resources, money), as consumers (for small businesses), as political threats, and as warriors. A more thoroughly grounded ethnographic portrait of those who continue to subscribe to the refugee-as-hapless-victim image, which I imagine is limited to certain European and American publics, would help reveal how this image is used to bolster a global humanitarian regime dependent on charitable funding from those publics.[32]

The evidence suggests that the bulk of those who know, engage with, and control refugees do not see refugees as hapless, pathetic people reduced to bare survival, but rather fully understand refugees to be agents who use mobility, narrative, competition, voice, and tactics to construct strategic subjectivities in their places of refuge, whether in refugee camps, cities where they live illegally, or third-country resettlement sites. Hosts, administrators, and refugees simultaneously view refugees as strategists, competitors, entrepreneurs, mobile agents, possible frauds, and perpetrators of violence, in addition to victims, dependents, and charity recipients. The tension between, on the one hand, the suspicion of refugees as political and economic agents who strategize and conspire, and, on the other, the humanitarian discourse that defines the granting of refuge as moral responsibility and charity means the space of refuge is



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

contested, tense, and a site of struggle. Refugees in this space work out ways to be active agents in constructing their lives while simultaneously adhering to a regime of rules, policies, and attitudes that expect them to behave like docile, grateful subjects.

The story of how jareer became Somali Bantus is a case in point. The argument here is not that the creation of Somali Bantu identity was a fraudulent process, but rather that it was a necessary process within the demands of the international refugee regime, a bureaucratic apparatus that insists on a particular narrative of trauma and persecution told in terms of essentialized identities in which culture, race, and place are inextricably linked. Not everyone who was resettled as a Somali Bantu suffered to the same extent, but the Somali Bantu label gave a name to their suffering of historical injustices as a group. It coalesced under one label a history of slavery, colonization, and apartheid; it provided a language for group recognition of a shared past of discrimination and degradation. The particulars—whether one really identified as Yao or Makua, whether one really spoke Mushunguli or Maay Maay, whether one really witnessed one's father being killed or mother being raped—seemed less significant than the historical fact of subjugation and the certainty of future persecution in Somalia. Those who chose to self-identify as Somali Bantus were given certain parameters to work within and, wishing to take charge of fashioning their future, used them to craft identities, life narratives, and family structures to find a home within a global system that mandates membership in a state, somewhere.

One of anthropology's signature strengths is its ability to recognize and demonstrate human creativity and agency continually to make new social worlds in even the most extraordinarily dehumanizing circumstances. Refugees see their lives as constrained, of course, but also see themselves as creatively exercising their capacity to remake their world anew, to strategize, manipulate, redefine, and engage with the categories and boundaries drawn around them. Nuancing Agamben's portrait of the utterly excluded, Somali Bantu refugees actively worked the systems that excluded them to find a spot defined by them in the international order. They did so by creating an identity that would gain traction, lobbying for resettlement in countries they selected, cultivating support from relief agency staff, playing the category for resettlement made available to them, taking on new family configurations, and accepting as their own generalized stories of suffering.

As resettled refugees in the United States, Somali Bantus are offered the possibility of citizenship (although only after many hurdles), but they continue to play with and redefine their political and social identities in ways that transcend and even repudiate the nation-state model of citizenship and belonging.



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

One might accept a new identity as Mohamed, child of Nassir and Fatuma, legal resident of the United States, while simultaneously holding an identity as Axmed, child of Jamal and Nurta, residents of a refugee camp. Unlike undocumented immigrants, they hold a legal identity, but, in a way, it is a doppelgänger identity because so many have transformed their personal narrative in conformity with the requirements for refugee identity. Such transformations do not mean their new identities are not real; rather, they are simultaneous and coexistent with their pre-resettlement identity. All resettled refugees I know share this social and political condition of identity doubles. (Many years after their resettlement, when my Somali Bantu friends began gaining U.S. citizenship, one of the first things many did before obtaining a passport was to change their names back to their pre-resettlement names. Birthdates were impossible to change, even though the birthday of every single adult I know is recorded as January 1, reflecting the uncreative efficiency of resettlement interviewers charged with filling out paperwork for people who do not record their birthdates. I heard how the universal January 1 birthday presents problems with authorities who become suspicious when they see that the same birthday is recorded on everyone's driver's license. "It's embarrassing!" one man tells me.)

The story of Somali Bantu resettlement thus has three concurrent themes: humanitarian rescue as narrated by UNHCR, NGOs, the media, and the U.S. government; cruelty and humiliation, as evidenced by the experiences of families broken apart by the resettlement process, accusatory interview styles, and the insistence that indigent refugees cover the cost of their airfare to the United States, ensuring they arrive in their new home already deeply in debt; and refugee bravery, courage, tireless self-advocacy, and tactical manipulation of a system of exclusionary and constraining rules. All are true. Which we tell depends on our agenda: the first offers self-congratulations and benefits donors but positions refugees in ways that are condescending and belittling. The second offers an indictment of the entire process, calling for policy reforms and systemic overhaul, but also overlooks the role refugees themselves play in working the system to their advantage. The third applauds as a success the story of refugee initiative and self-help but downplays the enormous barriers to their self-determination put in place by a system almost totally stacked against them.

Although almost 12,000 Somali Bantus were eventually resettled in the United States, almost every family who came was forced to leave behind someone precious: a child, a spouse, a parent, a sibling. Upon arrival, most families immediately filed P3 family reunification requests for their family members left behind. Isha's son Idris filed for his sister Rabaca and her family and his brother Ciise and his family. Xawo and her brother filed for their parents, Sheikh Axmed Nur and Habiba. Abdiya filed for her son Abdullahi. But soon



Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024

thereafter the U.S. State Department decided that Somali family reunification appeals were too fraudulent for the system to manage and suspended the program, even for family members who could demonstrate conclusively their relationship through expensive DNA tests or the testimony and photographs of an anthropologist.

One afternoon in 2008 as I sat with several refugees from Banta discussing the P3 applications, Sadiq's phone rang. It was news from Kakuma: Sheikh Axmed Nur's wife Habiba had died that morning. A couple years later, another phone call reported that Isha's daughter Rabaca, mother of seven, at the age of forty suddenly and inexplicably died one morning as she stepped out of her hut in the refugee camp. The next year Sheikh Axmed Nur's second wife died, leaving him a widower with numerous young children. In November 2013, Sheik Axmed Nur died, after twenty-two years in Kakuma refugee camp. Ciise and his family still remain in Kakuma, beginning their third decade of life in a refugee camp. Funerals are held monthly in Lewiston for those long-separated family members who die in the refugee camps, separated from their loved ones in the United States by an ocean, a continent, and the borders against refugee mobility that condemn refugees to die in refugee camps.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/582469/9780822374725-004.pdf by guest on 08 November 2024