

**When the Heart Grows Sad: Loss, Absence, and the Embodiment of Traumatic Memory  
amongst Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City**

**By**

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## *Abstract*

Anthropological approaches to the study of suffering amongst refugee populations have characterized refugees as “liminal” relative to their citizenship status within the “national order of things” (Malkki 1992). By adopting this lens, resettlement organizations and international relief agencies understand suffering as a result of the loss of national citizenship, and thus frame “healing” through the recreation of the sense of national belonging either through repatriation or resettlement. However, this approach fails to capture suffering as it is understood and experienced by refugees themselves. Furthermore, it misses the particularity of violent experience, and the specific ways by which individuals and groups are made to suffer. Instead, anthropologists must ask themselves how violence targets culturally embedded understandings of identity and meaning-making, and how individuals and groups who survive violence attempt to deal with these changes in order to recreate identity at both the individual and collective levels after the fact. Through this research on Somali Bantu refugee experience, I hope to shed light on the particularity of traumatic memory and the specific ways by which this community attempts to deal with the ongoing nature of suffering. Within the Somali Bantu refugee community in Kansas City, suffering does not result from the loss of citizenship status, but rather, from the loss of familiar relationships through which meaning and identity are derived. I argue that within this community, traumatic memory is lodged in the everyday lives of those who experienced the violence because of the way these losses have created an ongoing sense of absence that remains pervasive even after resettlement. Through personal narratives of suffering collected during my two years of fieldwork in this community, I will show how the traumatic memory of loss becomes absence, how absence is then incorporated into the everyday reality of the members of this community, and how knowledge of the absence, and memories of the trauma, become embodied in the present as “lived suffering,” structuring everyday realities and social relations (Das 1996, 2007; Farmer 1996; Kleinman & Kleinman 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1996). Through this lens, I will also show how efforts of mending, centered on the strategic use of silence at the collective level, impacts the individuals through whom silence is facilitated, thus illustrating the relationship between collective memory and individual bodies.

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To my brothers and sisters, whose friendships have filled the loneliness that sometimes accompanies life, and who represent all the best parts of myself,

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*Table of Contents*

<i>Acceptance Page</i>	ii
<i>Abstract</i>	iii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	iv
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The History Behind the Words: An Ethnographic Sketch of Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City</b>	<b>9</b>
Somali Somali, Bantu, and Somali Bantu: Sorting out the Labels	9
Slavery and the Stigmatization of Identity	11
Civil War and the Somali Bantu Exodus	15
The Contemporary Situation	17
<b>Chapter 2: Violence, Trauma, and Memory: A Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>32</b>
History and Memory	32
Collective Memory and Identity	34
Memory, Trauma, and Embodiment	37
Symbolic Violence and Violence of the Everyday	42
Locating the Collective through Individual Narratives of Memory	46
Methodology	48
<b>Chapter 3: We Planted the Mango Trees</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Chapter 4: And then the Bullets Came to the Habaat-Sugaay</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Chapter 5: When the Heart Grows Sad</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Silence in Mending: Embodiment and the Social Reproduction of Identity among Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City</b>	<b>124</b>
Recasting Identity: Removing Somali Bantu Refugees from the “National Order of Things”	124

The Somali Bantu Community—An Alternative to Nation-Based Models of Identity	<b>127</b>
Mourning the Loss of the World: Reconceptualizing Traumatic Memory	<b>129</b>
Renegotiating Identity: The Price of Collective Silence on Individual Bodies	<b>136</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>145</b>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<b>148</b>

## *Introduction*

The topic of this thesis is motivated in large part by two factors, both personal and academic. First, my interest in issues of identity, culture, and migration began at a very young age. Growing up as an American-born North African minority in Lawrence, Kansas, the child of immigrant parents who came to this country with nothing but the hopes of achieving the “good life,” I have experienced social and cultural identity struggles first-hand. I have encountered the difficulties and frustrations that accompany the attempt to meld two distinctly separate selves into one, and the constant efforts of those diverse individuals who struggle everyday to keep from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1994:2).

Second, my interest in the area of refugee studies also stems from a childhood memory of the image of the Somali refugee during the Somali famine of 1992. As the famine gained international publicity, images of emaciated men, women, and children starving to death half-way across the world became normal fixtures on American television, embodying what it looked like to exist without a national identity. For a long time these images of starving Somali people haunted me, their sunken eyes and swollen bellies overwhelmingly defining what it meant to be a “Somali” person in my mind.

When I had my first real-life encounter with a Somali refugee family during my early teenage years, contrary to the images of refugees I had seen, these Somali people were not surrounded by flies and disease; instead, they were healthy, well-dressed, and well-fed. The inconsistencies between the image of the Somali refugee of the camps and the Somali people I met in person in Kansas City were overwhelmingly apparent. The danger lies in the potential to

overlook the suffering that real people experience if it does not coincide with the notions of suffering portrayed by these images. This draws our attention to the problem of the “universalization” of the refugee through mass circulation of images of “suffering”, stripped of individual experience and specificity (Fair & Parks 2001; Malkki 1995; De Waal 1997). The tendency to dehistoricize refugee experience often leads people to take for granted the complex nature of violent experience, and the various ways by which traumatic memory may become embodied. In presenting this research, I hope to “rehistoricize” Somali Bantu refugee experience, and reinsert particularity into the nameless, stateless, historyless, identityless faces to which I was exposed so long ago.

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I first came in contact with the Somali Bantu community as a volunteer for Catholic Charities. My role was to be a mentor; to visit the family to which I was assigned regularly and to report back on the visits to my supervisor. During these visits I was to “keep them company,” and was instructed by my supervisors at Catholic Charities to make it clear that I was a mentor and “not a social worker.” I was warned against providing material support to the family, whether in the form of money, gifts, or donations. During my early visits with the Somali Bantu family, I introduced myself as a North African American. I formed a deep friendship with the mother, a woman my age with five children at the time. We talked about life and our families, about our likes and dislikes, and also about the challenges we both faced in the United States. Through this remarkable woman I was introduced to the experiences of a young refugee mother abroad, struggling to maintain a traditional Somali Bantu family in the face of her increasingly changing world.

I found it more and more difficult *not* to respond to her requests for help. I often bent the rules, bringing gifts for the children, clothes donated by people I knew, or monetary gifts on special occasions such as birthdays and holidays. It seemed inhumane to refuse to help if I could, and especially if such a refusal was based on my instructions to maintain a “professional distance” between the family and myself as a mentor. On the contrary, I sought, not a shallow and professional relationship with this woman, but a deeper friendship based on mutual reciprocity. I saw in her a woman who was looking for true friendship amidst the superficial world in which she suddenly found herself.

Through this first family, I was introduced to several other Somali Bantu families by driving them to neighborly visits and events such as mourning rituals, healing sessions, and a variety of other errands. During this first year, my research was predominantly based on participant-observation, engaging in conversations with various people, observing the day-to-day events and happenings of Somali Bantu refugee families living in Kansas City. After building this background, and acquainting myself with Somali Bantu culture and family life, I contacted the Somali Bantu Foundation where some of the families I had come to know sent their children to be schooled on the weekends. I met with the leadership of the Somali Bantu Foundation several times on different occasions, conducting formal interviews about the goals and challenges that the organization faced. I also began to attend the weekend school on occasion to understand the ideas, lessons, and goals of education in the life of American-born Somali Bantu children. It was through the Foundation that I met many of the people whose narratives I collected.

The Foundation provided me with a research assistant who accompanied me to the homes of community members who had volunteered to share their stories with me. During these

sessions, I introduced myself as a student at the University of Kansas, working on a project on Somali Bantu experience and identity. I told them I was interested in hearing about what it means to be Somali Bantu, and always asked them the same question: “tell me about yourself.” The responses were transcribed on my computer during the interviews, or voice recorded and transcribed at a later time. Each interview lasted between 1-3 hours depending on how much the interviewee wished to say. Thus, I engaged in two years of participant-observation, collected ten individual narratives from community members between the ages of 18 and 65, conducted several group interviews with the community leaders, and attended a total of eight healing sessions over the course of my two years with the Somali Bantu. I continue to visit with them regularly and volunteer as an English teacher for the women of the community.

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During my time in the Somali Bantu refugee community, I began to notice that certain issues present in the limited literature on Somali Bantu (for example, Besteman 1999; Lehman & Eno, 2009) were completely absent from conversations in which I engaged with them. Certain historical events had been silenced and there seemed to be a general sense of confusion surrounding the reasons as to why they had been treated so poorly by non-Somali Bantu people. Meanwhile, other parts of the narratives emphasized events and experiences that were not present in the literature at all.

These clear and undeniable inconsistencies between the literature on Somali Bantu and Somali Bantu narrative texts sparked my interest in this particular phenomenon as the focus of my research endeavor. I sought to understand how and why inconsistencies regarding such major events in history could exist within the Somali Bantu population. This led me into an exploration of the effects of violence and trauma on the reproduction of identity among resettled

refugee groups. I wanted to understand the historical factors that led to their isolation from the larger Somali population, and consequently, the effacing of their legacy from the pages of Somalia's national memory. Why was there such an adamant silence on certain parts of Somali Bantu history among the Somali Bantu refugees in Kansas City? How have/do Somali Bantu deal with their traumatic memories and experiences in the present? What impact do inconsistencies between non-Somali Bantu and Somali Bantu histories have on Somali Bantu collective memory, identity, and structures of meaning-making within this community?

These questions led to more general questions such as: What constitutes suffering for different groups and how are groups made to suffer in particular contexts? What is the relationship between memory, narrative, and identity? How is identity reproduced in the wake of a world changed drastically by violence?

It was under these circumstances that I formulated this particular research project. This work is based on interviews and ethnographic observation carried out between October 2007 and September 2009 amongst Somali Bantu refugees in Kansas City. I will use personal narratives collected during my fieldwork within the Somali Bantu community to understand Somali Bantu experience, history, and identity, as expressed through their own words, memories, and stories. I argue that within the Somali Bantu refugee community in Kansas City, traumatic memory is lodged in the everyday lives of those who experienced the violence because of the way the deaths of relationships (Das 2007) have created an ongoing sense of absence that remains pervasive even after resettlement. Through the narratives presented in this paper, I hope to show how the traumatic memory of loss becomes absence, how absence is then incorporated into the everyday reality of the members of this community, and how knowledge of the absence, and memories of the trauma, become embodied in the present as "lived suffering," structuring

everyday realities and social relations (Das 1996, 2007; Farmer 1996; Kleinman & Kleinman 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1996). Through this lens, I will also show how collective mending strategies impact the individuals through whom the silence is facilitated thus illustrating the relationship between collective memory and individual bodies.

Perhaps the question at the heart of this thesis on the anthropology of violence and trauma then is not, how do groups heal after violence, but rather, as Janzen & Janzen (2000) suggest, how do individuals and groups deal with their traumatic past in the present? Experiences of violence have the power to shape consciousness and construct lives in the way they leave their marks on the physical and mental body. I argue, following Das (2007), that the experience of violence is not overcome, but instead, is submerged into the everyday lives of Somali Bantu refugees in the ways it alters and changes their day-to-day rhythms. After the violence has subsided, Somali Bantu are recast into the world with a new knowledge of the changes wrought by the violence. Their very presence in the United States, the physical and emotional wounds they carry in and on their bodies, and the deaths of familiar relationships, bear witness to the dramatic effects that violence can have.

Survivors of violence are engaged in the everyday work of repair (Das 2007), subtly drawing upon mythico-histories (Malkki 1995) that attempt to turn such violence on its head. These mythico-histories become a source of guidance from which the group draws direction and identity in the present. Yet not all parts of Somali Bantu history are incorporated into these narratives, particularly those traumatic memories that were deeply ingrained in their lives before and after the Somali Civil War. Through the revealing power of narrative, I hope to uncover these past sources of trauma that shape narrative strategies of remembering and forgetting,

acknowledging and silencing; thereby providing an understanding of the long-term implications of violence on Somali Bantu collective identity.

In this research I will present the historical experiences that have led to the development of Somali Bantu identity, and the ways by which violent experience continues to intrude open the everyday lives of those who experience it even long after the physical violence is removed. By understanding the underlying causes of their violent and traumatic experiences, I hope to show how the violence enacted on the body of the Somali Bantu collective has had long-lasting, residual effects that do not simply disappear through the process of resettlement, but must be acknowledged, confronted, and dissected. I also hope to show how these traumatic experiences of subjugation and inferiority become embodied in identity and self-perception in the post-resettlement phase.

The primary purposes of this project then are fourfold. First, I hope to provide an ethnographic sketch of the Somali Bantu that integrates their past experiences with their present situation as refugees living in the United States. Second, I aim to trouble anthropological conceptions of traumatic memory in an effort to create a more particularized approach to experiences of violence and subjugation amongst refugee groups. Third, I wish to contribute to the study of traumatic memory and identity by revealing the relationship between trauma, loss, absence, and embodiment. And fourth, to illustrate the importance of considering the local level in refugee, transnational migration, and identity studies in an effort to create a more holistic approach for characterizing the complexities of negotiating and renegotiating identity within the context of resettlement and relocation.

The text will be broken up into six chapters. In chapter one I will provide a historical description of the Somali Bantu population, situating them within a historical framework in order

to understand the context out of which the narratives arise, followed by a brief ethnography of contemporary Somali Bantu life, including the problems and challenges faced in this new stage of resettlement. Chapter two will focus on past and present literature on trauma, memory, and identity as it is relevant to this research project. Through this theoretical framework I will focus on memories as the embodiment of the past, transposed into the present through the vehicle of narration, and altered through narrative strategies that are filtered through existing social, political, and cultural structures. In the latter part of the chapter I will outline my methodology in approaching the analysis of the narratives which comprise the focus of this thesis. In chapter three I will present the narrative of Osman, a Somali Bantu elder. Chapter four will reveal the experiences of a younger Somali Bantu man named Mukhtar to illustrate the differential nature of memory recall across generations. Chapter five will examine the role of gender in Somali Bantu identity through the narrative of Habiba, a Somali Bantu woman in Kansas City. In each of these three narrative chapters I will provide culturally embedded exegeses of the narratives for a richer analysis of the texts. The final chapter will follow with a theme-based analysis that attempts to answer the questions brought up earlier in the introduction, as well as a summary of the conclusions of this research and suggestions for future work with this group.

By peeking into the homes, histories, and lives of contemporary Somali Bantu refugees in Kansas City, one can begin to understand the efforts of a long-since dominated group as they struggle to shake themselves free of the weight and pressures that their past experiences have placed on them, yet bogged down by the politics of resettlement in their new life abroad. By examining the narratives of suffering within this population, we can start to grasp the ways by which persecuted refugee groups in general, and Somali Bantu in particular, reproduce themselves after violent experience.

## *Chapter 1*

### **The History behind the Words: An Ethnographic Sketch of Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City**

Understanding the narratives and ultimately the identity of this particular group requires a comprehensive approach, beginning with their transformation from Bantu to Somali Bantu, then from Somali Bantu to Somali Bantu Persecuted Refugees. A thesis exploring Somali Bantu refugee identity must deal with the long process of construction that begins at this important historical moment, and traces its path through the violence of slavery, migration, legal emancipation, social, cultural, and political marginalization, persecution, refugee camp experience, and finally to the present stage of resettlement. Somali Bantu identity is essentially the story of how this group came to be; of how their historical experiences brought them to where they are, physically, mentally, and emotionally, as a collective community today.

#### *Somali Somali, Bantu, and Somali Bantu: Sorting out the Labels*

Throughout this thesis the terms “Somali Somali” and “Somali Bantu,” are used to represent the two major groups involved in the making of Somali Bantu history as the Somali Bantu refer to them in the narratives. The title “Somali Somali” represents the non-Bantu peoples who comprise the six major clan families (Isaaq, Darood, Dir, Hawiye, Digil, and Rahanweyn) in Somali society. These clans are further divided into “clans of 10,000-100,000 members each” (Besteman 1996:583). Somali Somali speak Af Somali, which has been “classified as part of the Afro-Asiatic branch of languages and the Eastern Cushitic sub-branch (Warsame 2001:343). Somali Somali are most likely the faces that come to mind when one thinks of Somalia and its people, as they appeared frequently on television and in the news to the

world at large during the Somali Civil War of the early 1990's. They are described (by both Somali Somali and Somali Bantu) as lighter-skinned, wider-eyed, narrower-nosed, softer-haired, Arab Somali's. These non-African physical features stem from the historic trade relationship between Somalia and the Arab world. Because of its position on the coast of Africa, Somalia has maintained strong commercial ties with the Arabian Peninsula and Persia. This paved the way for the entrance of Islam into Somalia as early as the seventh century and laid the foundation for the general Somali notion of Arab ancestry (Mukhtar 1995). Collectively, these "Arab-like" characteristics can be summed up using the self-ascribed Somali word, *Jilec*.

The term "Bantu" is a word that refers to both languages and people; the speakers of the Bantu languages are "Bantu" people. The Bantu language family is a part of the larger Niger-Congo super-family and is believed to have originated somewhere between the Nigeria/Cameroon border, from the ancestor language called proto-Bantu about 6000-5000 years ago (Ehret 2001). Today there are between five and six-hundred Bantu languages spoken by approximately 240 million African people (Middleton 2007). To explain such a vast spread of Bantu language and culture, scholars have attempted to study the "Bantu Expansion" as the mass movement of Bantu speaking peoples, traditionally cultivators and fishermen who possessed knowledge of "iron smelting for spears, arrows, hoes, scythes, and axes more than 2,500 years ago" (Gordon & Gordon 2007:31). It is apparent that there was a historical "Bantu Expansion" consisting of the spread of Bantu culture and language across a large part of the African continent using early agricultural technology to traverse lands and forests that had been previously unoccupied. However, scholars on the subject have yet to agree on the specific details of this movement, in which direction and order this movement progressed, and exactly what the underlying factors contributing to such a wide spread of people are. Nevertheless,

generally speaking, the Bantu practice of agriculture and cultivation spread during this Bantu Expansion from the Western parts of Africa to much of Eastern and Southern Africa including Tanzania and Mozambique (Ehret 2000).

Somali Bantu roots can thus be traced back to southeast African Bantu agricultural tribes that settled into Mozambique and Tanzania as a result of this Bantu Expansion. Among these tribes are the Makua and Yao from southern Tanzania and northern Mozambique, the Ngindo of southern Tanzania, and the Zaramo and Zigua of northeast Tanzania (Eno & Lehman, 2003). In contrast to Somali Somali Arab origins, Somali Bantu are known for their more “African” features. They are often described (also by both Somali Somali and Somali Bantu themselves) as the darker-skinned, smaller-eyed, broader-nosed, kinkier-haired, African Somali’s. Collectively, these characteristics can be summed up using the Somali word, *Jareer*—a derogatory label used by Somali Somali to identify Somali-Bantu “otherness” as it relates to their status as *addoon*, or “slave” (Bestemean 1999; Eno & Lehman 2003).

#### *Slavery and the Stigmatization of Identity*

Examining the causes that brought these Bantu people to Somalia reveals a history of slavery and violence that stigmatized and isolated Somali Bantu peoples for the remainder of their time in Somalia. As trade between Africa, Europe, North America, Arabia, and Southeast Asia increased, and the Industrial Revolution flourished in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slavery became an increasingly successful enterprise. Looking for a way to increase trade in Somalia, Somali Somalis sought to develop the approximately ten percent of fertile land located in southern Somalia. This land fertility in a predominantly dry and arid country is due to the Juba River, which runs from the highlands of Ethiopia through southern Somalia and empties into the Indian Ocean. The river serves as a continuous year-round water-source, which is a rare

commodity in the dry lands of Somalia. The Shabelle River is another water source which also originates in Ethiopia but ends as a series of swamps in southern Somalia (Eno & Lehman 2003).

Somali pastoralists saw the opportunity for the production of grain and cotton goods for export in the Indian Ocean Trade, but needed slaves to work the land, as agriculture is generally looked down upon by Somali Somalis (Cassanelli 1982). Also protecting Somali Somalis from enslavement was their adherence to the Islamic faith which prohibited the enslavement of fellow Muslims. As a result, the Sultanate of Zanzibar, the major Islamic slave trade center in Africa at the time, obtained slaves from generally non-Muslim areas (Cassanelli 1988).

Because of their extensive knowledge of agriculture, the demand for agricultural labor, and their relatively close proximity to Somalia, the primary targets of the Somali Somali demand for slavery were the Bantu peoples of Tanzania and Mozambique. Cassanelli (1989) has argued that the first round of slavery began in about 1800 with Zigua people from the Mrima Coast to various parts of Southern Somalia. While many East African peoples were enslaved and exported to Europe, Arabia, America, and parts of Asia, it is estimated that about 50,000 Bantu were forcefully taken as slaves to work on Somali Somali plantations in the Juba and Shabelle riverine areas from 1800 to 1890 (Cassanelli 1988; Besteman 1999; Eno & Lehman 2003).

By about 1830, the first Bantu fugitive slave settlements appeared in the Juba River Valley arranged in villages according to East African Bantu tribe affiliation. As first generation Somali-born-Bantu arrived, lacking knowledge of their Bantu origins, they settled according to the name of the tribe by which they had been enslaved (Besteman 1993). Around 1895, the first slaves were officially emancipated by the Italian colonial regime, and emancipation continued until the early twentieth century, when slavery as a whole was abolished (Eno & Lehman 2003). The densely forested Juba Valley became the eventual home to the Somali Bantu, and Somali

Somali pastoralists began to refer to them as *Gosha*, or, “people of the Forest” (Besteman 1993:566). Interestingly, “ex-slaves arriving in the middle valley around and after the turn of the century adopted Somali clan affiliations as an aspect of personal identity, to negotiate social relations, and to build kinship networks” (Besteman 1999:113). This historical event marked the beginning of a new identity of Bantu based on birthplace rather than on ancestral roots. The division between “Bantu” fugitive slave settlements and “Somali Bantu” settlements is important to note as it pinpoints the historical development of Somali Bantu identity.

Despite its formal end, the social impact of slavery on Somali Bantu identity was immense. Besteman (1999) argues that:

As slaves and populations from which slaves were taken converted to Islam, scholars argue that a transition from equating slave with infidel to equating slave with black occurred, with black being negatively valued for its association with slavery and its real or purported connection with paganism (116)

The history of slavery led to the development of associations between slavery and “blackness” which created a distinct separation between Somali Somali and Somali Bantu, prohibiting their full incorporation into the Somali clan system. Subsequently, participation in the larger Somali society was nearly impossible. Although there is evidence to show the formal adoption of Somali Bantu by Somali Somali clans, a process known as *sheegad* (and at a less formal level, *ku tirsan*, meaning “leaning on”) these affiliations were very superficial and marked a much lower status on the clan hierarchy. These distinctions stem from the idea of “lineal purity” (Besteman 1993:567), which posits that an adopted clan member is not a pure and true member of the clan.

Limited inclusion into the Somali clan system was sometimes more degrading for Somali Bantu than complete exclusion, as they were forced to pay *diya*, or, payments for offenses committed by other members of the clan. Meanwhile Somali Somali clan members did not have

to pay *diya* for an offense committed by a *Gosha*. Furthermore, because of their limited incorporation, clan protection was not granted to Somali Bantu so they were left virtually vulnerable to attacks from other clans, nearby Somali Somali pastoralists, and militias during the Somali Civil War (Besteman 1993).

A major event in Somali history came with the independence of Somalia as a nation-state in 1969 when the socialist regime of Siyad Barre “led a successful coup that overthrew the postcolonial parliamentary democracy and established the Siyad-led Supreme Revolutionary Council as the ruling body” (Besteman 1996: 580). While initially, the Soviet Union had backed Barre in developing an independent governing body, they sided with the Ethiopians during Barre’s 1977 campaign to take back the Ogaadeen land given to Ethiopia during the colonial period. This split with the Soviets, which coincided with Cold War politics, increased American interests in Somalia, as its location could provide the United States with a military base in close proximity to the Middle East. In exchange, the US provided the Barre regime with money for military technology and economic aid (Rawson 1994).

During his time in power, Barre officially banned tribal affiliation, and any other form of identity that could lead to social inequality in an effort to create an egalitarian society (Lewis 1988). Besteman (1993) refers to these reforms instituted by the Supreme Revolutionary Council as “laws of nationhood” (576). Barre proclaimed to the nation that “the master-slave distinction had been successfully transformed by assimilation and the Somali democratic ethos” (Ibid:113). As a result, Somali Bantu historical narratives collected during this time reflected a peaceful picture of Somali Bantu life as free and unfettered. No mention of slavery, subjugation, or of the derogatory labels which they had been given by the Somali majority was publicly made. The banning of tribal affiliation seemed to have created the opportunity for Somali Bantu to

begin renegotiating those parts of their past that they deemed responsible for their unequal status (Besteman 1993). Despite these idyllic statements, superficial laws, and Somali Bantu narratives, however, the situation of the people of the Juba River Valley remained distinctly stigmatized. Somali Bantu had become a part of the nation only inasmuch as they were an aberration from it.

*Civil War and the Somali Bantu Exodus*

During the civil war that broke out after the overthrow of the government in the early 1990's, the Somali Bantu suffered greatly. The violence against Somali Bantu (and other Southern Somali minority groups) is described as follows:

Residents in the Juba Valley received particularly harsh treatment by militias because of several factors: 1) in the early years of the war, militias of competing warlords battled back and forth across the Valley for territorial control, each side attacking civilians; 2) identified as racial minorities of slave ancestry within Somalia, most Juba Valley residents held weak ties to Somali clans that were easily broken in the midst of war, which meant that armed clans did not come to their defense; 3) as sedentary peasant farmers tied to the land for their subsistence, Valley residents were easily targeted by mobile militias; 4) as food producers, Valley residents were killed so other Somalis could claim their land and their harvests; 5) as an unarmed population, Valley residents were defenseless (Besteman, 2007)

So the Somali Bantu history of agriculture, slavery, and subordination placed them in the category of second-class citizens, and their location on agricultural land during the war, along with the rejection from the Somali clan alliance system made them easy targets for Somali Somali militias.

By about 1991 many Somali people began to flee to Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. Declich (2000) states that "in March 1994, they (the camps) hosted 128,144 Somali refugees divided in three settlements by the names of Ifo, Hagardeera and Dagahaley. Out of these, 1,252 in Ifo, 3,322 in Hagardeera and 5,569 in Dagahaley were defined in UNHCR's reports as 'Bantu

Somali' refugees, totaling 10,143 members of such minority groups in the camps" (Declich 2000:27). Another 3,000 Somali Bantu made their way to Tanzania and settled in Mkuiu refugee camp in the Tanga region (Declich 2000).

Somali Bantu travelled to the camps mainly on foot, hiding in the bushes by day, travelling by night. They experienced much violence on their flight from Somalia and this continued on in the camps as Somali Bantu were attacked and women were repeatedly raped while collecting firewood from the Bush (UNHCR 2000). In an effort to alleviate the situation, resettlement organizations began looking for cultural similarities between the Somali Bantu and other Bantu peoples living in Tanzania and Mozambique. Cultural specialists were brought in, along with government representatives, to assess whether or not the Somali Bantu were culturally similar enough to other Tanzanian and Mozambican peoples. Though the answer was yes, these countries ultimately declined to extend asylum to Somali Bantu refugees, citing the economic inability to support such large numbers of refugees, and internal strife as the causes (Barnett 2003).

Meanwhile, as Somali Bantu became recognized as a minority group by UNHCR, they were regarded as "persecuted" by resettlement workers and therefore their resettlement process was accelerated. Although it is undocumented, there was much debate as to who was or was not of Bantu origin and thus who should receive this special refugee title. Many Somali Somali people, members of the dominant clans in Somalia, claimed Somali Bantu identity, or bought out resettlement packages from Somali Bantu families. During an interview with a Somali Somali man in Kansas City (2007), I was informed of this situation:

When the war started I remember at that time nobody wanted to be Somali Bantu. They were treated badly by everybody at that time. When we were resettling that's when people started to say they are Bantu, because Bantu got a special deal

to go to different countries and leave the camps. Then everyone was saying, ‘yes we are Bantu, we are Bantu’ but they are not Bantu they are Hawiyye or Darod. So many Bantu people lost their place for resettlement when Somali would pay them for their resettlement deals. And you know they would accept these deals because they never had money before and suddenly they have five thousand dollars or something. So they didn’t know what to do, they made a choice to sell their resettlement. But you know it was not fair for UNHCR to only think about the Bantu because they are not the only ones who were in danger, it was so many people that were in danger so it’s not fair to only give resettlement to one group. What about all the other groups who need help? I remember it was really terrible at that time.

Because of this hostile environment in Dadaab, the Somali Bantu were relocated to Kakuma refugee camp in western Kenya by UNHCR. Reversing the silence recognized earlier by Catherine Besteman (1993), the Somali Bantu began to speak of their history of persecution, isolation, and experiences of violence. The realization of this history of persecution amongst resettlement workers led to the 1999 US decision to grant 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees “persecuted refugee” status and, consequently, resettlement to the United States. A special issue of the UNHCR magazine *Refugees*, focusing on the Somali Bantu, stated that despite the many refugees still living in the camps, “a lucky few, however, will soon be starting an unbelievable journey, swapping a lifetime of poverty and semi-slavery and years of exile in a refugee camp for a new and totally different life in the United States” (UNHCR 2002:2).

### *The Contemporary Situation*

Of these 12,000 “lucky few,” approximately forty-five Somali Bantu refugee families were resettled to the Kansas City, Kansas area (Somali Bantu Foundation, KCK, 2009) beginning in 2002. The “unbelievable journey” upon which these refugees embarked has landed them in Wyandotte County, KS located in the tiny townhouses of the “projects.” Almost all homes I visited were one to two bedrooms, with a small living room and kitchen. Some homes had a television set with a VCR or DVD player, and even less had computers or video gaming

systems. The homes are scantily furnished with whatever the families can manage to acquire from neighbors, friends, or through donations. Often during my visits, the families would ask me to bring “whatever you can, anything, we can have it if you don’t want it. We need a carpet, we need clothes, we need things for the kitchen. Please anything is good.”

The walls are covered in tapestries and sheets held up by pins and tacks, with traditional Somali Bantu streamers and ornaments hanging from the ceilings throughout the house. The smell of incense and Somali cooking fills the air and inundates anyone entering the home. The chatter of Maay Maay, the language of the Somali Bantu, surrounds those inside the small space, filling their ears with the sounds of Somalia. These sights, smells, and sounds—the items and sensations converting the atmosphere of a cold house into a warm home—are not items reflecting their new “American” culture, but rather, are reminiscent of life back home and in the camps. The interior of these worn-down, often too small townhomes, are a reflection of the intertwining past and present; a present filled with memories of a distant place brought to life through the act of carrying on with everyday life in old and familiar ways.

The physical housing is very problematic. The townhomes are often run-down, roach-infested, and in poor condition. The neighborhoods in which refugees are resettled are usually low-income and experience higher levels of crime in general. Mothers complained of a concern for their children's safety and usually did not allow children to play outdoors. This is very different from Somalia, or even the refugee camps, where Somali Bantu say they experienced more security and comfort and children were outdoors all the time. During my time with the Somali Bantu, three families were burglarized and the few belongings which they had managed to acquire were stolen from them. This situation only heightens their concerns, which in-turn creates a more isolated environment where linguistic and cultural barriers are exacerbated. But

the Somali Bantu are not completely isolated from the material culture of American society and the lure of the American dream. Rather, this awareness creates an “everydayness” that revolves around the general sentiment of “see but don’t touch, touch but don’t feel,” as they can see a world of opportunity, yet are separated from it by their designation as “refugees.”

The primary language spoken among Somali Bantu is Maay Maay, the traditional combination of Bantu and Somali words together. The adults commonly speak little to no English, with the men being more fluent in general than the women. The children speak English and Maay Maay fluently, and constantly engage in code-switching during their conversations with each other, as well as with their parents. The children often take on the role of translators for their parents, explaining and translating official paperwork such as letters received from school, insurance companies, utility bills, and resettlement organizations. These language barriers make life all the more difficult. Many Somali Bantu have only been in the US for a few years and their relatively isolated lives create difficulty in completing simple everyday tasks which leads to feelings of frustration voiced during interviews. Many Somali Bantu spoke of a feeling of disorientation despite having lived in the States for two or three years. Language troubles, combined with the general culture shock experienced, makes the process of transition to a new life a difficult one. While resettlement organizations offer cultural assimilation and language classes, many Somali Bantu lack the transportation to attend, and when they do, complain that they are not useful in real-life application.

For men, the average Somali Bantu occupation is, as it was in Somalia and in the refugee camps, in manual labor. These jobs range from loading cargo in planes at the Kansas City Airport and packaging meat in meat-packing plants, to loading and unloading inventory in large stores and shopping centers. The average hourly pay rate is between seven and eight dollars an

hour, while the average family size is six to seven members (Somali Bantu Foundation, KCK, 2009). Many people complained of pay cuts and few working hours, which negatively impact the financial well-being of the family. Money troubles plague many refugee families who experience rapidly growing families and low paying jobs. Women are predominantly tied to their traditional role as “housewives,” responsible for taking care of the home, cooking, cleaning, looking after the children, and tending to other daily chores. While many women express a desire to work, they are physically unable to do so, as they must tend to the children, and are discouraged by their limited knowledge of the English language.

Health problems are rampant, commonly associated with the stress of the living situation or disappointment with the promises of the great “American Dream.” Many of the people I interviewed complained of some sort of physical ailment, including but not limited to headaches, nightmares, miscarriages, excessive bleeding, chronic cough, lice, general body aches, and stomach pains. Medical coverage is inadequate and after some time, whatever medical aid granted to them based on their refugee status, expires. These symptoms were discussed more so by the women than by the men, and visits to the doctor were a point of much frustration. When the women could make appointments, either for the children or for themselves, they were often canceled due to a lack of transportation or babysitter, as their schedules are intimately connected to that of the working males. A few women resorted to healing by the local *Fundi*, a Somali Bantu traditional healer who uses a combination of Bantu and Islamic healing chants, incense, and healing oils to expel the evil causing the ailment.

The healing sessions take place at the home of the *Fundi*. The scope of Somali Bantu notions of sickness and ailments vary, ranging from excessive post-natal bleeding and coughing to maintaining the chastity of an unmarried girl or treating disobedience resulting from the

influence of too much television or American culture. The healer may also treat a person who is believed to have subconscious knowledge of something important. In this case, the *Fundi* forces the words or memories out from the subconscious into the open air. During the sessions, the *Fundi* sits cross-legged facing the afflicted. Arranged neatly in front of him are the tools used during the healing process. These are scented oils, incense, an incense dispenser, and a piece of black and white traditional colored cloth.

The *Fundi* begins by chanting words from traditional *Quranic* text mixed with words spoken in Maay Maay. As the healing begins, the *Fundi* places the cloth over the head of the afflicted person, covering their upper body completely. While chanting for the evil *Jinn*, an Islamic notion of spirit presence that can be good or evil, to “leave now and let this person be at peace,” he begins to place the smoking incense underneath the cloth, causing the person to cough and sneeze. This, as it was explained to me, is the physical expulsion of the *Jinn* causing the sickness. The *Fundi* does not engage in a dialogue with the *Jinn*, but rather, commands it to leave the afflicted through strong language, a stern tone, dramatic facial expressions, and various hand gestures. At times the *Fundi* may have physical contact with the afflicted, pounding on the back or patting the chest, rubbing the knees, and/or touching the hands. This type of healing is referred to as *Wadaada*.

These sessions, although less costly, require that the afflicted provide the healer with the necessary healing tools such as the incense and the oils. Many women who have no material means to see a Western doctor or purchase the tools for the healer were therefore unable to seek healing to treat their feelings of sickness or suffering.

Children attend nearby schools, with the average age of children being within the elementary years (Somali Bantu Foundation, KCK, 2009). Many children attend special ESL

programs organized by the public schools, but are involved in general education as well. In a conversation with one ESL teacher at a local elementary school, I was informed that the quality of education for Somali Bantu refugee children is relatively poor, as there are many students and not enough teachers. Girls often wear the Islamic *hijab* to school, and complained of being made fun of by their peers. One girl, a fifth grader, told me that students “call me gorilla because I’m black and I come from Africa. They say that’s where gorillas are from. They always ask me why I’m wearing that on my head and I tell ‘em it’s none of your beeswax!”

As Somali Bantu make their transition from the camps to the US, they find themselves situated in changing local moral worlds. This notion of local moral worlds, “within which suffering usually finds legitimate meaning for most people” (Janzen 2002:43), in this new phase of Somali Bantu life is centered on the ethos of an emerging Islamic core. As Muslims, albeit an identity very much contested by Somali Somali in Somalia (see Besteman 1999), Somali Bantu in the US are thrown into a world that they find morally offensive. In a meeting with the leaders of the Somali Bantu community, one man shared his initial shock upon arriving to the states:

We were scared to go outside. Everywhere around us we saw naked women, naked people, and we felt ashamed. Ashamed for ourselves to look at them and ashamed of them for showing their private bodies to the whole world. Many of us locked ourselves in our homes. We didn’t even want to see television or look out of the window. Even today, when I walk outside I look down, I don’t look at people, because I am worried of what I’ll see (Somali Bantu Foundation leader, 2009).

This reaction was very common, and reveals the fear that American-born Somali Bantu children will grow up replacing the traditional Somali Bantu value system with notions of American individualism and “freedom of expression.”

In an effort to curb this ominous fear, the Somali Bantu Foundation was formed in 2006, instituting a strong adherence to the Islamic faith that would guide their choices, actions, beliefs,

and morality in the United States. It started with a few Somali Bantu men, and perhaps from the example of the Somali Foundation which preceded it—and as a declaration of separation from it—as a way to aid Somali Bantu refugee families making the difficult transition to life in the States. These men recognized the need for a community focal point which could keep up ties amongst Somali Bantu and traditional Somali Bantu culture in the United States.

Since its inception, this organization has become the glue that holds the community together. From their makeshift office located in a small townhouse in North Kansas City, they host a weekend school. Different rooms in the townhouse are used as classrooms, with every inch of the home filled with the hustle and bustle of students reciting Arabic, Quran, and Islamic Studies. Boys and girls are taught separately except for the very young students at the beginner levels, and the teachers are all volunteering members from the community. The Foundation provides members of the community with basic help including aiding in the acquisition of state ID's and driver's licenses, grocery shopping, providing a bus system for the transportation of students to and from the weekend school, and offer translation services for both written and verbal communication, among many other things.

The Foundation functions as the collective conscience of Somali Bantu people in a strange and foreign world. They emphasize the teaching of traditional Somali Bantu culture, yet stress Islamic education and identity above all else. All Somali Bantu included in this research identify themselves first and foremost as Muslims. They draw upon a distinct identity, differentiating themselves from Somali Somali and African Americans in post-resettlement life. While the former distinction is based on past experiences, the latter is a new category of “other” introduced after their arrival to the States. I often heard this notion of a particular Somali Bantu

identity, characterized by distinct cultural practices and traditions, throughout my conversations with the people of the community:

We don't like to be called African American because we are not. We are afraid our children will think they are African American when they grow up then they will behave badly. This is why when we teach them, we teach them about being a Muslim, and about being Somali Bantu. We teach them about what is right and good. Do you like to be called something you are not? African Americans are different from us in many ways. They are loud and they are not Muslim. Sometimes they steal and they do drugs. This is not something we can ever do. These things are wrong for us (Somali Bantu man and leader of the Somali Bantu Foundation 2009).

The growing fear of the African Americanization of their children is generally the concern of the men in the community. However, the understanding of black as something negative surfaced during my time with the Somali Bantu women in their homes. On one occasion I brought a framed picture of myself with a woman whom I will call Farah, as a gift. Upon seeing the picture she immediately covered the image of herself with her hand, saying "look at me so black. You white, so pretty. Black no good." On another occasion, I was presented with a small white doll. Farah's family excitedly told me that the young daughter had named the doll after me. Curious, I inquired as to why. They responded "because she's white like you." This was especially surprising since I am not white, but tan skinned.

Furthermore, although it is common to see Somali Bantu women wearing the *hijab* in public, I wondered why even in the privacy of their homes, all of the women and female children donned the Islamic *Hijab*. I slowly began to realize through bits and pieces of our conversations that they were ashamed of their "kinky" hair; of their status as *jareer*. The women told me that they disliked the texture of their hair and preferred to keep it hidden all the time. On a visit to the home of Farah after the birth of her daughter, she told me, "my daughter she's telling me my baby black and she no from our family! Do you think my baby she's too black?" She then

insisted that the “blackness” was from her husband’s side of the family, as her own father was “very, very light, very white.” The reason this attitude is so alarming is due to the fact that many Somali Bantu are in fact dark-skinned. Their desire to separate themselves from African Americans was prevalent not only in culture and practice, but in physical appearance as well.

Creating a distinct identity in the United States is primarily accomplished by drawing upon Islam. The community therefore participates in many practices that allow for the expression of a cultural and religious identity infused into one. They engage in fasting during the Islamic month of *Ramadan*, as well as in the celebration of the Islamic holiday, *Eid*. All the women I met cover not only their heads, but their entire bodies, according to Islamic dictates. During the month of *Ramadan*, many large dinners are communally cooked and shared at the Somali Bantu Foundation office. Recitation of the *Quran* is common and traditional songs combining Islamic and Somali Bantu concepts are sung. For *Eid*, new clothes are purchased or acquired for the children and the adults, and the exchange of money and gifts, as well as neighborly visits, take place. Family members from nearby states may also travel or visit to share in this special time.

Community members partake in the celebration of the birth of a new child, and welcome the baby into the world by cooking for the woman who gave birth for the first seven days after the event. This is done with the knowledge that the act is reciprocal; this woman has or will support other women who will undergo the same experience. Community members pool their resources and provide monetary gifts on this important occasion, to help provide for the necessities and expenses accompanying the birth of a new child. The child is viewed as a legitimate member and future proponent of the larger Somali Bantu community. Raising

children is seen as a communal responsibility, with the initiation into an Islamic and Somali Bantu cultural life being the primary goal of the group.

Death is also communally shared and includes Somali Bantu people in the United States as well as those still living in the refugee camps or Somalia. The loss of a relative is seen as the loss of a community member as well, and friends and families gather to mourn the loss together. Mourning usually takes place at the home of the family of the deceased, regardless of whether the death took place in the States or abroad, and lasts for an average of three days. With incense blazing and *Quranic* verses playing in the background, stories about the deceased person and pleasant memories are recounted. Explicit details about the nature of the death and the feelings experienced by those left behind are also shared with the group, as grieving becomes a social event.

Marriages are conducted along traditional Islamic guidelines. Courting takes place under the supervision of the family, usually within the home of the woman's family. News of an engagement generates social excitement and people busy themselves with providing for the food, decorations, music, and festivities. The bride wears a customary Somali Bantu brightly colored gown, and women and men dress in their traditional Somali Bantu dresses and veils. The wedding consists of dancing and singing, eating and laughing. Weddings are often videotaped and sent to those family and community members who cannot be present at the actual event. In this way, weddings are directly and vicariously attended. The videos were present in the backdrop of many of my visits to the homes, even if they were not being closely followed and watched. Offers to show wedding films is common as community members gather together for tea or general friendly visits.

Along with the emphasis on a more “Muslim” identity, however, comes the marginalization of traditional cultural practices that contradict Islamic teachings. I found this especially prevalent in the treatment and discussion of *Wadaada* healing rituals. While I had attended several healing sessions in the community, there was a denial of the continued reliance on *Wadaada* as a legitimate form of healing among the leaders of the Somali Bantu Foundation, and also among some of the members of the Somali Bantu community in general. When I asked Mohamed, a Somali Bantu refugee who was educated about Islam from a young age, about why he refused to participate in *Wadaada* healing, for example, he explained:

**Mohamed:** Some people who read the *Quran* they know and understand everything. Some people who don't, they don't know. Some people who believe in *Quran* can't believe in *Wadada* because it is *Shirk*. If you ask the demon to make you better then it is *Shirk*, only Allah can make you fine.

**Me:** Do a lot of Somali Bantu use demons to heal?

**Mohamed:** No just the people in the villages, not the cities.

This statement reveals an emerging social hierarchy that places those individuals who are knowledgeable about Islam above those uneducated “people in the villages”. This development is a direct effect of the politics of resettlement and the growing need to root themselves in a deterritorialized identity in the United States, an issue which I will discuss further in chapter six. Mohamed’s insistence on *Wadaada* as *Shirk*, an Arabic word referring to the Islamic concept of the single unforgivable sin—the association of partners with *Allah*—is a sentiment echoed by many members of the community, especially within its leadership. In an interview with Yusuf, president of the Somali Bantu Foundation, he explained his views as follows:

All Somali Bantu are Muslim, except a few. Muslims, whenever a person gets sick, we call a *Sheikh* and he reads *ayas* (*Quranic* verses) to that person to feel better. First treatment is *Quran*. The second option is consulting with members of the family. We ask what would be the best treatment for the person. A long time

ago we had traditional medicine that we use before we go to the doctor. Anything sticking out of the body for example, we use herbs. *Deensi* is a drink that you make when people get sick. Somali stores make this drink and sell it here in the US. Roots from trees are good treatments for this sickness. We don't have this kind of tree here though so we can't use it now. *Wadaada* is the term to describe this type of healing and sickness but now we don't use it anymore. It was believed that someone can be a healer when someone is stressed or there is a demon or start talking to yourself. Sometimes you get a fever but it's not really a fever you go to the doctor and he says you're fine. Sometimes this person doesn't even know he has *Wadaada* but the elders will analyze the situation, ask the person what is the problem, and determine if he is meant to be a *Fundi*. It can be a man or a woman. Now we don't really do this because we don't have anyone to do it

It was not until after I had mentioned my visits to the *Fundi*, and acknowledged that I had witnessed traditional *Wadaada* healing firsthand in the Somali Bantu Kansas City community that Yusuf began to clarify:

Well yes some people who don't understand, they still do it. But these are not many. Today there's a difference between the healing of the elders and younger. The younger are just not interested. They are more interested in using *Quran*. Using the *Quran* as healing started in the camps. Some people like agriculturalists didn't know about *Quran* until they came to the camps and learned it from the others.

Thus slowly the traditional Somali Bantu ways are being replaced by a combination of Western and Islamic practices and beliefs. Those who continue to partake in “un-Islamic” rituals, such as *Wadaada* healing for example, are considered uneducated people from the “villages,” or in other words, “people who don't understand.” Furthermore, an Islamic identity guides Somali Bantu on how to deal with the trauma of their past experiences. Take the following quote of Mustaf, a Somali Bantu Foundation member:

We're Muslims and we know that everything good or bad comes from Allah. We don't get sad because then Allah will feel sad and we don't want that. Sometimes in the camps we felt sad but we have to calm down and remember Allah. They always told us don't get sad. And they remind us of the words of Mohammed: “don't get sad, don't get sad, don't get sad.”

Religion becomes a comforting presence that directs Somali Bantu in dealing with the trauma of violence and the difficulties of resettlement. It unites the Somali Bantu into a community, keeping each individual/family from experiencing a sense of isolation and alienation. It also allows for the concretion of a value system in the face of shifting local moral worlds. Islam aids in the construction of mythico-histories that guide its adherents towards a particular morality and directs their behavior so as to maintain a sense of cultural identity.

Yet Islam and Western biomedicine are not always equipped to deal with many of the old or new problems faced by this community. For example, after suffering a miscarriage, Farah informed me that she experienced nightmares for two months. She finally decided to visit a doctor at the hospital. However, the doctor was unable to diagnose the problem. Farah explained the situation as follows:

When my baby dying I'm sad. I'm very sad. I'm pregnant and I'm telling my husband I'm feeling something no good. One day I'm waking up I'm bleeding. I'm scared I'm calling my husband he's working, I'm telling him I need go hospital. He's coming home he's taking me. Doctor KU Medical he's telling me my baby he's dying. He's dying inside me. But you know, *Allah* wants him. I want him too but Allah wants him. I'm crying too much. I'm still having bleeding now. I'm having bad dreams maybe one maybe two months. I'm going KU again for seeing doctor. I'm telling doctor I'm sick, I'm seeing bad dreams. My doctor he's telling me you not sick! I'm telling him, no I'm sick. Every night I'm seeing things. He's telling me rest and he's giving me medicine for infection. He doesn't know because he's not knowing about dreams. I'm going *Fundi* he's helping me. I'm no having bad dreams now."

Farah's story is not uncommon. As this group transitions from one context to the next, they are faced with new challenges that require their constant resituating both culturally and morally, thus continuously redefining themselves as a collective community. The term "Somali Bantu" therefore represents the ongoing construction of a particular group with a particular history. "Somali Bantu" is a double identity that bears the mark of dual social status. It illuminates their

role as a marginalized people on the fringes of Somali society, revealing a second-class status, separated out and made distinct from the usual “Somali” majority, while at the same time, distancing them from their Bantu origins and pre-Somalia past.

Because many Somali Bantu have never been back to their Bantu places of origin, and have also never been fully accepted into Somali society, the meaning of the label “Somali Bantu” must be derived from the combination of the two words together. This grouping of the two separate words “Somali” and “Bantu” into one title indicates the very real collision of their past with their present; never quite able to connect with or understand their Southeast African roots, yet never fully able to gain acceptance as legitimate and rightful members within Somali society. Consequently, “Somali Bantu” has become a title with its own particular historical identity, one that has very much differentiated itself from the original meaning of either of the two words as they exist separately. In the present stage of resettlement, a new label, “refugee,” has been tacked on to this identity, and this group still struggles to accommodate for it, and to incorporate it into their everyday lives.

Although this basic ethnography of the Somali Bantu is by no means the complete and total characterization of this group, it is not meant to be. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to provide a sketch of the historical experiences that have paved the way for the construction of Somali Bantu identity, and outline the ways by which this identity is socially reproduced in this new resettlement phase. While Somali Bantu have made many leaps and bounds in adjusting to life in America, they are faced with new or recurring struggles every day. Coming from a long history of violence and persecution, the physical relocation of this group to a foreign land does not constitute overcoming trauma. Instead, along with the struggle to survive in a new and strange context is the burden of violent and traumatic memory that plagues many

members of this group. In order to peel away the various multifaceted layers of Somali Bantu identity, one must understand the historical context, institutional forms, social relations, and discursive spaces in which these experiences and memories are both created and shaped. For this we must allow the Somali Bantu to speak for themselves, and from their utterances, attempt to piece together a more holistic understanding of the Somali Bantu as a distinct cultural group with a particular history and identity.

## *Chapter 2*

### **Violence, Trauma, and Memory: A Theoretical Framework**

Self-consciousness emerges under the sign of that which has already happened, as the fulfillment of something always already begun. We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left.

--Pierre Nora

#### *History and Memory*

This quote by Pierre Nora (1989) suggests that our preoccupation with memory is a result of the fact that we exist with the terrifying reality that everything we know today can potentially, and will eventually, become lost forever. As we derive our self-consciousness from the past, yet grow increasingly estranged from our pasts in the modern world, our real connection to memory, rooted in *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory), becomes lost. We must therefore consciously construct *lieux de mémoire*, deriving our meaning from these socially constructed spaces. These “sites of memory” attempt to replace the actual environments of memory (what was once the “present”) because they no longer exist. Nora argues that the construction of sites of memory is necessary due to the “increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good” (Nora 1989:6). Therefore sites of memory are incredibly important in providing us with a sense that historical continuity persists even after the present has passed.

In his work on the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra criticizes modern theorizations of trauma for “acting out” rather than “working through” traumatic events. This tendency results from an over-identification on the part of the historian/theorist with the victim, inevitably valorizing loss, thereby normalizing suffering, sadness, and victimization. Because of the fact

that “trauma is effected belatedly through repetition, for the numbingly traumatic event does not register at the time of its occurrence but only after a temporal gap or period of latency, at which time it is immediately repressed, split off, disavowed” (LaCapra 1994:174), it becomes detached from its particular historical context and it is therefore easy for the trauma to be stripped of its initial specificity. This then leads theorists to the mistake of presenting the specific experiences as general and relatable, or as disassociated from their historical particularity. LaCapra’s discussion on the merging of absence (structural trauma), and loss (historical trauma), sheds light on this tendency of the discourse of history to essentialize traumatic events and their victims, removing the specificity of their experience (LaCapra 1999). The conflation of structural and historical trauma becomes a major obstacle in the ability to work through the difficult experiences.

In order to reformulate approaches to trauma and memory, he poses the question: How can one give voice to the traumatic wounds that seem to defy representation? He points to an important issue regarding whether attempts to work through problems are really able to deal with the unspeakable trauma that one has experienced. He suggests that the historian take on the role of the “middle voice,” a position of both proximity and distance, whereby the researcher recognizes his role as a second-hand witness, thus maintaining a distinction between the victim and listener. In so doing, LaCapra vests the historian with a very specific task: to use a critical approach to history and memory that places trauma at the center of its theory, recognizing its fundamental role in the construction of those who experience it. For him, “historiography involves work on memory that inquires into its operations, attempts to retrieve what it has repressed or ignored, and supplements it in ways that may provide a measure of critical distance on experience and a basis of responsible action” (LaCapra 1994:175). The role of the historian

then is to recognize not only the experiences of trauma through first-hand witnesses, but also to locate the sources and causes of the trauma in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experience in its totality.

As Nora and La Capra suggest, the struggle between history and memory is a dangerous one that has the power to make certain memories disappear, sometimes indefinitely. The acquisition of particular memories, and the omission of others, is common in the writing and recording of history. Yet history does not “write itself” as the saying goes. Instead, it is subjectively constructed by those within society who have the power to control its making. The problem, therefore, lies in the fact that as history becomes concretized, it is widely accepted as a true and verifiable account; it becomes the authority on particular historical experiences, thereby invalidating the memories that do not belong to the dominant social group. When the dominant group succeeds in creating a history, minorities often grow silent about their own memories. Consequently, these memories eventually begin to fade, as there is no effort to preserve it in the collective memory. When the memories are silenced over generations, it becomes an incredibly difficult task to attempt their recollection. As anthropologists interested in trauma and memory, we must hasten to collect these stories of marginalized communities and groups that make up their collective memories, lest they fall prey to the overpowering nature of history.

### *Collective Memory and Identity*

In applying a holistic and critical approach to studies of memory and trauma, and in accurately describing the identity of groups who have experienced traumatic events, one must recognize that collective identities are constituted within discourses of memory (Buckley-Zistel 2006), and that memory is ultimately reflective of the politics of power in a particular context. What is remembered and, more importantly, what is forgotten (the culmination of which

constitutes the totality of memory) is tied to what is allowed to be remembered and what is beneficial to be forgotten by those who hold the power to control memory in a given society. This realization suggests an interconnection between the memories that individual narratives reveal, and the collective environments out of which they arise.

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) wrote extensively on collective memory. He argued that collective memory is a socially constructed notion. He illustrated the relationship between individual memory and the larger social group by arguing that “it is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of recollection” (Halbwachs 1992:38). In his introduction to Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory*, Coser suggests that “it is, of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on the context to remember or recreate the past” (Ibid:22).

So if individual memory cannot function without the collective of which it is an inseparable part, then it is the purpose of Memory Studies to examine how social minds work together to create a particular memory narrative that serves a specific end. After all, he argued, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 1992:38).

Halbwachs differentiated between historical and autobiographical memory. History reaches the social actor through written texts and is remembered through commemorations, festivals, and national holidays. Autobiographical memory is a recollection of the events we have personally experienced and is in constant danger of “fading” if it is not periodically reinforced with others who shared the same memory. This is due to the fact that it is “always

rooted in other people. Only group members remember, and this memory nears extinction if they do not get together over long periods of time” (Coser 1992:24). While special events (whether festivals, commemorations, or war) keep communities and groups together on a conscious level, what keeps them united in the absence of such events is the collective memory. Therefore collective identity is based on group actions of remembering and forgetting, which vary across communities due to the highly selective nature of collective memory. What is remembered and what is forgotten is filtered through institutions of social and political power to serve particular group interests. Recognizing these institutions and their effects on memory is essential to understanding collective identity as a whole.

As to the question of historical continuity, Halbwachs responds that the past is a social construction shaped by the present. This innovative idea, to seek out the past from the present, has been extremely helpful in reformulating social scientific approaches to the past, and has endured into modern scholarship on memory today.

Recent scholarship on collective memory has coined the term *mnemohistory*, which “unlike history proper ... is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered” (Assmann 1997:9). What concerns collective groups in identity construction is the culmination of what is selectively remembered and strategically left out. This approach is especially helpful in calling for “a theory of cultural transmission that helps us understand history not simply as one thing after another nor as a series of objective stages, but as an active process of meaning-making through time” (Olick 2007:18).

Assman & Czaplicka (1995) use the concept of cultural memory as the means by which humans are able to maintain their nature consistently over generations. For them, cultural memory is different from “communicative,” or “everyday” memory, which is formless, random,

and disorganized. They define cultural memory as “ a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (Assman & Czaplicka 1995:126). Although they dismiss scientific or biological explanations for cultural survival, they relate communicative memory to cultural memory in important ways.

They argue that communicative memories, transmitted through individuals, are socially mediated and relate to a particular group that draws its uniqueness and unity from a common past. However, the problem with attributing cultural survival to communicative memory is its limited temporal horizon which does not extend far enough into the past to fix itself to a point “which would bind it to the ever expanding past in the passing of time” (127). They argue that this type of fixity can only be found in cultural memory that lies outside of the informal every day, or “objectivized culture.” They counter Halbwachs’ argument that objectivized culture transforms “memoire” into “histoire” by revealing the connection between objectivized culture and the generation of formative and normative impulses. These impulses are primarily responsible for the “concretion of identity” in their ability to reproduce collective consciousness and unity. Drawing on Aby Warburg’s concept of cultural objectivation, Assman & Czaplicka argue that “in cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible across millennia” (1995:129). Thus this concept is pivotal in the stabilization of cultural memory over time.

### *Memory, Trauma, and Embodiment*

Critical medical anthropology today has come to emphasize phenomenology, a theoretical perspective which emphasizes the subjectivity of human experience, and “brings to the foreground the place of emotions and everyday life, and puts into the background abstract

explanations by officials and formal creeds” (Janzen 2002:42). Within this phenomenological perspective, embodiment is often highly regarded as a legitimate means to understanding experiences of illness and suffering. Embodiment draws on the idea of the body as representation; “as being-in-the-world” (Janzen 2002:43). Particularly pressing in this vein of anthropology is the desire to understand the workings of memory in relation to experiences of violence and trauma. As we seek to address past trauma and its recollection through memory we must realize that trauma, and the way it is remembered, does not just “happen.” Rather, trauma—and consequently its memory recall—are historically situated, occurring as part of a larger historical process, facilitated or hindered by the social, political, and cultural contexts of the time. The interaction between the body and these various levels has been referred to as the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. Schepher-Hughes and Lock (1987) did much to enhance our understanding of the interactions between the social body, or the body in society, the body politic, in relation to power and authority, and the way they often come to be inscribed in the individual body which bears witness to their effects (Janzen 2002).

In her book, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992), for example, Schepher-Hughes illustrates the intersection of these three bodies, and the role of the body as metaphor for the social and political realms. Through her depiction of *nervos*, a medicalized condition translated as “nerves,” she shows the effects of economic injustices perpetrated by the sugar industry that were brought to bear on the bodies of the women of *Bom Jesus*. Rather than citing hunger as the problem, thus implicating the state in the creation and perpetuation of suffering, the condition was diagnosed as a non-hunger related issue and was hopelessly treated with medications. According to Schepher-Hughes, the symptoms experienced by the women of *Bom Jesus* resulted from the imbalance between the three bodies and

represented a dysfunctional social and political order. But the individual bodies of the women spoke up in unison against the injustice, demanding the recognition of the true source of suffering, essentially revealing the power of the body to speak to state perpetrated everyday violence.

Thus traumatic events, and the stories that tell about them, must be situated within these historical frameworks in order to be understood from the root; to pinpoint the causes out of which the trauma was allowed to grow, and to understand the consequent impact of the trauma on the individual in an ongoing social environment. In this approach the body is acknowledged, not as object, but as subject; capable of revealing experiences which language, through silences, wishes to conceal (Csordas 1990).

Particularly helpful in this process is the role of narratives of suffering as they are presented by people who have experienced violence and trauma either first-hand or vicariously through the collective memories of their larger group. But because narratives are socially mediated, they are only one component of a complex structure involving the past, present, and the body as witness. Piecing these parts together is necessary for understanding the effects of trauma and violence and for answering important questions such as “how and why did this happen?”

While there have been many anthropological works on trauma and memory (see for example Daniel 1996; Feldmen 1991; Kleinman 1995; Nordstrom 1998), due to the limited scope of this research, I will focus on those anthropological studies that are most relevant to refugee experience and violence of the everyday.

Janzen & Janzen (2000) are helpful in articulating the role of the anthropologist in situations of civil war, genocide, and other extreme forms of violence. They stress the

importance of listening and recording stories of suffering because “the burdens of each person’s experiences are great, and the questions facing many individuals are perplexing. Giving voice to these burdens and questions is a first step for their tellers to regain their humanity and understanding and to contemplate solutions” (2). Those who participate in violence, whether as victims or perpetrators, suffer isolation from “their former selves, their ordered world, and the rest of humanity” (Ibid: 11). The job of anthropology then, is to reconnect these individual stories with the larger world, while paying close attention to the variations amongst individual accounts, or in other words, to the differential trauma within a given population. Rebuilding this context requires a reconnection with the social, temporal, and cultural dimensions within which the violence occurred. They argue that “if telling a story of ordeal humanizes the teller, then making sure that such a story is related in narration or print is the obligation of the person who received the story” (Ibid: 12).

During their work amongst Rwandan refugees, Janzen & Janzen were surprised to find no sign of divination, “the hallmark of an African approach to the interpretation of misfortune” (Janzen & Janzen 2000:202), in the aftermath of the genocide. In seeking out signs and attempts at healing, Janzen & Janzen argue that “perhaps the suggestion that there can be healing after a genocidal conflict is almost unforgivably obscene in the eyes and ears of some because their pain has been so total” (Ibid: 202). Rather than seeking out signs of healing, they suggest that the more appropriate approach is to figure out how people try to “live with the images and the memories of what has happened and how to make sense of it” (Ibid: 202). But their research is hopeful in that, even in the absence of formal healing rituals and ceremonies, there was a desire to move forward and to forgive within the refugee communities of Rwanda and Burundi. A return to “life as usual” could lend way to moving past the violence; it could spark a sense of

normalcy that would initiate the healing process in a simple, yet effective way. Locating these modes of “moving on” after war is especially important because unresolved war trauma can lead to cycles of violence that harbor the potential for more war.

Lisa Malkki (1996) also worked with refugees in an effort to develop a better understanding of the influence of refugeeness on individuals and societies. As humanitarian organizations attempt to define themselves as apolitical, they dehistoricize refugees, stripping them of their historical, social, cultural, and political particularities. The result is a “universalization” of the refugee as an international object of victimization. Malkki points to the dangers of such practices, arguing that, “this dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims” (Malkki 1996:378). As such, refugees are assumed to be incapable of bearing witness to their specific sources of suffering and trauma. Thus humanitarian interventions, far from providing an outlet for pain, may actually foster silence amongst refugees.

In her research with Hutu “town” and “camp” refugees in exile, Malkki noticed two distinctly different responses to the refugee status that accompanied their flight from Rwanda and Burundi. The differences existed between the “camp refugees” who lived in the major Mishamo refugee camp, and the “town refugees” who came to reside in a nearby town. The town refugees tended to take on a more cosmopolitan attitude, identifying less and less with Burundi as their true home. The camp refugees, on the other hand, were engaged in a collective effort to actively create and recreate a sense of national belonging and legitimacy. For the camp refugees, their political status afforded them protection that would allow them to benefit from refugee life, endure difficulties that would make them stronger, and eventually go back to reclaim their homeland. In this sense “refugeeness was seen as a matter of becoming” (Malkki

1996:381). Thus the camp refugees considered themselves in exile—a time of moral trials and difficulties—and vested their hopes in the eventual return to their rightful place in Burundi. As a result, “refugeeness was clung to both as a protective legal status and as a special moral condition—for it was only by together passing through a period as refugees that the Hutu as ‘a people’ could affect their return to their rightful homeland” (Ibid).

These stories about a legitimate place in Burundi, the construction of a history that spoke to their ideas about Burundi and consequently afforded them a rightful place in the national history, are what Malkki refers to as mythico-histories. She defines this term specifically as historical narratives that comprise “a set of moral and cosmological ordering stories: stories which classify the world according to certain principles, thereby simultaneously creating it” (Malkki 1995:129). Interestingly the mythico-histories reproduced what Malkki calls the “body maps” or, “maps of physical difference” between the Hutu and the Tutsi. These body-maps became attached to “innate moral character differences” (Ibid), whereby favorable moral characteristics were attributed to one’s own group, while negative moral characteristics were connected to the physical features of the opposing group. There was an adamant desire to perpetuate these physical differences in the refugee camp, despite their association with the causes of war and genocide.

### *Symbolic Violence and Violence of the Everyday*

As research and studies on violence and its aftermath gain momentum, anthropologists have acquired many different ways by which to approach the difficult and multifaceted nature of violence and trauma. Moving beyond the experience of violence as only physical suffering, to violence as both physical and emotional, the field is creating broader understandings of violence, trauma, and suffering. Moreover, violence is now approached as embodying a number of forms

such as Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence. In his article on "Symbolic Violence" among the Kabyle of Algeria, Bourdieu (1992) defines symbolic violence as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (272).

In his examination of the domination of men over women, he suggests that "the male order is so deeply grounded as to need no justification: it imposes itself as self-evident, universal" (Bourdieu 1992:273). According to Bourdieu, this gender inequality—and the symbolic violence that emerges from it—is derived from the social structures and cultural forms that reinforce male superiority. Symbolic violence is especially ingrained in society, and is often unchallenged, because it is tied to a "biologized social construction" (Ibid) under the guise of a seemingly legitimate biological justification. This type of violence results in "imprisonment effected via the body" (Ibid).

His arguments on gender can be generalized to include other dominator-dominated relationships which are so inextricably linked to the existing social, political, and cultural order that they are no longer recognizable as social constructs. This is especially true if the constructs are attributed to unchangeable, fixed causes such as biological disposition and family lineage, for example. The dangers of failing to recognize the socially constructed elements of one's world results in the domination of the self or the collective through the very constructs of that world. I have called upon his research here because it is helpful in understanding the situation of dominated groups who seem to accept their alleged inferiority as ultimate and absolute truth.

While Bourdieu illustrates the power of symbolic violence, Veena Das (2007) draws awareness to the creation of the subject through violence. As identity is highly subjective, Das suggests that "the experience of becoming a subject is linked in important ways to the experience of subjugation" (Das 2000:205). She characterizes violence, not as an interruption—something

that temporarily enters and then departs—to the daily lives of individuals, but rather, as a part of it. Therefore questions must be asked about the nature of the violence and the ways by which people are made to be subjects, as well as how this subjugation is expressed. By pinpointing the outlet for their subjugation, one is also likely to locate the outlet for the subjective experience of violence, suffering, and subjective identity recognition.

These violent experiences are physical in the way they leave wounds, scars, and cause death, but they are also symbolic in the way they so deeply transform relationships between people, thus damaging the very notion of coexistence. In the case of Asha, the violence of the Partition was noticeable, not through grandiose stories of the physical violence itself, but through the ways it altered traditional familial relationships. Violence then descends into the everyday and integrates into one's preconceived notions and ideas. It creates a new lens through which the subject must gaze upon the world. With this new perspective the subject recognizes the damage the violence has wrought and the way it has led to the physical as well as symbolic deaths of relationships. Das views the study of changing relationships as crucial to the understanding of violent experience because, "they are both the objects of study and the means through which anthropologists arrive at an understanding of both abstract and concrete patterns of sociality" (Das 2007:3). Changes in relationships have the ability to put our worlds in jeopardy because it is through relationships that we come to learn about and understand the world.

When subjects begin to re-inhabit their worlds after violence has subsided, they find them drastically changed by the deaths of these relationships. A new "poisonous knowledge" (Das 2007:77) emerges as the differences between life before and after the violence is realized. Das draws her notion of poisonous knowledge from Cavell's idea of knowledge as a curse when one knows "more than his fellows about the conditions of knowing" (Ibid). The everyday lives of

these subjects become occupied with repairing the damage done to the social fabric. To understand this daily work of repair then, one must make a descent into the ordinary, the site of the outlet of subjugation, thus locating the violent experience in order to understand its individual and collective impacts on the subject(s). Through this descent, one may recognize how “everyday life absorbs the traumatic collective violence that creates boundaries between nations and between ethnic and religious groups” (Das 2007:16).

Drawing on Cavell’s work on voice, she describes the impact of philosophy and scientific studies on the repression of voice; that which animates words and gives them life. Because “words, when they lead lives outside the ordinary, become emptied of experience” (Das 2007:6), the anthropologist must examine the site of the ordinary in order to locate the voice behind the utterances and words. She encourages social scientists to avoid the impulse to “think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary” (Ibid: 7), but instead, to seek it out through a descent into the everyday.

However, in situations of discrimination and violence, the sense of everyday—of being tied to a particular context from which we then derive our sense of belonging to communities and states—becomes frayed. Thus “it is not only violence experienced on one’s body in these cases but also the sense that one’s access to context is lost that constitutes a sense of being violated” (Das 2007:9). Das characterizes this feeling as a “betrayal of the everyday” (Ibid).

She argues that “in the regions of the imaginary, violence creates divisions and connections that point to the tremendous dangers that human beings pose to each other.” Das suggests that the way these dangers are “mastered, domesticated, lived through” must be addressed, not through “an ascent into transcendence,” but through “a descent into everyday life”

(Das 2007:15). She draws on Wittgenstein's metaphor of the torn spider's web to illustrate this "engagement with suffering and healing that ordinary life reveals" (Ibid).

On approaching the issue of the past, Das suggests that it is a part of the present and is adamant that during the violence and then following it, "if one's way of being with others was brutally damaged, then the past enters the present" (Das, 2007:6). She differentiates between phenomenal time and physical time, or, the difference between the time of the events and the telling of the story. Das refers to this as "the difference between historical truth and narrative truth" (Das 2007:96). Despite this differentiation, Das' approach in dealing with trauma and the present is one of integration, in which the past continues to weave itself into the everyday. This causes the constant resurfacing of previous sources of suffering, as well as discovery of once unidentified or unrecognized facets of the experience, essentially reappearing due to the context of present situations.

#### *Locating the Collective through Individual Narratives of Memory*

Narratives are extremely important in articulating memory, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of collective narrative strategies used in memory recall. These strategies can reveal important information about social context, power relations, and social norms. Furthermore, investigations into identity reveal an inextricable link that exists between personal narrative and collective memory.

Building on post-structuralist and social constructivist approaches of the 1960s and 70s (see for example Althusser 1971), social scientists today look to narrative analysis to understand the development of the subject and the reciprocal relationship between social structures and collective and individual mediators. From this vantage point, the self is not a fixed *product* of social structures and ideologies, but rather, is an ongoing *construct*, actively engaged in the

development of the social body and the body politic. Thus consciousness is considered to be in a constant state of progress and construction. This is why memories that surface continue to change with changing sociopolitical environments. Social structures are filtered through active agents who then work with and through these structures to construct a more coherent picture of the place of the individual in collective notions of personhood. This process is then translated into collective identity through the act of narration.

Reissman (1993) argues that “narratives are representations” (Reissman 1993:2). They are told by individuals yet they often represent collective views and socially agreed upon understandings of the events, people, and places that have led to the present telling of the story. Therefore examining autobiographical sketches is not only useful as descriptive of the self but, more importantly, as the site of the emergence of a certain collective consciousness. It is within, betwixt, and between individual narratives where we may locate the collective voice and therefore its larger social framework.

Narratives are also intimately connected to memory; they are the vehicle that transports the past into present consciousness as a witness to past experience. They are the physical expression through which experiences of the past are brought from subjective internal confinement to objective external release. This metaphor of memory as vehicle, moving in and out of consciousness, emphasizes the active nature of memory as *practice* rather than as something static (Antze & Lambeck 1996). Yet the transfer of past experiences into the present requires the use of cultural vehicles. These vehicles can be understood as the “symbols, codes, artifacts, rites, and sites in which memory is embodied and objectified” (Antze & Lambeck 1996:xvii).

Studying narratives is especially helpful in understanding these cultural mechanisms of social order and control. It also leads to a better understanding of the cultural and historical discourses that shape personal narratives and construct collective identities. What is told can be studied as a reflection of these cultural mechanisms and therefore can help uncover answers to important questions relating to experience, beliefs, and morality. This is largely due to the fact that narrative construction is “motivated and oriented, not only by truth, but by good. This is to say that morality regulates narratives of memory” (Hannoum 2005:127). Narrative analysis is an important tool in understanding collective identity by reflecting the often unspoken fundamental morals, values, beliefs, and ethics that underlie social behavior that tie together the social fabric of a particular group.

As narratives are socially constructed, they are also simultaneously in a process of construction (Kerby 1991). As the narrator narrates, the story works to embrace, reject, reinforce, reaffirm, or renegotiate reality as it is perceived by that particular individual. Yet these choices in narrative strategies are made within, and mediated by, the social, political, cultural, and historical environment in which the narratives are created as well as those in which they are told. This is not to say that context determines narrative content, but rather, that choices are made within particular contexts and these contexts must be taken into consideration when examining a narrative text.

### *Methodology*

To understand the impact of violence and trauma on the shaping of individual and collective consciousness, I have elected to rely on the use of narratives collected from the Somali Bantu refugee community in Kansas City, KS. I have earlier mentioned the process of gaining access to this community, and how I acquired the interviews and narratives (see Introduction of

this text). My decision to rely on narratives as the source of Somali Bantu identity was based on literature presented in this chapter, which pointed to the importance of narratives in constructing the subject, describing the experiences through the subjective self, and pointing to the larger sociopolitical context which drives the themes and processes of remembering and forgetting that fuel the narratives. More generally, I decided on narratives as the primary tool in understanding Somali Bantu identity because of their ultimately revealing nature.

Each interview lasted approximately 1-3 hours and began with the question, “tell me about yourself”. As narratives and not interviews, I wanted to understand what Somali Bantu felt was important to relay in terms of their experiences. Therefore, in order to avoid guiding their answers, I did not ask questions until after the individual had completed his or her narrative. Follow-up questions were posed to clarify or expand on issues relevant to my research endeavor.

To provide an understanding of Somali Bantu identity, I have selected three of the narratives collected during my fieldwork. The first narrative describes the experiences of Osman, 65, a Somali Bantu male elder. To understand the differential effects of violence and trauma across generations, however, the second narrative I have included is that of Mukhtar, 28, to serve as a point of comparison and reflection about the way the different amount of time spent in Somalia impacts recollections, narrative strategies, and identity. The third narrative, Habiba’s story, explores the experience of violence and trauma through the gendered subject. I have elected to include her narrative in order to understand the way violence was differentially experienced across gender.

Through these selections, I believe I have included data that can shed light on the particularities of the various levels of Somali Bantu experience; the varieties of which culminate to produce the larger collective identity of Somali Bantu refugees in Kansas City. Each narrative

will be presented in segments, each segment followed by an exegesis of the underlying meanings and contexts as I have understood them from documented literature and my two years of fieldwork in the Somali Bantu community. In this sense, the analysis can be characterized as following a thematic approach, pulling out major issues and themes present within each narrative, and commonalities and differences across the three narrative texts. Some of the themes that will be explored, as they emerged through their words and silences, are: the good life and the bad life, the healthy body vs. the sick body, old values vs. new values, denial and acknowledgement, remembering and forgetting, deaths of relationships, guilt and the development of the provider-complex, internalized racism, an emphasis on education, moving forward vs. looking back, remembering the dead, and the will of *Allah*, among others.

The decision to follow this particular approach is due to my limited knowledge of the Somali Bantu Maay Maay language which led me to work with translations of the narratives, initially audio-recorded and simultaneously typed on my laptop, and the audio later transcribed. I have included gesticulations, pauses, and silences when they occurred in an attempt to maintain the rich sense of voice and life that accompanied the words and utterances during the actual narrative sessions. Each chapter will conclude with an overall summary of the major points that can be taken away from the narratives for the purposes of this research.

### *Chapter 3*

#### **We Planted the Mango Trees**

On a warm summer day in August of 2009 I made my way to visit with a man named Osman. As I pulled into the townhouse complex in Wyandotte County, KS, I could see young African American children chasing each other through the streets, others in the distance kicking a ball around the parking lot. Many people sat on the steps in front of their apartments, watching the children play, or visiting with neighbors on their stoops. The neighborhood reminded me of my own memories growing up in a low-income neighborhood in Lawrence, KS, a memory that now seemed a world away. I pulled my car in front of the apartment and swallowed hard. I could feel a ball rising in my throat; the feeling of something familiar, yet lost. I sat for a moment wondering what awaited me behind the seemingly ordinary dull blue door of the townhome, from the outside appearing so similar to any other in the neighborhood. It was a door shutting out, or rather, isolating, the memories and experiences of those who lived behind it. I had come to expect that in my interviews with Somali Bantu, I would hear stories about a place that was foreign to me, and of devastating experiences which would draw up that ball from the pit of my stomach, lodging it uncomfortably in my throat. I braced myself for what was to come, and reached for the car door, greeting my research assistant, Abdullahi, who was already waiting for me in front of the house.

As I entered the home, Osman stood welcoming the two of us, dressed in a simple brown button-down shirt and faded blue slacks. Around his knee, over his pants, was a medical wrap. He was older than I had expected, his pleasant face bearing the marks of time and experience. I

smiled politely and shook his hand, thanking him for welcoming me into his home. He spoke in Maay Maay, telling me through my research assistant that he was honored that I was interested in listening to his story, which he insisted was of “an ordinary man with an ordinary life.” Looking around the small, stuffy, empty home, I thought to myself how people with different experiences could so drastically redefine what it means to be “ordinary.”

I took a seat on the single couch in the otherwise empty living room. I wondered how this family would accommodate for guests that numbered more than two, but realized that perhaps guests do not come here very often. Aside from the couch, the only other furniture in the room was a small, old television set connected to a VCR. On the TV a video played, muted, revealing images of what I took to be Somali Bantu people in their villages back home in Somalia. These people moved their mouths, yet I could hear nothing of what they spoke. I only watched as their gestures and movements communicated something eerie, something which the body has the power to express even when our words wish to conceal it.

Osman sat to my far left in a chair he had brought from another room. My translator sat next to me on the couch. I could hear the sounds of someone moving in the kitchen, and caught a glimpse of a tall, thin woman, dressed in full *hijab*. We made eye contact briefly, but she soon moved out of my line of sight and did not come out to say *salaam*. I could smell the scent of goat meat cooking, and heard the sound of a knife against a cutting board, chopping; a sound which seemed to echo throughout the entire otherwise silent home.

Osman opened the window behind me, apologizing that the air conditioner was not working that day. I could now hear the noise of the children playing outside, screaming and laughing, taunting each other the way children do—their voices permeating into the silence of this home, animating it with the innocence of children enjoying a summer afternoon. I pondered

for a moment on how from outside, I could hear nothing from this home which I now found myself in, but could feel a presence of something heavier and louder than the children's laughter, surrounding me in every which way.

Osman cleared his throat, everyone in the room pensive, waiting to hear what he wished to express. I too prepared myself, typing the heading for the interview on my laptop. I examined the title, wondering to myself how strangely unfair it seemed to classify this man—the entirety of his past, his experiences, his being—into four simple words: *Osman, Somali Bantu Refugee*.

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Osman is a respected member of the Somali Bantu community in Kansas City. He is also one of its eldest members and is referred to respectfully as a “Somali Bantu elder.” While Osman is not sure of his exact age, he estimates that he is about 65 years old. He said that in Somalia, age was not a defining feature of a person's life and therefore his parents did not keep track of their children's ages. Osman spent many years in Somalia, working as farmer, a skill that was taught to him by his father. Because of the length of time he lived in Somalia, he remembers more than those who fled during their early childhood and teenage years. As a farmer, and member of the Somali Bantu group, Osman was denied access to education. He has recently begun schooling for the first time in his life. I met Osman through Abdullahi who works at the Somali Bantu Foundation office.

Osman and his family came to the United States in 2004 where they were initially resettled in North Carolina. In 2006 they moved to Kansas City in the hopes of finding better work. After arriving in Kansas City, Osman badly injured his knee and back while lifting boxes at his job. He is currently unable to work. He lives in a relatively small two-bedroom townhouse in Kansas City, Kansas with his second wife, his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson.

I began my interview as I usually do, by asking Osman to tell me about himself. At this request, Osman angled his chair so that he could face me directly. He put his hands on his knees as one who is accustomed to telling fantastic tales to young children. As he spoke, his tone carried a sense of knowledge about something which others could not know. He was authoritative, yet kindly educating. He began his story in Maay Maay, pausing every so often to allow Abdullahi to translate:

We are called Somali Bantu. In Somalia we live Somali Somali and Somali Bantu. The difference between us is that Somali Bantu have kinky hair and Somali Somali have soft hair. The country we lived in was Somalia. A long time ago our ancestors were living in Somalia for centuries. If I talk about our culture, we were farmers first. We were farmers and we were living in villages in Lower Juba (Jilib). Somali Bantu working for the government were very few. We were usually living at the river bank. Villages were very small. The biggest village we had was like three town houses (neighborhoods) like this one. We were not considered good to work for government, we were just farmers. We were waiting for God to give us rain and we were not using any technology or engine to water the farms. We were only waiting for rain to come.

This short excerpt is loaded with meaning in its silences that need to be unpacked. First, in asking Osman to tell me about himself, he begins with the words *we are called Somali Bantu*. He does not begin with himself, the individual, but narrates a story of a shared history and identity. This “we” to which he refers, implicitly includes the identity of refugees, a way by which they are publicly, and generically one might add, known in their neighborhoods and in Kansas City in general. But Osman inserts a particularity into this otherwise universalizing title by identifying this community as the historical Somali Bantu. Thus Osman is able to relate a collective identity and assume a collective voice through his own individual words, tying himself from the start to a larger group and culture.

*In Somalia we live Somali Somali and Somali Bantu. The difference between us is that Somali Bantu have kinky hair and Somali Somali have soft hair. The country we lived in was*

*Somalia.* Osman draws a line of distinction between two primary groups which were involved in the making of identity in Somalia. He differentiates himself from the first group by pointing to the body maps (Malkki 1995)—the difference in hair texture, a description full of underlying connotations and experiences. In Somalia, as discussed in Chapter One of this text, the Somali Bantu were subjected to violence, rejection, and inequality, based on the physical characteristics which tied them racially and culturally to the African people of Tanzania and Mozambique. “Kinky” hair is a description one often comes across in resettlement profiles of the Somali Bantu, and is a rough translation of the derogatory label *Jareer*. Here, not only does Osman recall this title, but he bases his distinction between the two groups on this very quality, which lies not in the physicality of hair texture, but in the black African identity it symbolizes. He does not question or reject it, but recounts it as a fact of his life. He then situates the story in a particular setting, rooting it in the country of Somalia; the site of ordinary life, but also the site of much violence and war.

*A long time ago our ancestors were living in Somalia for centuries. If I talk about our culture, we were farmers first.* This statement brings forward the very controversial notion that Somalia was inhabited by Bantu speaking people long before it was inhabited by the Arab Somali Somalis, and long before the Bantu were taken as slaves. Though it may have some historical proof, as some scholars of the Bantu Expansion suggest, more importantly, it allows him to inadvertently refute the story of slavery by providing an alternative explanation for the presence of Bantu in Somalia. Furthermore, it gives Somali Bantu a sense of seniority in the area, placing them in Somalia and giving them rights to the land, prior to the entrance of Arab-Somali peoples. The choice to mention this statement here, at the beginning of the story, perhaps stems from the Somali Bantu treatment as “other” by Somali Somali people in reference to

Somalia. Mentioning “farming” at this point is also significant, as it was another reason for which Somali Bantu were separated out and made distinct from the rest of Somali Somali society, labeled as low-class in relation to their work in agriculture. However, when Osman places it directly after the statement regarding the seniority of Bantu people in Somalia, he is also suggesting that this way of life is the original “Somali” way of life, and that the nomadic pastoralism of the Somali Somalis is a digression from what it initially meant to be Somali in the first place.

*We were farmers and we were living in villages in Lower Juba (Jilib). Somali Bantu working for the government were very few. We were usually living at the river bank. Villages were very small. The biggest village we had was like three town houses (neighborhoods) like this one.* The location of Somali Bantu villages in the previously uninhabited region of the lower Juba was a direct result of the trickling effect of Somali Bantu people fleeing from slavery. Yet again, no direct reference to the violence of slavery is mentioned, only to its aftermath in the way it organized everyday life in village settlement and orientation. His emphasis on the small size of the village speaks to the small number of Somali Bantu compared to Somali Somali, representing their role as a minority in Somalia. It also shows the intimate character of village life, as it is organized by family units who all know each other, and interact with each other on a daily basis. At this point, Osman enters into a discussion of the political marginalization of Somali Bantu people.

*We (Somali Bantu) were not considered good to work for government,* a consideration made by Somali Somali who were in control of government, and who held the social capital to determine who was or was not to be a part of the political workings of the Somali nation-state. *We were just farmers* emphasizes the exclusion from politics based on their role as farmers, an

occupation which, in Somalia, suggests a people who are not capable of understanding or working with the government.

*We were waiting for God to give us rain and we were not using any technology or engine to water the farms. We were only waiting for rain to come.* This statement reveals the spirituality of Somali Bantu daily life, depending on God to send them rain. It also explains the Somali Bantu tendency to attribute important events on which their livelihood depends, in this case rain for the crops which was their source of income as well as sustenance, to a higher power beyond themselves. The emphasis on the lack of technology to work the farms speaks to the general absence of technology in the region, but also, to the Somali Bantu belief in hard work to which the hands will later, on the Day of Judgment, bear witness. As Somali Bantu were largely farming peoples, using one's own hands to earn one's living is a way of expressing an honorable, respectable way of life. It shows how, by the hands of Somali Bantu, Somalia was harvested, supported, nourished, and fed. This notion arises again later in the narrative as a way to claim rights to Somalia by recounting their physical contribution to its construction. It also separates Somali Bantu from political life, regarded by Somali Bantu as a space of laziness and corruption. When Osman states *we were only waiting for rain to come*, one may get the sense of isolation and separation from the larger Somali society, giving Somali Bantu legitimate ground to absolve themselves of responsibility for the future violence that would erupt during the Somali Civil War of 1990-91.

I was a farmer. I never saved 2000 shillings. I was just living on my strength and hard work. I was just farming using my force and I was also working for Somali Somali also farming for them and building houses for them and I was taking money from them. We had a lot of droughts so I was working for the Somali Somalis to make extra money.

*I never saved 2000 shillings. I was just living on my strength and hard work.* Somali Bantu struggled financially as farmers in Somalia, working difficult and tiring jobs for low pay. Saving money was nearly impossible as families struggled day-to-day. *I was just farming using my force and I was also working for Somali Somali also farming for them and building houses for them.* Osman worked on his own small plot of land but also on Somali Somali owned farming land. However, Somali Bantu work was not always restricted to farming. They often engaged in construction work for Somali Somali. Osman's statement, *and I was taking money from them,* suggests a feeling of justice. By taking their money Osman is somewhat compensated for his mistreatment and impoverished life. He builds their homes and toilets to take their money; to take whatever he could from them as a small sort of compensation for all they have taken from him.

The hardships we had over there is we never went to school. We never had education. You can see me now, I never went to school. When we went to the refugee camps in Kenya, that's when the young generation went to school and learned something, not in Somalia. That happened because we were not working for the government. When the civil war began we didn't know anything about that, we didn't know what was going on. We saw people passing us and chasing each other. We didn't know what was going on. They would kill each other and rape the women but we didn't know why they were fighting.

*The hardships we had over there is we never went to school. We never had education. You can see me now, I never went to school.* At this point in his narrative, Osman is recognizing the fact that a lack of schooling (in Somalia) has created a life of hardship. As Somali Bantu were marginalized from educational opportunities, and were often treated as though they were made for manual labour and not for reading and writing, educational opportunities were not open to them. When he said *you can see me now, I never went to school,* he stretched out his hands towards me revealing his calloused palms. His scarred hands bore witness to the fact that he was

a farmer, a worker, not a student, politician, or intellectual; they bore witness to the very fact of his Somali Bantu-ness, to the reality that he was not, and would never be, Somali Somali. In this gesture he seemed to suggest that being a Somali Bantu farmer placed him in a position of inequality where he was not allowed to become anything more. The scarred skin on his hands embodied these injustices that characterized the everyday realities of Somali Bantu life. Unequal access to education kept Somali Bantu locked in their place as subjugated farm workers, making them, in turn, rely heavily on an agricultural way of life as the sole means of livelihood.

Osman's gesture caught me by surprise. His hands made me feel ashamed of my own easy life. They were the hands of a man who had experienced a suffering that one who did not share the experience could not begin to understand. He kept his hands steadily held out, for the translator, for me, for the world to see. The room was quiet; no one spoke or even moved. It was a moment where the gesture engulfed us all into its truth, into its bare reality. I looked away and began to type, feeling uncomfortable with my inability to find words to express my feelings to him.

*When we went to the refugee camps in Kenya, that's when the young generation went to school and learned something, not in Somalia. That happened because we were not working for the government.* Again, Osman is repeating the notion of exclusion from Somalia's political life. This time, however, he shows how this exclusion seeps into the everyday experiences of Somali Bantu by revealing how political marginalization breeds unequal access to education. This, in turn, impacts the professional options available, limiting them to their work in agriculture, which thus increases their exclusion from Somali society. Things changed, however, as the Somali Bantu were removed from the particular environment of Somalia to the general environment of the refugee camps. Leaving Somalia seems to have immediately opened up new doors for

Somali Bantu, who found themselves being offered educational opportunities which they never before had.

*When the civil war began we didn't know anything about that, we didn't know what was going on. We saw people passing us and chasing each other. We didn't know what was going on. They would kill each other and rape the women but we didn't know why they were fighting.*

This excerpt is important in its illustration of several major points. First, the repetition that Somali Bantu did not know what was going on, or why the perpetrators were fighting, suggests that Somali Bantu exclusion was so deeply ingrained in the social divides between Bantu and non-Bantu, that, even at the eruption of war, the Somali Bantu are completely unaware of the situation. This sense of confusion surrounds many of the narratives that make up the collective consciousness of the Somali Bantu refugees in Kansas City. Second, in the minds of Somali Bantu, the war seems to have begun spontaneously, with no precursors and no knowable reasons as to *why* there was a war in the first place. Third, it absolves Somali Bantu of any involvement as perpetrators in the war of 1990. Their political marginalization forced them to remain distinctly separate from politics, a realm which is perceived as corrupt and violent, so that even when describing the scenes he witnessed, Osman seems detached from the violence of the war. Fourth, that the war and its perpetrators did not specifically target Somali Bantu. In fact, the Somali Bantu, according to this account, seem to be purposely avoided, as his statement *they would kill each other and rape the women* refers to the act of Somali Somali chasing *only* after other Somali Somali. Somali Bantu seem to be situated on the outside of the violence, watching the violence but not threatened or affected by it.

Whenever the war is referenced, it is normally done on a very general scale. However, one particular aspect of the violence is specifically mentioned: Rape. Das (2007) discusses the

use of rape in war, illustrated through the abductions and rapes of Indian and Muslim women during the Partition, as a strategic use of violence against the body of women to construct the notion of a masculine state while simultaneously emasculating the males. Das states:

Once the problem of abducted women moved from the order of the family to the order of the state (as the demand for legislation), it sanctified a sexual contract as the counterpart of the social contract by creating a new legal category of “abducted person” (applicable, however, only to women and children) who came within the regulatory power of the state. There was an alliance between social work as a profession and the state as *parens patriae*, which made the official kinship norms of purity and honor much more rigid by transforming them into the law of the state...the interest in women, however, was not premised upon their definitions as citizens but as sexual and reproductive beings. As far as recovery of women held by the “other” side was concerned, what was at stake was the honor of the nation because women as sexual and reproductive beings were being forcibly held...national honor was tied to the regaining of control over the sexual and reproductive functions of women (Das 2007:25-26)

The same can be said of Somalia, where stories of rape surfaced as the most horrendous violation perpetrated by the Somali Somali against the Somali Bantu. As a traditionally Islamic and conservative society, sexuality in the Somali Bantu community is a private act contained within the confines of religiously-sanctioned marriage. The violation of this sacred law is a violation in the deepest sense, as it targets the religious, social, and sacred fabric of the entire society. Thus the violation of women is no longer *just* about women, but it is about the honor of the collective at large (see for example Abu Lughod 2000). The women, though initially the subjects of violence, become objects of violence that must be rescued by the males, constructing distinct post-war gender relations in the community. This issue is clarified later in Osman’s narrative.

He went on:

The hardest war began in 1990. Until 1991 we were living from jungle to jungle. I left my home with my wife when two of my brothers were killed in front of me. We went to the jungle in the Juba. I stayed with my wife there for twenty days

eating grass and plants. We were hiding in the grass and when we hear Somali language (Af somali) we were always scared and hiding because they might find us.

*The hardest war began in 1990.* Osman uses the word “hardest,” a term relative to something less hard, or less difficult, to discuss the major event of the Somali Civil War. He seems to allude to a time when there were other wars, yet he does not speak of them explicitly. Historically, there had been no “war,” per se, in Somalia since its independence when the Somali-led coup ousted the post-colonial authorities from power in 1969. So, to what other wars does Osman refer? Perhaps a traditional understanding of “war” here, in the sense of a physical battle between two or more pronounced groups, is too narrow a scope for this reference. Somali Bantu identity had been under attack since their ancestors were brought to Somalia as slaves from Southeast Africa in the early part of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stigmatization, marginalization, and persecution were wars waged by the majority against the minority in this context every day. While these wars may not be considered major events in terms of death rates and bloodshed, they are wars of the everyday; a destructive kind of war that assaults the very spirit of a people, dehumanizing them in the most mundane, bloodless ways. *The hardest war* thus can be understood as a reference to the most difficult kind of war because it combines the aforementioned types with the use of physical violence and bloodshed.

*Until 1991 we were living from jungle to jungle. I left my home with my wife when two of my brothers were killed in front of me. We went to the jungle in the Juba.* One of the derogatory labels used to identify Somali Bantu was *Mushunghuli*, translated as “people of the forest.” This was a reference to their post-slavery settlements in the previously uninhabited forest regions in Southern Somalia. *Mushunghuli* was used to describe the former slaves with a supposedly uncivilized nature. During the war, many Somali Bantu fled into the surrounding forests to seek

a place of hiding. This abstract term thus became physically embodied as Somali Bantu sought refuge in the forests. What is interesting at this point is that it was a direct consequence of Somali Somali violence that forced this term out of the realm of abstract into something concrete and real. Notice here how the relation of *living from jungle to jungle* is juxtaposed with the experience of the death of Osman's two brothers. He does not discuss the death of the two brothers as a main event in his story, but rather, as a causal one triggering his movement to the jungle, a continuous lived experience that becomes the focus of this section of the narrative. What Osman remembers and discusses about the traumatic experience of watching his two brothers die is not *how* they died, but how their deaths led to a dramatic change in his everyday life.

*I stayed with my wife there for twenty days eating grass and plants.* Osman mentions a duration of time here, temporary yet specifically remembered. One can imagine the mental and physical strain this situation would have on the subject, counting the days, waiting for a way out. The recollection of specific number of days also reveals the intensity of his suffering. Living off of grass and plants shows the extremity of the threat of violence, and the experience of violence on multiple levels. It also dehumanizes the person as it likens them to animals, a theme that will emerge in a later narrative. Resorting to eating grass and plants can give one an idea of the drastic danger in which Somali Bantu suddenly found themselves. The following sentence, *We were hiding in the grass and when we hear Somali language (Af Somali) We were always scared and hiding because they might find us*, lends voice to the linguistic isolation of Somali Bantu from Somali society. When Af Somali was instituted as the official language of the Somali state, Somali Bantu were linguistically separated from the rest of society. Recognition of danger during his time in the jungle was through linguistic differences. Not only was the body of

Somali Somali a threat, but also their language which kept the Somali Bantu isolated and excluded. This same linguistic difference, in the new context of war, was used as a warning, signaling the approach or threat of violence during the flight phase. The statement speaks volumes in terms of the sense of fear under which Somali Bantu lived during the outbreak of war. *They might find us* does not mention specifically what would happen if they were to get caught, nor does it need to. The brutality that would follow being captured was coupled with the very fear of getting caught, intensifying the experience of trauma.

One day we were sleeping there on the floor in the jungle and I woke up. I heard Somali talking. I saw them, they had my wife. Then they took my wife and they were gone for some hours. I don't know how long. They brought her back and she was tired and sick and they raped her, all of them. This is what they did, they raped the women, raped the girls. There was a lot of rape at that time. We left the jungle after that and went to the village.

After recounting this portion of his narrative, the movement in the kitchen stopped for a moment. It seemed as though the entire house was silent. I peered into the kitchen where I watched Osman's wife, her back to me, her body frozen, as if she were an image in a painting. Osman clasped his hands together, his fingers interlocking, his entire body tense. His eyes were fixed on the ground, yet his voice was monotone and emotionless. He recited the story from a different place, disconnected from the events he described.

The Somali Civil War brought about many changes in relationships between Somali Bantu family members. But this statement must be situated within the context of Osman's previous allegation that the hardest war began in 1990. Here one must begin to better understand what made this part of Osman's experience particularly difficult. It is tied directly to the rape of his wife. The relationship between husband and wife in this particular circumstance was affected as they shared such a violent and difficult experience together. The relationship

that existed prior to the violent event, which consisted of a private and exclusive intimacy, was drastically altered.

An interesting point to make here is that Osman is able to recount a specific number of days when describing the length of time he spent in the forest, yet this linear time disappears when discussing the rape of his wife. The duration of linear time, when it comes to traumatic experience such as the rape of one's spouse, seems irrelevant. Bledsoe (2002) refers to this experiential sense of time as "contingent". Thus it can be said that Osman's notion of time in this incident is contingent upon his wife's return and then end of the event of rape.

Acts of rape damaged the entire social fabric of the Somali Bantu community by challenging the traditional role of men as the protectors of women. As husbands and wives attempt to move on after violence, they are plagued by the knowledge of this failure; of the inability of Somali Bantu men to protect their women. This knowledge results in a very subtle restructuring of gender relations among Somali Bantu in the post-resettlement phase. This issue will arise again throughout the narratives as a point of tension between male and female accounts of rape. The knowledge of the breach in this relationship was acknowledged, yet the desire to continue living as husband and wife in the present met this past trauma and challenged it. This insistence on continuing life "as usual" did not come in the form of forgetting, but rather, in the form of remembering through the voice of the collective.

By generalizing the experience of his wife, *this is what they did, they raped the women, raped the girls. There was a lot of rape at that time*, the pressure normally placed on the couple to deal with this experience on a personal level is eased as the event becomes an issue of general Somali Bantu experience. By collectivizing rape and understanding it as a fact of Somali Bantu life, Osman and his wife indirectly agree to relegate this event to the realm of that which is secret

(for a further description of “secrets” see Taussig 1999). The collectivization of gendered violence results in the dissemination of both guilt and blame across the community, relieving the couple from the difficulties of coping with such a difficult violation on their own. This is what allows Osman to distance himself from the story being narrated, recalling it as though it had happened to, or was about, someone else. By collectivizing the personal story of rape, Osman and his wife have initiated a secret, which when kept, equips them with the ability to move past the event and concentrate on repairing the damage through a descent into the ordinary (Das 2007); by carrying on with simple daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and working.

After the event of the rape, Osman and his wife left the jungle and migrated on foot to Kenya. They made it to Dadaab refugee camp where Osman immediately began searching for a job. He found work building houses and toilets for Somali Somali refugees. Although he was thankful for this work, he spoke to me of why he could not have worked in a more “prestigious” position, such as an employee of the resettlement organizations.

As Somali Bantu we were always lower than Somali Somalis. Our ancestors were lower than the Somali Somalis. They never fought to get the high position for the government. They were low so we were low also. You can differentiate between Somali Somali and Somali Bantu in the US because Somali Bantu never worked in the government but Somali Somalis did and they still work that way here and Bantu still don't work with the government. As Somali Bantu once we get a job that's good enough for us. We don't need anything else.

Osman acknowledges that his inferior position in Somali society, as well as in the camps, stemmed from a history of inferiority beginning with his ancestors. Yet he provides no specific explanations or reasons as to why this has always been the case. He seems to accept it as a fact of life demonstrating a sort of symbolic violence. Furthermore, he shows the Somali Bantu negative perception of government and those who work for it when he says: *as Somali Bantu once we get a job that's good enough for us. We don't need anything else.* He attaches an

immorality to the Somali desire for power, domination, and control, which they attempt to achieve through government and the pursuit of high sociopolitical positions. Somali Bantu can be understood then as the opposite: innocent, humble, and pure, because of their distaste for power and prestige. Somali Bantu are content with a humble life and do not seek fulfillment through engaging in immoral behavior.

Yet despite these assurances I wanted to understand why Osman remained adamantly silent regarding the history of slavery, so I asked him if he had knowledge as to why his ancestors were treated so poorly. After taking a moment to think, he replied:

**Osman:** I remember somewhat of the story. But I don't remember all of them. Our forefathers were living over there in Somalia. I was told that they were taken from Mozambique and Tanzania. I was told that they were taken over there when they were children. The person who took them there I can't remember.

**Abdullahi:** Said Barghash

**Osman:** Ah yes, Said Barghash. I was told that they were taken by ships up to Mogadishu. When they were taken over there they were sold to Somali Somali. So Somali have many tribes and the Somali Bantu who were sold were named after the tribe that bought them. He is low status but he is named after that tribe. They were using them as *addoon* (slaves), they had to work and do everything around the house. When Somalia didn't have any government Britain and Italy were there. When the Bantu became a lot, they started to go around Somalia collecting each other and building villages to live together.

Osman recalls a story of slavery, yet he is distanced from it and struggles to remember it. It does not enter into his narrative as a conscious memory, but is triggered by a specific question and only surfaces in fragmented portions when he is directly confronted with it. Knowledge of the memory does not signify its relevance to Osman's life story, nor does it reveal a causal connection between slavery and discrimination, marginalization, and violence. The recollection also does not enter into a deep explanation of the violence of slavery itself, but is mentioned almost as a passing, fleeting event. As soon as he begins a discussion of it, it is already almost

over and he moves on to, *when the Bantu became a lot, they started to go around Somalia collecting each other and building villages to live together*, discussing post-slavery emancipation. It appears as though the transition from slavery to freedom was a simple process depending solely on a growing population. Yet the influence of a slave past is woven into the violence throughout the entirety of the narrative. Failing to connect the experience of slavery to the moments of violence in his life causes confusion as to what lay behind the violence, motivating it, perpetuating it, and propelling it forward.

Immediately after this brief recollection of slavery, Osman enters into a discussion of the important contributions that Somali Bantu have made in Somalia. He reduces the impact of slavery by showing the irreplaceable role of Somali Bantu in the construction of the Somali nation-state:

Then we planted the mango trees. They are bigger than these trees now (points at the trees outside his townhome window). Every family got forty mango trees. There is no single tree that Somali Somalis planted there, they were all planted by Somali Bantu. If I estimated the Somali Bantu mango trees, it would reach from here to New York. The mangos are planted in the bank of the rivers. Our ancestors were living like that and we inherited the trees. The Somali Somalis never made farms. They were working for the government or pastoralists. The mangos being eating in Somalia were all the product of Somali Bantu. We would sell them to Somali Somali for a cheap price. The trees belonged to the Somali Bantu. Even though they were called slaves they were only slaves by name. They could still own some things.

*Then we planted the mango trees* cannot be understood as an isolated statement, but rather, must be connected to the preceding story of slavery, perhaps even as a contradiction to it, as well as to the totality of Somali Bantu experience. Regardless of how Somali Bantu came to inhabit Somali soil, they have made the most important contribution: the physical construction of the Somali nation-state from the ground up. For Osman, planting the mango trees, the source of Somali well-being and pride, was accomplished through the blood and sweat of Somali Bantu.

This contribution to the building of Somalia is a truth to which Somali Somali themselves can make no claim; after all, *there is no single tree that Somali Somali planted there*. His statement seems to be a challenge to Somali Somali, demanding to know, “and what did you do?” He disputes the Somali Somali sense of national entitlement by revealing their absence in the physical work of nation-building. In fact, his statement, *the mangos being eaten in Somalia were all the product of Somali Bantu*, suggests the almost scandalous idea that the very existence and well-being of Somali Somali depended on, and was due to, the hard work of Somali Bantu. When he states, *the trees belong to the Somali Bantu*, Osman is making a very controversial claim to Somali national soil, demanding the right of Somali Bantu to equality, citizenship, ownership, and most importantly, contesting the dehumanization and mistreatment of Somali Bantu at the hands of Somali Somali for so long. In this statement, Osman is also able to downplay the experience of slavery, suggesting that slavery was superficial and did not impact the very essence of Somali Bantu identity and life. Rather, their important role as nation-builders, as fellow citizens, occupies a more important place in Somali Bantu identity.

Osman and his wife remained at the camps from 1992 until 2004 when they received refugee status and were brought to the United States by UNHCR. The process of resettlement resulted in the relocation of Osman and his wife to the United States where they were settled in North Carolina. At this point Osman made an interesting revelation:

Before this wife I had another wife. The other wife that I had she delivered for me a daughter and she is now living in Somalia. This wife here she was someone else's wife and she had two children from him. They are in Somalia now the two children. When I married her she delivered 3 children for me, 2 of them are living here now.

While the exegesis about the event of rape showed how extremely violent acts come to alter relationships between husbands and wives, what is interesting about this excerpt is the subtle

way in which we can recognize the transformation of relationships between family members. *Before this wife I had another wife. The other wife that I had she delivered for me a daughter and she is now living in Somalia.* Osman, permitted by traditional Somali Bantu and Islamic customs, was married to two women. However, as families began applying for resettlement, these Somali Bantu cultural practices were looked upon as wrong, even “illegal,” in the United States. Families had to decide which wife and children would be registered for resettlement with the husband, and which ones would not. In similar situations encountered during my fieldwork, the first wife is normally selected to register with her husband, and the second wife either registers as a single mother, remains in the refugee camps, or returns to Somalia. In Osman’s situation, his second wife, having delivered more children for him than the first, and perhaps because of the traumatic event of rape which complicated traditional structures of obligation and responsibility, is given priority over the first wife. Thus Osman’s first wife is left behind and returns to Somalia while the second wife is brought to the United States.

As this excerpt illustrates, important decisions relating to family are not so clear-cut and straightforward. The experience of gendered violence introduces new factors that come into play as families must make impossible decisions about who will be officially recognized as family and resettled, and who must be left behind. These decision-making processes are not discussed, yet they are embodied in the very presence of one wife and the absence of the other.

In 2004 Osman and his family were resettled to North Carolina, but after a year and a half he moved to Kansas City where his son and daughter-in-law were living in the hopes of finding better work. Osman found a low-paying job in a warehouse. In 2008, after loading heavy boxes onto shelves at a packaging company for two years, Osman badly injured his knee and can barely walk now. He is currently unemployed and struggles to make ends meet. This injury, however,

has allowed him to go to school for the first time in his life. He is currently taking ESL classes to learn to speak English in the hopes of increasing his chances of finding work.

Osman grew quiet. I watched as he stared at a spot on the floor, wondering what he was thinking about and how he felt. I also wondered how he felt about Somali Somalis after all of his experiences. I asked him about this, to which he replied:

We came from the same country and we are living in a different country now.

This is not our country so I don't feel anything for them now.

He seems to be able to compartmentalize his experiences in Somalia and his life in the United States. Yet throughout his narrative I sensed a feeling of anger, a sense of injustice, which he blamed on Somali Somalis. *I don't feel anything for them now* seemed contrary to his story. How could a man who had endured such suffering, feel nothing for the perpetrators? As Osman spoke to me of his nostalgia for Somalia and the longing he felt for his family, I began to realize that, more important than his anger toward Somali Somalis, was his desire to return to a life before the outbreak of war, even at the expense of sociopolitical discrimination and marginalization. This longing however, would not materialize except under very specific conditions:

If we had a good government. The villages we ran from, still I have people over there and my family that's there. Now I can do nothing because I got old but I wanted to see with my eyes how is my land and my people and my country to see them and make sure they are ok. But now I am old. They still have the same culture as before. I have a video of my family in Somalia they sent to me. I begged for money to buy the camera. \$150.00 so I can see my family and the people back in Somalia. I finally got enough money and I sent it to them so they sent me this tape (points to the video still playing silently in the background). I want to show it to you, to show you my family and my home there.

We moved over to the television where Osman rewound the tape. He started it from the beginning, but strangely, kept the sound muted. No one seemed to notice this, and if they did, they did not mention it. A woman appeared on the screen. She looked angry and upset,

frowning, waving her arms frantically in front of the camera. Osman did not acknowledge her gestures but instead, went on to explain her relationship to him. “This is my sister” he said. I looked over at Abdullahi who did not seem to mind the silence. I asked Osman if he could turn on the volume. Suddenly her voice was audible, her yelling and screaming came through loud and clear. Osman did not react or explain. He continued to smile, quietly watching the screen. Did he not notice this obviously angry woman? Could he not hear her? I asked Abdullahi to translate what she was saying. He told me:

She’s cursing at Osman. She is telling him he went to America and left them and he forgot about them. She said he never sends them money. She wants him to remember them and to send them money because they don’t have any. She said she will be angry with him until he sends them what they need.

I looked over at Osman who seemed not to hear a word of what this woman was saying. His eyes were fixed on the screen, his smile steady and relaxed. Another young woman appeared on the video. This was the daughter of a former neighbor from Somalia who was married to four women, and had to select only one to bring to the United States. The young woman on the screen was a daughter whom he had given to his first wife because she could not bear children. Calmly she spoke to her father, now living in Ohio, through Osman’s camera, hoping her message would reach him:

I hope you can hear me and I hope you remember me. I am grown up now so maybe you don’t recognize me. I am feeling sad that we cannot be together but *Alhamdulillah*, that is God’s will. I want you to know I am grown now and I need you to send me money so I can buy new clothes and we also need money for food.

I have included these two instances from Osman’s video to illustrate the transformation of relationships between family and friends within the Somali Bantu community. Despite the difficulties encountered by refugees in the United States; their inability to find well-paying jobs, the difficulty of continuing life in a new and foreign world, and their very humble living

situations, they are expected to send remittances in order to provide for their families in the States, as well as those back home. This places a considerable amount of pressure on Somali Bantu people living in Kansas City who struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis. The “provider complex” is a common feature of post-resettlement life for many transnational migrants (see for example Castles & Miller 2009; Obadare & Adebaniwi 2009; Brennan 2004; Levitt 2001), as they are expected to send money and other material support back home, but find themselves financially unable to do so.

Osman’s story about acquiring the video camera, how he begged for 150 dollars to purchase the camera, stemmed from his longing to maintain ties with his family back home. Yet the responses of his family, such as that of his sister described earlier, are fraught with anger relating to unmet expectations surrounding the issue of financial support. Those still in Somalia attribute the lack of financial support to “forgetting” about family and obligations on the part of resettled refugees. Osman’s desire to keep the video muted, only watching scenes of a familiar place and of familiar faces with whom he longs to be reunited is more understandable when the sound is turned on, putting sounds and words behind the images and revealing the changing nature of relationships in the aftermath of war and resettlement.

*Conclusion:*

Osman’s narrative, representing one experience within a larger collective group, tells the story of a long history of discrimination and violence, based on the distinctions of the body-maps. As a farmer of Bantu origin, he was separated out from the rest of Somali society, denied access to education, and forced to flee his land which served as a source of cultural identity, as well as his sole means of livelihood. But the violence of Osman’s life is not limited to these originary moments of violence. Instead, they are woven into the most intimate parts of Osman’s

life. The raping of his wife and his inability to protect her has altered the traditional and sacred bond between a man and woman in Somali Bantu society. Furthermore, a history of educational exclusion has limited his ability to fulfill his role as bread-winner for the family all the way through the post-resettlement phase. The outbreak of war, resulting in his need to flee Somalia and instigating his move to the refugee camps, has separated Osman not only from his first wife and their children, but also from his family, and friends that comprised his entire social support network. It also separated him from the land in which he invested so many years of hard work. With no educational background, and no work experience save agriculture, he was forced to find a job lifting heavy boxes on minimum wage in the United States at a relatively old age in order to provide for his family. This resulted in a severe knee injury which has now limited his ability to continue on in the only line of work that is available to him—a man with little knowledge of the English language, and a refugee with no education.

Today Osman's life is consumed by idyllic memories, longing for the relationships of his past and for the land he once called home. His days consist of watching and rewatching home videos of his family in Somalia, with the television muted, silencing the reality of the drastic changes wrought upon this now imagined world, and the pressures placed on him to provide what he, himself, will probably never have. Yet remarkably, his memories are not completely determined by the experiences of discrimination and violence. Rather, he creates mythico-histories that invalidate Somali Somali claims to superiority and citizenship. These mythico-histories belittle the traditionally esteemed realm of the political, defining it instead as a place of corruption, immorality, and violence. He counters the negative attitudes towards farming in a predominantly nomadic society by pointing to its significance in the construction of the Somali

nation-state. He uses farming as a contribution through which Somali Bantu may lay proud and legitimate claim to an equal Somali national identity.

But not all memories are incorporated into these mythico-histories. In fact, some parts of his past remain completely untouched by them. Such is the case with the history of slavery. Osman does not connect the history of slavery to the social construction of race in Somalia, and therefore, does not recognize its relevance to the social creation of the body-maps. Instead, he seems to internalize these body-maps as a fact of life, continuing to cite them as a cause of the social divisions between Somali Bantu and Somali Somali.

Despite Osman's attempts to escape into the more pleasant memories of his past, his violent experiences are embodied in his calloused hands, in his injured knee, in the small, empty apartment he now occupies in a world that is foreign to him, in the physical separation from his familiar home and family, and in the unspoken knowledge of the failure to protect his wife. It is everywhere, surrounding him, always reminding him of what he perhaps wishes to someday forget.

Through this brief analysis of the underlying meanings of the text, I hope to have shown the importance of both the said and the unsaid in narrative analysis. This is particularly important in understanding the narratives of those who for years have been affected by the experiences of violence, marginalization, and trauma. What Osman shared through the text of his narrative is more than what he can, or perhaps *wants*, to put into words. We can gain better insight into his narrative when we explicate these undertones that add color to the story of Osman's past, thus resuscitating the memories in the present, and bringing them to life.

## *Chapter 4*

### **And then the Bullets Came to the Habat-Sugaay**

Osman's narrative reveals a particular perspective of Somali Bantu experience. As an elder, his memories of Somalia extend far beyond the outbreak of the Somali Civil War, and therefore, much of his narrative revolves around the issue of showing the contribution of Somali Bantu to the construction of the Somali nation-state. This is not the case with all Somali Bantu, as many people fled with their families in their early childhood years. To understand the variations in traumatic memory recall over time, and the differential ways by which Somali Bantu remember and draw a sense of self-awareness, we must examine these various levels of experience. For this reason, I will share the story of Mukhtar Abdi, a 28 year old Somali Bantu refugee in Kansas City.

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I knocked on the door of Mukhtar Abdi's townhome. His wife answered, dressed in her beautiful bright blue and orange *hijab*. She did not say much to me, or to Abdullahi, but showed us to the couch where we could set up our equipment. It was quiet except for the sound of her four children playing with their toys on the bare floor in the kitchen. Like many homes in the Somali Bantu refugee community, walking into Mukhtar's townhome in Wyandotte County, KS was like walking into Somalia. As I entered the townhome, I looked around. The walls were covered in bright pink sheets with a delicate rose pattern across the entire living room. I noticed that the sheets also covered the back door and all the windows in the home. The space was dimly lit, with no lamps in the living room except for the muffled streams of sunlight mixing

with the pink of the sheets, producing an orange hue all throughout the house. Something strange caught my attention. Amidst the humble furniture in the home stood a huge television that spanned half of the apartment's living room wall. Its modern edge, the presence of an expensive piece of technology, seemed strangely out of place. I was distracted from the massive TV by Mukhtar's wife who brought me water and offered us some soda. I set up my computer and voice recorder. Mukhtar had not yet arrived so I sat on the couch while Abdullahi performed his afternoon prayer.

A few minutes later Mukhtar entered, hugging his children and wife, and then seated himself on the sofa across from me. He was a well-built man, medium in height, and had a long beard. He wore blue jeans, rolled up above his ankles, and a plain white t-shirt. Abdullahi remained seated on the floor after his prayer, so I moved next to him, taking a seat on the floor at Mukhtar's feet. His wife and children sat close by throughout the duration of the narrative. His wife did not introduce herself and did not speak at all.

Mukhtar is 28 years old and is married with four children. He worked for Avis car rental, cleaning cars for eight hours a day on minimum wage, but was recently laid off. He was married in 2001 in Nairobi Kenya. His wife gave birth to five children, but one died a year after she was born. Like many Somali Bantu, he and his family were farmers, working a small plot of land in the Lower Juba Valley in a town called Jilib. In 2004, Mukhtar and his family were resettled to Kansas City.

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Mukhtar began his story, his voice strong and sure. He spoke clearly and did not hesitate to begin immediately with his memories of Somalia:

In 1990 the war started in Mogadishu. We were living in the lower Juba so we had no problem. The war was in Mogadishu first. So people who left from Mogadishu were passing by us. So we were calling them *Habat-keent* (bullet-bringers), and they were calling us *Habat-sugaay* (bullet-waiters). We were seeing for four months people running and passing by us. When they were migrating to Kenya and Tanzania, Eastern Africa, we were just settled. We didn't know anything about the war so we didn't leave our farms. That's because there were no sources of news. There was no radio that we can use or television. Everything was shut down. And the government was overthrown. So we were thinking the situation would go away after a few days or a few months and then everything will come back, the government will come back.

*In 1990 the war started in Mogadishu. We were living in the Lower Juba so we had no problem.*

*The war was in Mogadishu first. So people who left from Mogadishu were passing by us.*

Mukhtar recalls the exact date of the outbreak of war in Somalia. Yet the war which he recalls is isolated to the city of Mogadishu, thus distancing himself, and Somali Bantu in general, from any direct involvement in its initiation. It also shows the fragmented nature of Somali society, where a war in Mogadishu did not necessarily mean the outbreak of war in the Lower Juba. As a marginalized minority, Somali Bantu were always excluded from the workings of the larger Somali society. This experience of exclusion shaped Somali Bantu views and expectations of the war as well. They were outsiders who had nothing to gain from war and who had no reason to become involved in it. Their belief that the war would not affect them seems to suggest that as Somali Bantu, they believed they would continue to be excluded, even from involvement and participation during the war.

*So we were calling them Habat-keent, and they were calling us Habat-sugaay.* As people fled Mogadishu and migrated to Kismayo, they had to pass through territory inhabited predominantly by Somali Bantu people. These Somali Somalis were pursued by other Somali Somalis involved in the war. So the term *Habaat-keent*, literally translated as “the bullet-bringers,” refers to the Somali Somalis who, fleeing Mogadishu, were pursued by a train of

bullets from members of other tribes. It is thus a label to describe the people who brought the war into Somali Bantu territory. *Habaat-Sugaay*, on the other hand, means “the bullet-waiters.” This was a reference to the unarmed Somali Bantu who inhabited the lower Juba Valley. They were called bullet-waiters because they were settled in their homes, uninvolved in the war, and yet the bullets, representing the violence of the war, would eventually come to them anyway. It can almost be understood as a Somali Somali threat against the Somali Bantu meaning, “don’t worry the bullets are coming for you, you just wait.” These labels show the divided nature of Somali society, even during the chaotic times of war. While the war was initially fought between Somali Somali tribes, thus showing the fragmented nature of Somali Somali society, there was still a specific distinction drawn between all Somali Somali and all Somali Bantu, where Somali Somali were united, despite their internal differences, against the Somali Bantu “others.”

*We were seeing for four months people running and passing by us. When they were migrating to Kenya and Tanzania, Eastern Africa, we were just settled. Again this shows the social separation between the Somali Bantu and Somali Somali. Despite the fact that for four months, Mukhtar’s family witnessed people in flight and watched as bullets were exchanged between groups, they did not feel compelled to move. They did not connect the situation of Somali Somali with their own situation, because they were always taught that they were separate and different. Mukhtar also suggests that the presence of violence seems to be a normal part of Somali Bantu life. Killing and fighting did not mean war, in the mind of Mukhtar, as he says we didn’t know anything about the war so we didn’t leave our farms.*

*That’s because there were no sources of news. There was no radio that we can use or television. Everything was shut down. And the government was overthrown. The outbreak of*

war was a time of mass chaos and hysteria. All communication or contact with the outside world was shut down. This created an atmosphere of confusion as to what was going on and what the fighting really meant. Mukhtar acknowledges that the government had been overthrown, but does not connect this event with the start of a war. Perhaps Somalia's national history, and even before this, Somalia's fight for independence from its colonial powers, has impacted Somali Bantu views of government as something unstable and insecure, subject to overthrow, replacement, and annihilation. Yet throughout the periods of political turmoil, the people of Somalia have remained overall unharmed. *We were thinking the situation would go away after a few days or a few months and then everything will come back, the government will come back,* just as it always had in the many historical instances of political unrest that came before 1990-91.

And then the bullets came to the *Habaat-sugaay*. We were not fighting and we didn't have a tribe to fight for, but settled water moves with the moving water. So the moving water disrupted the settled water and moved it with it. Anybody who passed us used to kill somebody. Or the people who fight against the people who were migrating would shoot a bullet and it would hit one of us instead. When this was happening I was living with my uncle. The son of my uncle was one month old. All of the people in the village moved out.

*And then the bullets came to the Habaat-sugaay.* This is a very important moment in Mukhtar's narrative, and more importantly, in his life. The statement refers to the moment when Somali aggression was turned against innocent Somali Bantu farmers and their families. It marked the beginning of major changes in Somali Bantu life, maybe even the end of Somali Bantu life in Somalia. It was the historical moment when Somali Bantu realized there was no place for them in Somali society and that they would have to leave. Despite the fact that Somali Bantu had no interests in the clan wars that were erupting throughout southern Somalia, and despite their history of sociopolitical marginalization, evidenced by Mukhtar's statement: *we*

*were not fighting and we didn't have a tribe to fight for*, Somali Bantu were nevertheless engulfed into the violence of the Somali Civil War.

Mukhtar uses an old Somali Bantu proverb to explain how an isolated group came to be involved in a war from which they had nothing to gain. He says, *settled water moves with the moving water*, which means that regardless of how separate, isolated, or excluded the Somali Bantu were from Somali society before the war, the war came like a tide, enveloping the comfortable, settled water into its waves; disrupting it, uprooting it, and sending it downstream with everything else. For Mukhtar, war does not discriminate. It does not care who is involved or who is not, who is innocent and who is guilty, and therefore, the crimes committed were not specifically against Somali Bantu, but against humanity at large. He suggests that war takes on a life of its own, dominating and destroying everything in its path. Somali Bantu were incorporated into the violence regardless of their lack of interest in it, or their isolation from it. Even those in their homes, or working on their farms, were touched by the violence: *Anybody who passed us used to kill somebody. Or the people who fight against the people who were migrating would shoot a bullet and it would hit one of us instead.*

But what Mukhtar does not acknowledge is that the violence of the war was carried out by people, by agents who do in fact discriminate. By removing the violence from lived experience and placing it into the realm of the abstract, the perpetrators seem to be absolved of their responsibility for the crimes committed with their own hands. But perhaps for Mukhtar, and other Somali Bantu who experienced violence on a much deeper level, not only through the war, but through the destruction of their everyday realities and their normal everyday lives, pointing fingers becomes less important than the everyday work of mending the damage done to the social fabric of Somali Bantu society.

So when we moved out from our homes, our villages became the place of war. People were fighting in our homes. So we were in the center. Anyone coming from Mogadishu was passing us and anyone coming from Kismayo was passing us. So that caused us to live in the bush, so we were living with the animals in the bush. We didn't have a house there in the bush. So when we come back to our gardens and farms, a Somali who is from Mogadishu is settled there and he has his gun. You cannot go back to your farm. If you are captured, you have to harvest all the crops over there and carry it wherever they want. If you refuse to do that they will kill you.

Before the war, Mukhtar was given to his father's brother who did not have children of his own. This Somali Bantu custom is a gesture of love—to give one's own child to be raised by a loved one whose fortune would have it that he or she could not have children. So Mukhtar lived with his uncle, who one month before the war, was finally blessed with a son of his own. As the war intensified, Somali Bantu villages were caught in a cross-fire between the cities of Mogadishu and Kismayo; Mogadishu being the major site of war, and Kismayo a port-town to which many Somali's who did not go to Kenya fled. Like many others, Mukhtar and his family were forced to leave their farms, hiding in the Bush by day, returning to their homes at night. After some time, returning to one's home was no longer an option, because *a Somali who is from Mogadishu is settled there and he has his gun*. Not only did Somali force Somali Bantu out of their villages, causing them to live in the Bush, but they also claimed the territory for themselves. Returning Somali Bantu were captured and forced to work on their own farms, producing food and crops for their captors. Mukhtar's statement, *that caused us to live in the bush, so we were living with the animals in the bush*, shows how deeply affected the Somali Bantu were by this experience. Being forced off of one's land, especially when the land is one's source of pride, well-being, and livelihood, is dehumanizing. It is to separate people from the social worlds by which they come to define themselves as human.

One day my uncle told us ‘I will go and find food for you from our farm’ and he went to our farm early, at 6am. He took a long time and when he came back his nose was bleeding. They were loading him all the day and when they released him they kicked and beat him. He was sick like one month and a half. Another day me and my aunt also tried to get some crops from our farm. Many Somali Bantu groups follow each other and go together to his or her farm. So one day, my aunt and me, when we were going to our farm, we found a militia hiding there. When they saw us they started shooting at us with their bullets. Some people were killed and I myself was shot (lifts pant leg and touches his bullet wound) this is where I was hurt (hand remains on scar, silence).

The instance of Mukhtar’s uncle’s beating is a difficult experience for a young child to endure. When his uncle, the figure of strength and protection in Mukhtar’s adolescent life, is hurt, this has a lasting impact on Mukhtar’s sense of security. Recalling specific details such as a bleeding nose, and the length of time his uncle was in recovery, suggests the deep imprint of the moment in Mukhtar’s mind. The events that followed, however, were even more traumatic. As his uncle was injured, Mukhtar, the second eldest male in the family, was suddenly thrust into the role of caretaker. He had to leave the protection and safety of the bush, venturing out into a hostile and violent world with his uncle’s wife in order to get food for the family. The question was one of survival and risk. Thus while his uncle’s injury forced him out from the Bush, more importantly, it seems to have forced him out from the protection and innocence of childhood. The violence he witnessed, in a way, initiated Mukhtar into the realm of adulthood even though he was only a young boy at the time.

Often when listening to the narratives of the Somali Bantu of Kansas City, one may become caught up in the story, in the adventure behind it all. It may be common to forget the reality and truth that the stories represent. When Mukhtar lifted his pant leg, revealing the deep mark of a bullet hole in his right leg, I was brought back down to my own reality. I watched Mukhtar move his fingers over the scar, quiet, reflecting, remembering. The scar was his

testimony, the witness; it was a remnant of the violence he had experienced, now otherwise scattered in his mind as a few fragmented memories and thoughts. He was forced to carry it with him wherever he went: into the refugee camps, across an ocean, into the privacy of his small yet comfortable home in Kansas City. It was always there, embodying the trauma of a young child witnessing murder and suffering all around.

But the previous excerpt is important for another reason as well. *Many Somali Bantu groups follow each other and go together to his or her farm.* This statement reveals the sense of group solidarity that emerged even in the most frightful of times. The Somali Bantu stuck together, stood by each other, marching in groups into a very dangerous world. They risked their lives for each other, making sure to accompany one other in their journey to acquire food and water. Although they were aware of the risks they faced, they marched on in unison anyway. It is a show of remarkable strength that emerges from this group's collective identity. This social support system even extended beyond the realm of the survivors, into the responsibility and concern for the dead, as Mukhtar describes below:

Many people were dead, but there was no time and no chance to bury the people. Some people they decayed over there while they were lying outside. A warlord general came back to capture the militia who were there. So when he was chasing those people, many Somali Bantu were killed. When the general was chasing after them, we had some time to bury some of the people who were dead. But we couldn't bury everybody because some bodies were rotting from the sun and they were smelling bad. We didn't have gloves or tools to move their bodies and the smell was too strong. When we got a little bit chance, the other people were buried and some people went back to their farms.

*Many people were dead, but there was no time and no chance to bury the people* speaks to the importance of burial in Somali Bantu life. Returning to the site of murder, risking one's life in order to bury the bodies of the deceased, may seem like an unnecessary risk to take during war. War causes death, and it is virtually impossible to bury all the dead. However, the topic of burial

and funerary rights is a serious issue in Islam. For Somali Bantu Muslims, burial represents more than simply closure for the family and friends of the deceased. It is a necessary requirement to assure the delivery of the soul to *Allah* for judgment. The funeral is more for the deceased than for the family, as it is a time where the last prayers are made for the delivery of the soul to heaven. Death separates the soul from the physical body, and the soul is believed to wander until the act of burial reunites the two. Thus a body that is exposed to the world after death, remaining uncovered and unburied, is the sign of a tormented soul whose transition to the afterlife is incomplete. Mukhtar's decision to dwell on the issue of burial here makes more sense when placed within this broader Islamic context. When he states that *some people they decayed over there while they were laying outside...But we couldn't bury everybody because some bodies were rotting from the sun and they were smelling bad. We didn't have gloves or tools to move their bodies and the smell was too strong. When we got a little bit chance, the other people were buried* he is speaking to more than a bad memory of a disturbing image. He is voicing his regret, perhaps even guilt, at his inability to fulfill this Islamic obligation towards his fellow Somali Bantu Muslim brothers and sisters who were left unburied to rot in the sun. Therefore Mukhtar's return to the site of murder is seen as a duty, a risk that he must take in order to feel at peace with himself as a Muslim, and as a member of the Somali Bantu collective. His inability to bury all the bodies of the deceased is a source of mental anguish for Mukhtar, a dedicated Muslim who from an early age, was raised according to the religion of Islam.

The acquisition of clean water and food became an obstacle for Mukhtar's family, whose farm was devastated due to the war and the drought plaguing the country. Many people left their farms and the Bush for Kismayo. The way to Kismayo was a difficult route to take. He described the hysteria of clan affiliation which, despite their historical exclusion from it,

included the Somali Bantu as hidden supporters of this or that clan. The presence of militias was also an obstacle, beating up and torturing civilians who were trying to flee Somalia. Furthermore, the food delivered by the relief agencies was monopolized by militias and warlord, and did not reach its intended recipients. Hunger, malnutrition, and starvation were added to the already complex situation of war:

The food that the UNHCR sent for the people who are starving, it was not coming to us. It was going to the militias who were over there. So the people got something called a lack of nutrition that causes the person to become swollen. You can see that the person died and he was not killed but he died because of no food. Those people who were dying on the way were the people who were trying to go to Kismayo to find a job or to get the food that was sent by UNHCR because Kismayo was the shore of the ships that come there. All the people who tried to walk down there were dying on the way because of lack of food and water.

Mukhtar's uncle, now recuperated after the earlier incident, decided to travel to Kismayo to bring food back for his family. Mukhtar described the situation as follows:

My uncle who tried to go to Kismayo to get food for us, he came back to us with a little baby. The baby's mother was swollen and dead, so the baby was left on the breast of his dead mother. When we were waiting for him to bring us food, he brought us a baby instead. So me and my uncle, his wife, and his little baby, and the baby that he brought from the road outside, we tried to migrate to Kismayo. We decided anybody who died on the way to leave him and anybody who stopped to stop.

No one seemed safe from the violence, not even young children and babies. The uncle's rescue of the baby, especially in a time where there was already a shortage of food and water, shows the ability of Somali Bantu to maintain a sense of humanity in times of war. The condition in which the baby was found, attached to the breast of his *swollen and dead* mother, is a haunting image. When the family decided to leave Jilib and head to Kismayo, they were forced to make a very difficult decision, *we decided anybody who died on the way to leave him and anybody who stopped to stop*. For a family to be forced to sit down and discuss under what conditions

abandonment would be allowed, is a traumatizing event to experience. It shows the way family bonds and traditional familial responsibilities had to be renegotiated during times of war. It reveals how violence warps and transforms family relations in unspeakable ways that alter the relationships between people even long after the violence has subsided. The knowledge of this decision, even after the violence is removed, seeps into the everyday lives of those who experienced it and becomes a part of the everyday work of mending. This decision would come to impact Mukhtar in very strong ways later on.

The way was jammed. Twenty-four hours people were walking down to go to Kismayo. You can see some people who are eating grass like animals. When some people reached Kismayo, they were given wheat flour and oil, and some rice. When my family was walking we found a car carrying food, and we were given food on the way. Each family was given rice and oil and some beans. Another problem was anybody who used the oil, because of non-nutrition in the body, if the people use the oil, they were dying. So anybody who uses the rice by itself was a little bit okay but anybody who uses the oil was sick or died. When we got that new food on the way we decided to come to Kenya, not to Kismayo. The people who gave us the food told us not to go to Kismayo, but to go to Kenya instead. We were walking two nights and two days. The two days and two nights walking was to a city called Afmadow.

*You can see some people who are eating grass like animals.* This statement reveals the extent to which suffering reached in the Somali Civil War of 1990-91. The comparison of people to animals shows the dehumanization of people through war. The problem of hunger was so severe that people had to resort to eating grass, plants, or anything they could manage to swallow. Furthermore, the problem of malnutrition shows the impact of war on the deconstruction of the physical body, hindering the ability of the body to survive, as Mukhtar shows through his discussion of oil intake.

When we reached Afmadow my legs were swollen from walking. My legs would not go down, they were just swollen. And we still have to walk to Kenya. We did not go the time we wanted to go because of this problem. My legs were very big. My family decided to leave me over there because they thought I was from the

group of swollen people and I was going to die. I was very scared and sad, but I was not angry because I knew this is what they have to do. But fortunately, I did not die and we waited over there for a month and a half. My uncle got a job over there building houses. So he brought us food and my aunt cooked for us but there was no medicine over there. When we stayed one month and a half and my body got a little bit of nutrition, we started to migrate again.

When we speak of flight, and the experience of refugees leaving their countries, we often do not think of the physically detrimental effects that fleeing has on the body. Refugees must walk for miles and miles, travelling for days at a time with little or no food and water. As a young boy, Mukhtar did not complain about his fatigue or his stress. Regardless, the power of his body to speak up on his behalf is evident through the swelling of his legs.

*My family decided to leave me over there because they thought I was from the group of swollen people and I was going to die.* This speaks to the connections that were made by people between swelling and death, which was based on earlier observations that the bodies of those who died of malnutrition became swollen shortly before death. Thus swelling was regarded as a prophecy of one's looming end. The observation was enough to challenge the family bond between a young boy, Mukhtar, and those responsible for his protection and safety. It shows the struggle of the family to survive at the expense of one of their own, and the desire to support and protect one another under the traditional and sacred pact of family duty. Mukhtar's statement, *I was very scared and sad, but I was not angry because I knew this is what they have to do*, reveals the way the breakdown of traditional family bonds becomes normalized and accepted. Traditional family values were tested and challenged, revealing the limits of the family unit and the individual desire for survival at the expense of collective cohesion and unity.

Mukhtar continued the story of his escape from Somalia. His voice was still calm and he seemed unmoved by his sad experiences. He spoke of how his uncle was captured by two

members of the Hawiyye clan who accused him of murdering their father on behalf of the Darod clan. He was almost killed until a Somali Somali truck driver on his way to Kismayo, intervened and paid the men to release their prisoner. This same man then drove Mukhtar and his family to the Liboi border between Somalia and Kenya where they were approached by UNHCR:

In the morning we walked to the Kenya Liboi border and UNHCR came to us over there. They brought us to a camp called Dagahaley. They gave us a nutrition card, like a food-stamp. The name I have now, Mukhtar Abdulrahman Abdi, is not really my name. My real name is Mukhtar Ali Hassan. Why I have this name is because this is my uncle's name. He's the one who wrote the UNHCR registration and that's why I have, up to now, that name. That is what I remember when I think about Somalia.

Of all of the benefits Mukhtar and his family received from the refugee organization, he only names one in particular: *They gave us a nutrition card, like a food-stamp.* Perhaps his memory of this nutrition card is shaped by the reality of hunger and starvation that he faced for many days before finally arriving in Kenya. This illustrates how particular memories are triggered by experiences that stand out in our minds. The pain of hunger and the scenes of death and desolation he witnessed on his march to the camps are ingrained in his mind as a reminder of the tangibility of suffering; what it physically looks like and how it feels.

When Mukhtar confesses that the name he now carries is not his real name, but rather, the name his uncle selected for him when he registered Mukhtar at the camps, it shows how this experience is carried into the present through the reproduction of his name. We might even go so far as to say that the change in his name represents his rebirth after the war. It is the literal formation of the subject through violence, physically and mentally created as someone new. The fact that Mukhtar continues to carry this name today is a constant reminder of the many experiences that culminated in the changing of his name, and of his subjectivity, by his uncle that first day in the refugee camps.

But the problems he and his family faced were not resolved once they reached the camps.

Instead, there they encountered old problems:

First time we were living in Dadaab camp, especially Dagahaley refugee camp. When we got the resettlement process, IOM, the International Immigration, decided to take us to the Western Kenya to Kakuma because they were afraid that the Somali Somali would have problems with the Somali Bantu to kill them because if they hear you are going to America maybe they will kill you or maybe they were angry about why only Somali Bantu are going to the United States, that's why they took us to Kakuma refugee camp. And they also put us in a different area for only Somali Bantu.

As Somali Bantu made their way to the camps, they were surprised to find the perpetrators of the war living side-by-side with them under the new title of "refugee." Despite their superficial reduction to an internationally recognized equal social status, the previous social striations and hierarchical divides were simply transferred into the new setting of the refugee camps. Somali Bantu seemed to have been recast into a familiar world of discrimination and marginalization with a new subjectivity; a new perspective shaped by the violence itself. The danger to their lives in Dadaab was imminent, resulting in their transfer from Dadaab to Kakuma refugee camp in Western Kenya, where they were separated out, once again, from the rest of the surrounding society. There they encountered new problems:

We were new in the refugee camp in Kakuma. The water is hot, not cold water. Everything is hot. Another problem is if you can find food, you can't find anything to cook with. So you have to buy the firewood by itself. You cannot afford to buy firewood because there's no work over there. The problem is not only lack of food but also lack of clothes. If I talk about my family, my wife and I, we had only two shirts and two pants and one sirwaal, like the Indian style clothes. And the two pants I had were torn in the back and I couldn't sew it and didn't have the money to take them to the tailor. Maybe I was a lucky person because I had two clothes but there were other people who were lower than me. They didn't have anything. When I tore my pants I had to talk to my neighbor so he could know my situation and I know his situation. When my clothes tore I asked him for a needle to help me sew my clothes. He told me he has only one clothes and he washes these at night and wears them at the day time. So I

understood that he has the same problem that I have. The women had the same problem over there.

Mukhtar discusses the difficulties of refugee life, not in the grand and dramatic ways it altered their lives, but rather, in the most simple, mundane, day-to-day ways. *The water is hot, not cold water... if you can find food, you can't find anything to cook with. So you have to buy the firewood by itself. You cannot afford to buy firewood because there's no work over there.* These subtle difficulties take a heavy toll on Somali Bantu because they are consistent problems encountered every day. Such simple things as cooking and getting dressed in the morning became sources of much stress and anxiety. But through these experiences a sense of community once again began to emerge. Take for example Mukhtar's neighbor in the camps. He communicates his problems to him and then realizes *that he has the same problem that I have.* It is through this collective suffering that a sense of cohesion amongst Somali Bantu, challenged by the difficulties of the war, was reproduced in the refugee camps. This resilience of the Somali Bantu community shows the power of the collective in overcoming, or at least, in dealing with traumatic violence and experiences.

Eventually marrying in the camps, Mukhtar and his wife proceeded to have children and settle into refugee camp life. A continued lack of nutrition continued on in the camps and affected Mukhtar's life in a very tragic way:

We couldn't afford to buy nutritious food until people came to the United States and started sending money to their families over there. Everybody had this problem and many children were dying because of a lack of nutrition. It was a very hard place over there. I have a daughter she died in the camps. She was born on January 17 2002. She died July 2003. She died because of a lack of nutrition. I think she died because where we were living in Kakuma there was no clean water and not good nutrition. She was sick, I took her to a clinic for UNHCR and they were giving her medicine for nutrition but it didn't nourish her. She had black stool. They couldn't treat her so we brought her back home. When we took her home she was alive for three days. The fourth day the black of her

eyes changed into a white color. So when I saw this sign I realized she is going to die. So I returned her to the hospital but we had the same situation. So they tried to put an IV in her body, but everywhere they put the IV is swollen, even her head was swollen. I did not have the effort to take her to another doctor. We did the traditional treatment but it doesn't help. So if her time is finished, whatever you do to her it will never help. And then she died. So we brought her home and we buried her.

*We couldn't afford to buy nutritious food until people came to the United States and started sending money to their families over there.* Mukhtar is referring to the fact that after having seen and experienced the struggles of refugees in the camps first-hand, he, and others like him, have developed an empathy that makes them feel a sense of responsibility for those left behind. Today Mukhtar sends money to his family and friends in the camp to ensure that they have access to basic food and water. This speaks to the shortcomings of refugee organizations that cannot provide for all the refugees that reside within their borders.

The tragic story of Mukhtar's young daughter who died of malnutrition in the camps is a source of sadness for him, as she died of a preventable disease. Had the circumstances of the camp been better, her chances of survival may have been much higher. *When we took her home she was alive for three days. The fourth day the black of her eyes changed into a white color. So when I saw this sign I realized she is going to die.* Mukhtar began to notice symptoms which he associates with malnutrition, and the swollen, dead bodies he witnessed as a child along the road to Kenya. Seeing his daughter's situation triggers the surfacing of these difficult memories, and thus he understands his daughter's situation not only through the eyes of a concerned father, but also with the same eyes that saw disease and war and death in Somalia. Because of the many instances during which he was forced to witness people die due to what he describes as a *lack of nutrition*, he acknowledges the fact that he knows his daughter would also die: *So when I saw this sign I realized she is going to die.* Yet Mukhtar is not angry or upset about what happened

to his daughter. In fact, he seems to accept her death as fate: *if her time is finished, whatever you do to her it will never help*. Just as all of those dead bodies on the road were destined to die, so too was Mukhtar's daughter. The fact that he and his family must accept the preventable death of their young daughter shows the normalization of suffering and sadness. The family is able to deal with their loss by reminding themselves that this happened to many children of other families. They are not alone in their suffering, thus easing the pain of losing a child through calling upon the collective experience of malnutrition and death.

The Somali problem touched all of the world. We were a special people who had the most problems. Now we talk about uniting the people who are living over there and to help each other. I will tell my friends who are living in the US to help their people back home with the problems that they have. And those problems are there because of the lack of government, lack of jobs, hunger. If somebody got hungry they will do anything, stealing, killing, everything. Anybody who has anything he will steal it. If the person refuses he will kill, because he is hungry he will do that. I am not happy about that. I'm thankful for my life now. I have food, clothes, and a nice home. I'm not happy about what happened in Somalia but it is Allah's will.

*The Somali problem touched all of the world.* Mukhtar is revealing how deeply the Somali situation has impacted his world. This can be understood as how Mukhtar believes the Somali Civil War disrupted everything about his life. Its effects are not restricted to Somalia or the refugee camps in Kenya, but rather, to every aspect of his life, his entire world. He also refers to the presence of Somali Somali and Somali Bantu refugees on American soil. He implicitly states that his presence is evidence of the far-reaching hand of the violence of the Somali Civil War. He goes on to say that *we are a special people who had the most problems* but does not elaborate on what made the Somali Bantu "special" or what caused them to be targets during the war. Instead, he attributes the causes of the conflict to a *lack of government, lack of jobs, and hunger*. He does not mention why these conflicts existed in the first place, completely leaving out the

historical position of Somali Bantu in pre-civil war life. In fact, nowhere in his narrative does Mukhtar connect the violence he experienced to his position as a Somali Bantu. He does not discuss slavery, racism, discrimination, or marginalization, but instead, points to the effects of these experiences as the causes of the war.

He goes on to discuss the way hunger has the power to drive its victims to commit horrendous acts of violence, a conclusion he draws from his memories of starvation during the war in Somalia. Thus what he is most thankful for in his life today is the fact that he no longer must experience starvation or a lack of clothing. His appreciation for life in America is limited to its ability to provide him with these few necessities. Yet these are basic human rights that should be guaranteed to everyone regardless of where they are from or what they believe. The fact that Mukhtar feels content with his life now is derived from the fact that these rights are no longer violated. However, should this be enough for Mukhtar, and other refugees like himself whose definition of happiness rests on the provision of basic human rights and nothing more? His happiness today is linked in important ways to his violent and traumatic past. His present perceptions of good and bad are filtered through a past that causes him to be thankful for what he did not, and could not, have access to before resettlement.

Mukhtar then expanded on his role as provider for his family back home in Somalia and in the camps:

So we solved those problems when people come to the United States. They knew the problems everybody had over there so they try to send their friends and neighbors money. What I encourage people to do is not to talk about what happened. Everybody knows what happened. What I encourage them is only to help their friends back there Now their lives are changed in Kakuma because of the people sending money. The weather is the same, it's still hot, but now the person can afford to buy milk and food with the money for his family, he cannot depend on UNHCR to get food from there. And this is caused by the families

who come to the United States, the friends and the neighbors they send money to help.

For Mukhtar, moving to the United States did not mean forgetting about Somalia and the refugee camps. Instead, it is an opportunity to help those people whose suffering Mukhtar knows all too well. Yet his limited income and now his lack of employment will influence his ability to help. He, like Osman, has taken on a role that is overwhelming and may be beyond his means. This shows the sense of guilt attached to “getting out” of the refugee camps. Relationships change as Mukhtar moves on to a new life in the United States. He is no longer equal in suffering, but must take on the role of provider. Life is not suddenly better, but instead, is tied to feelings of responsibility and guilt. Despite his own dismal situation, Mukhtar must feel thankful for being one of the “lucky few” who made it to the United States, and must struggle to find ways to provide for those he now feels responsible for.

Mukhtar continued his story, discussing how, despite the comfort and happiness he experiences in the United States, he continues to worry about his family back home:

I think a lot about Somalia. My father and mom are still living over there. Anytime I call them they tell me ‘my son, do not come here. If you come here they will kill you.’ The Somali Somali who live over there know everybody who is living outside of Somalia. So if I go back they will understand that I am different than the people who are living there. I like to go back and see my parents because I am missing them like 20 years now. Anytime I ask them, I told them to come to Kenya but they still telling me my son do not come here, just stay over there. They didn’t come to Kenya with us because when we were coming to Kenya I was living with my uncle and they were living in a different part of Somalia so we lost each other. So they migrated to Kismayo and we migrated to Kenya. I got their news in 1997 that they are alive. But from before that time, before 1997, I didn’t know anything about them. I was thinking that they were already killed. That’s what I was always thinking about. 1997 I understood that they are alive. Now their situation and their life is ok, but still there is something wrong. That is a lack of government and anybody who gets a little wealth will be killed. Anybody who gets a little bit of education will be killed. That’s why they were telling me not to come over there.

Mukhtar's life in the post-resettlement phase is haunted by the absence of his family and the knowledge that things are not as they once were. His desire to see his family is complicated by an inability to return to visit for fear of the threat to his life evidenced by his parent's warning that *if you come here they will kill you*. These threats continue on even in a completely different context, as do the divisions between "us" and "them" or Somali Somali and Somali Bantu. His memories of Somalia are embodied in the present as real fear and anxiety about the possibility for more violence. The separation from his family for twenty years is a direct effect of the damage wrought by the war. The Somali Civil War disrupted the daily lives of its victims by separating them from their family members. *I got their news in 1997 that they are alive. But from before that time, before 1997, I didn't know anything about them. I was thinking that they were already killed. That's what I was always thinking about.* This statement reveals the confusion and rumors surrounding the outbreak of war, as many people were separated from family members of whose fate they did not know until many years after the event. A large part of Mukhtar's life was centered on the question of the disappearance of his family, and whether or not they were still alive. Even after news arrived that they had not been killed in the war, Mukhtar's joy was immediately stifled by the physical inability to be reunited with them.

Upon reflecting on his life, Mukhtar experiences mixed feelings. He looks at his townhome, his oversized television, his children safe and healthy in their home, and he must feel thankful. Yet at the same time, he has found himself thrust into a world that is unfamiliar, and without many of the people who are dearest to him. But he does not dwell on these memories, attributing them, instead, to the Will of God:

Everything that we were hit with in our lives, *Allah* gave us. What I wanted to change about my life was already changed. Right now I cannot say I would change my life because I am healthy, I can work, I can do anything I want. So I

don't think there's anything I can change. Health is everything. So what I can change is only how to educate my children here. I understand that everything that caused problems in Somalia was a lack of education so I have to educate my children. And if I can help my brothers I will help them. I don't have any other things I want to change in my life. I will encourage all the people, even the older people, to learn something because they still have a chance to learn so I will tell them to learn. And to change our children to not be the same as we were over there, ignorant, so we have to encourage them to get education. To teach them the Quran and any other subject that the world is learning. That is what I encourage to change our life.

For Mukhtar, talk of the past is pointless. What must be done is to concentrate on moving forward, and to learn from the horrible mistakes that damaged their lives in so many ways. He believes this can be achieved through education, which has the potential to mend the lives of Somali Bantu. He places hope in the children of future generations who now have access to education and can thus avoid perpetuating the "ignorance" that he believes was the cause of violence in Somalia.

#### Conclusion:

As a younger Somali Bantu refugee, Mukhtar does not emphasize the role of Somali Bantu in pre-Civil War Somalia. Instead, his narrative begins at the outbreak of war, and continues through the traumatic experiences associated with the flight process and the problems encountered in the camps. His body continues to speak to the violence, bearing the marks of the suffering which he was forced to face. Even his name represents a new subjectivity; the reinhabiting of the world through a new lens. Mukhtar's own experiences with starvation and malnutrition, for example, weigh heavily upon his recollections of Somalia, and on his analysis of what he should feel thankful for in the United States. These early experiences also shaped the way in which he dealt with the tragic death of his young daughter, accepting it as Fate, or, the Will of *Allah*, revealing how suffering and sadness have become normalized as part of the

everyday for Somali Bantu refugees who rely heavily on Islamic explanations to ease their suffering.

His narrative also shows the way the process of flight severed important links between family members, and how this separation is a continuous source of sorrow in his life today. The torment of not knowing whether his family was alive or dead for seven years after his departure from Somalia only intensifies his longing to be reunited with them. However, the ongoing threat to his life prevents him from realizing this desire, and thus, it is a source of suffering in the post-resettlement phase. Furthermore, for families to be forced to decide when it is or is not permissible to leave a family member behind, to abandon, alter, or renegotiate traditional family relationships and obligations, is an extremely traumatic event to endure because it restructures the entire social fabric of the society. Although these events have now passed from lived reality to memory, the knowledge of these changes challenges Somali Bantu norms of family loyalty and responsibility. Although Mukhtar is not upset with his uncle and aunt for even thinking about leaving him behind as a young child, this particular memory surfaced, of all the memories he could have chosen to discuss, and therefore reveals its lasting impact on the development of his subjectivity.

The fact that Mukhtar fled Somalia at such a young age shows through in his explanation of the problems that led to the war in the first place. He makes no mention of a long history of violence and persecution, but only alludes to it vaguely; leading one to believe it had little or nothing to do with the violence experienced by Somali Bantu in the war of 1990-91. Mukhtar does not recall a history of slavery, but recognizes that for some reason or other, Somali Bantu are a “special group.” Just what made them the special targets of Somali Somali aggression, or the UNHCR’s focus group for resettlement, is not made clear. In fact, for Mukhtar, they were

not specifically targeted at all, but rather, were brought into the war because of the encompassing nature of war itself. Perhaps the silence is a strategic choice, taken to avoid mentioning the stigmatized social position of his larger collective group, or more likely, it is the result of a general process of remembering and forgetting that began long before the Somali Civil War as a coping mechanism to deal with life as a persecuted minority group in Somalia.

Mukhtar derives his sense of obligation and responsibility from his memories of the refugee camps. He has taken on the role of provider for those family and friends who still reside either in the camps or in Somalia. Yet his small income and now his lack of a job hinder these obligations, making it difficult to fulfill this role, resulting in the stress of the provider-complex mentioned earlier in the story of Osman.

Through the narrative of Mukhtar, I have tried to show not only how violent experiences shape present consciousness, but also, how the differential workings of memory vary across generations within the Somali Bantu refugee community. Older generations are able to recall a history of violence and persecution, as well as the significance of agriculture to the construction of the Somali nation-state, thus tying the story of the war with a particular history. Later generations, however, lack the knowledge of pre-Civil War Somalia and are therefore at a loss for adequate explanations as to what caused the violence, or why Somali Bantu refugees were specifically targeted. Both generations, however, equally leave out the story of slavery, the social construction of race, and how being Somali Bantu became something negative in Somali society. A sense of confusion still surrounds the question of “Why Somali Bantu?” The impact this particular forgetting has had on Somali Bantu collective consciousness will be further discussed in later chapters.

## *Chapter 5*

### **When the Heart Grows Sad**

Walking into Habiba's home was like walking into a tent. Like many of the other Somali Bantu homes I had visited, every inch of the walls in her small apartment were covered in sheets. But something struck me about this particular space; something heavy and silent, enveloping everyone inside into its darkness. The sheets covering Habiba's walls were not brightly colored as I had seen before, but were dark blue, setting a somber mood. The darkness of the sheets blocked out the sun and the only hint of light was a single shadeless lamp positioned on the floor. From the ceiling hung streamers and decorations like in many of the other Somali Bantu homes I visited.

Habiba sat on a chair pushed against the wall, her red, white, and black hijab draped across her heavy-set frame. The living room was sparsely furnished with a single couch and an entertainment center with a large empty space where the TV should have been. The floor was covered with a blanket in the place of a carpet, a few pillows on the floor serving as make-shift seats to accommodate for extra guests.

Habiba began her story, her voice strained and heavy as she spoke. She did not look at me, but kept her gaze fixed steadily on the floor. She did not seem to speak to me, but to herself; reminding herself of the events of her life that had culminated to bring her to this present moment. In her voice was a hesitation; her story was jumbled, as though it were the first time she had set upon the task of organizing the story of her life into a string of events. As she spoke,

she seemed to be searching for a way to understand her place in a foreign land with no family or friends except for her two young children.

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Habiba is a Somali Bantu refugee woman. She is forty-two years old and is currently unemployed. She arrived to the United States with many other refugees in 2004. She settled into Kansas City and started work in a warehouse producing single-use plastics. She did not read or write and spoke very little English. In 2007 she suffered a heart attack. During her recuperation, and perhaps because of it, she was laid off from her job and has not been able to find another one since. Her medical problems have placed her and her children in a considerable amount of debt which she cannot resolve. To occupy her days, she has started taking English classes at a community college in order to increase her chances of finding work. She has had 10 children, five of whom have since died. Two of the surviving children from her recent marriage currently reside with her in Kansas City while the others are married with children and live either in the refugee camps or in Somalia with their families.

She began:

As I am here now, I am living here without brothers. All my brothers were killed over there. And I was there. They also hurt me, they shot me here in my leg (lifts dress to reveal a deep scar in her left ankle. Feels it and rests her hand on it). When my elder brother was killed, I tried to run to help him and then the shooters started firing at me and that is when they hurt me. I couldn't save him. I don't like to look at this wound now.

Habiba begins her story with an absence: *as I am here now, I am living here without brothers*. In Somali Bantu culture, as well as in the larger culture of Islam, upon the death or absence of her parents and husband, a woman is placed in the care of her brothers. This relationship serves as a form of stability for the woman, as the brothers are responsible for her well-being and protection.

Brothers play an important role in the lives of Somali Bantu women, protecting their honor, organizing their lives, and providing them with financial support. They are the liaisons between Habiba and the rest of the men of the Somali Bantu community. When Habiba speaks of her brothers, she is also speaking of a lack of protection, the absence of a safety net in her life in the United States.

*All my brothers were killed over there.* Das (2007) has earlier alluded to the uniqueness of the relationship between brother and sister through the story of *Antigone*, whose brothers were killed in a war to protect/attack the nation-state. This relationship—siblings born of the same mother and father—cannot be substituted or replaced. Thus the death of a sibling reflects the mourning of something irreplaceable; something that when taken by death, cannot be restored. Habiba's relationship to her brothers is broken in a way that cannot be mended. Consequently, her sense of stability and protection has also gone with them. *And I was there* places Habiba as a witness to the death of this unique familial relationship, and therefore, to the death of her own sense of safety and support.

During the event of the death of her older brother, Habiba attempted to protect this unique bond. Driven by the love of a sister for a brother, and also by the powerful desire to preserve this now single unique bond which tied her to her parents, her siblings, her entire familial identity and past, she ran to protect him. At this point in the narrative Habiba lifted her dress to reveal a deep scar on her left ankle; the memory of the bullet that stopped her from saving the life of the only brother she had left. *I couldn't save him. I don't like to look at this wound now* shows how this memory is embodied on the body of Habiba. She does not like to "look" at the scar because looking at it acknowledges the ability of her body to speak to her about that painful moment that ended so many important ties in her life. She keeps it covered at

all times to avoid having to acknowledge its powerful ability to bear witness to that tragic moment. Perhaps it is more difficult because of her inability to save him. For Habiba, this scar is a sign of failure; one that resulted in a dramatic and undoable absence. Had she been able to save him, and preserve the uniqueness of the relationship between them, maybe it would not be so painful to look at it today.

When they attacked the village, they tried to collect every man they saw. Two of my brothers, with five others, were put in a line to be killed. When they put them in a line, they started with my brother. Then they shot everybody. Only one of them was saved. All the rest were killed including my two brothers. Only one man escaped. He was lucky. When the man who escaped came to us, he informed us that everybody was killed.

*When they attacked the village, they tried to collect every man they saw*—the “they” to which Habiba refers are the Somali Somalia militias who entered Somali Bantu villages uninvited. This signals the beginning of the war in Habiba’s mind. Rounding up the men in the village illustrates a particular type of violence, aimed at destroying the social fabric of protection and support. The men symbolize not only protection, but also honor. As they round up the men and put them “in a line to be killed,” they are symbolically attacking the uniqueness of Somali Bantu relationships and the social worlds of Somali Bantu women. This also reveals how Somali Bantu seemed expendable and invaluable to the larger Somali Somali majority. They are lined up and shot in the same way, regardless of who or what important and unique role each man served in the community. Even though Habiba was not physically present, she narrates this story as someone who witnessed the murder of her brothers first-hand. It shows the impact of the violence in her life; the image of an event she did not witness herself is seared into her mind nonetheless.

*Only one man escaped. He was lucky. When the man who escaped came to us, he informed us that everybody was killed.* The chances of escaping these kinds of assassinations and massacres were very small. When a man did escape, he is referred to as “lucky,” suggesting in a sense that the violence was otherwise inescapable. Using luck to explain survival shows how the threat of violence was such a real factor in Somali Bantu life; that death in the most inhumane way—removing the specificity of identity and experience—was an everyday possibility.

*When the man who escaped came to us, he informed us that everybody was killed.* The return of the man to the place of violence and devastation suggests a sense of responsibility to tell and inform the family members of the tragic fate of these men. He does not flee to save himself, but returns to the place where he was forcefully taken, to share the news of the deaths with the members of the family. A sense of community and mutual obligations resulting from this emerges as Somali Bantu risk their lives to answer the burning questions of their fellow Somali Bantu about “what happened to my brother/husband/father/son” that produce a difficult ambiguity during and after war.

Some people went to where they were killed and we dug a grave, but we only had time to dig one hole for everyone. There was no time to make a grave for each one. The people who made the graves were the people living under the sheikh, the *Kadi*. He is chosen by Allah’s will. So the people that were working for him, they were Somali Bantu, they helped us to dig the grave. The sheikhs were safe because they were being protected by some of the Somali Somali elders who had guns because they are chosen by Allah. Anybody who is from outside the village used to run to the mosque where the sheikh is there because he has protectors with guns. But these people who protected the sheikhs were chased and the sheikhs had nobody to protect them. The sheikhs had to run like everybody else. People who used to be protected by the sheikh could not be protected anymore because the sheikh’s ran too.

*Some people went to where they were killed and we dug a grave, but we only had time to dig one hole for everyone.* As I have discussed earlier in chapter four, the issue of death and burial are extremely important in the Islamic faith. As Muslims, Somali Bantu feel a compelling obligation to bury the bodies of the dead. This, in a way, brings closure to the family, as they say their goodbyes, and mourn the death during the burial. Thus, burial during war returns a sense of particularity and identity to the dead, whose specificity is removed during the violence. But burial also serves as an important transition in the afterlife of the deceased. These two factors culminate to produce the feelings of responsibility for burial by the surviving members of the community. It shows how the bonds of the Somali Bantu community, though in a way broken by the deaths of its members, are not completely destroyed by the violence. Their relationships and mutual responsibilities carry on to the post-life experience.

*There was no time to make a grave for each one.* Mass burials instigate feelings of guilt amongst Somali Bantu. As they attempt to reestablish the uniqueness of being of each of the deceased, they are limited by the inability to provide individual burials. The idea of dumping one's family member's damaged and mutilated body into a mass grave is no doubt a source of anguish. It shows the obstacles that the continuing threat of war created in moving on after violence.

*The sheikhs had to run like everybody else. People who used to be protected by the sheikh could not be protected anymore because the sheikh's ran too.* During the early phases of the war, before it turned into a Somali Somali-led campaign to rid Somalia of the "non-Somali" Bantu peoples, the holy role of the *Imam* seemed somewhat protected. Somali Somali, originating from the early Muslims who fled persecution in Arabia in the seventh century CE, claim an Islamic identity that differentiates them from Somali Bantu who converted after their

enslavement beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This Islamic identity seems to have protected the lives and social status of Somali Bantu *Imam's* in the early stages of the war. Recognizing a mutual religious identity, the *Imam's* and *Sheikh's* of the Somali Bantu were provided with bodyguards, and given a say in the protection of the general Somali Bantu population. So in the early phases of the war, *Imam's* and *Sheikh's* were looked upon as the protectors of the Somali Bantu whose sense of security had been shattered by witnessing the traumatic deaths of their men; their culturally designated protectors. As the violence escalated, however, these Somali Somali-Somali Bantu religious bonds were easily broken, and even the holiness of the *Imam* was not seen as a legitimate reason to avoid murder and persecution. Thus the statement “the *Sheikh's* had to run like everybody else” is important for two major reasons: it signals the end of the hope for peace between Somali Somali and Somali Bantu society, and it represents the breakdown of the only alternative source of protection for Somali Bantu, resulting in a sense of hopelessness and abandonment.

In Somalia, one day I went to get firewood from the bush. I was pregnant and I had the firewood on my back. There were bandits there and they chased me. When I was carrying the firewood I fell down (lifts dress to reveal a scar on her knee) and the firewood fell and hit me on my rib. Now when I see this wound I remember what happened, so I just have to cover it. The baby I was pregnant with at that time, when I fell on my stomach. When I delivered the baby, she had a problem with her nose and mouth. When she exhales there was a very very bad smell that was coming from her nose and mouth. But there was no hospital to take her to, so she died.

This instance may seem out of place or random, but it serves an important purpose in Habiba's narrative. *In Somalia, one day I went to get firewood from the bush. I was pregnant and I had the firewood on my back* shows how despite the deaths of her brothers and the war all around, daily life had to continue on for Somali Bantu in Somalia. Collecting firewood was a daily chore that was the responsibility of the women. The wood was used for cooking, thus illustrating how

cooking, collecting firewood, and family life in general, continued on even in the midst of war. War does not pick a special time to intrude, nor does it care for the conditions of the people whose lives it destroys. The war did not wait for Habiba to give birth. It did not wait in order to give her and her family a chance to flee. So rather than an interruption in their lives, the war had to become a part of it. After all, even in times of war people must eat, drink, sleep, use the bathroom, have babies, and all the other mundane events of the everyday.

The death of Habiba's child is connected to the event of that day she collected firewood in the Bush. The scar on her knee, which looks very much like the scar one develops after falling off of a swing as a child, is a reminder of the death of her child and of her attempted rape. Regardless of what the "medicalized" reasons for the death of the child would have been, or the fact that the baby was not taken to a doctor and so there was no medical diagnosis of the causes of the illness or death, Habiba does not need these medical diagnoses to understand what happened to her daughter. She knows that it is because of her attempted rape by Somali Somali bandits that day in the Bush that led to her falling on her pregnant belly, that crushed the nose and mouth of her baby, that ultimately resulted in her death. These connections show how violent experience becomes the lens through which the world is interpreted and understood. Events in Habiba's life are related in some way or other to the violence of Somalia. Even when she acknowledged to me towards the end of her narrative that she does not talk about these events openly, they are present in her knowledge, in her memories, in her outlook on the world she now inhabits, providing her with answers and explanations to events that are otherwise senseless and irrational.

After the murder of her brothers and the death of her child, Habiba, along with many people of her village, fled to the "Cit of Generosity" known as Baladunkarim. The city was

known as such because it was where the Imam's and Sheikh's resided. It is a holy city where Somali Bantu, even today, often gather to make *Dhikr*, an Islamic chanting ritual in which the name of *Allah* is invoked to purify the soul and keep oneself grounded firmly in the remembrance of God. She continued on with her story of Baladunkarim as follows:

One day in Baladunkarim where the sheikhs were living, one of the Somali Bantu was slaughtered and the knife that they used for slaughtering, they asked me to wash it. And I did it out of fear, I washed it. They told me they will kill me if I don't wash it so I did it. I know it was wrong but I did not have a choice. (Habiba remains silent for some time). If I remember what happened in Somalia my stomach feels very bad.

Though this event may seem miniscule in comparison to the experience of watching the murders of one's family members, the impact of this moment on the life of Habiba is immense. After recalling this memory, Habiba grew very quiet. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, yet her face bore the marks of sadness and something which I understood to be guilt. Her eyes began to fill with tears and her upper lip quivered, attempting to hold back what I felt were sobs of sadness. I looked at my translator whose face shared the same shattered look as Habiba's. Even the word "shattered" here is not enough to capture the moment in which I found myself. It was a moment that I could not be a part of because I was not Somali Bantu. I could not understand the depth of the social bonds between the members of the Somali Bantu community that would lead one to cry when recalling the event of washing the blood from the knife that killed another, yet shed no tears when recalling the violent deaths of one's brothers. It was an intensely sad moment. Perhaps the saddest moment I have encountered in my research. But I could not quite grasp what made it so. Why was this moment so different from all of the other sad memories and events I had heard over the years?

When I thought about this moment later, I realized that the anguish Habiba expressed was over the sense of betrayal Habiba felt she had committed. In the earlier story of the death of her brothers, Habiba was adamantly opposed to the violence, intervening on behalf of her brother to save his life, or even risking her own life to fulfill her duty as a sister and Muslim to bury her brothers. Regardless of whether her attempts to save her brothers, or restore their uniqueness of being through individual burials were successful or not, her actions reflected the deep connections to her identity as a sister, a community member, and most importantly as a fellow Somali Bantu. The instance with the knife, on the other hand, was something completely different. To be forced to wash the blood from the knife that slit the throat of one's friend, one's community member, perhaps even one's neighbor, is to be complicit in his dehumanization and death. Habiba's silence and regret seemed to stem from what she understood as betrayal of the collective bond she shared with this person as she washed away the evidence of the crime, helping Somali Somali to cover up the murder of one of her own. Approaching the individual event through the context of collective and shared identity make Habiba's tears over this event a bit easier to understand.

After this event and the loss of protection caused by the persecution of the *Imam's* and *Sheikh's*, Habiba and a few others left Baladunkarim. For six four days they walked without food and water until they reached the town of Afmadow. There they rested their swollen legs and empty bellies for fifteen days. They managed to acquire food from the local population, both Somali Bantu and Somali Somali. They then made their way on a three day trip to a small town called Kogani. Again they begged the local Somali Somali population for food and water. They were given some rice and milk which they cooked, ate, and saved for the rest of their journey. After one night in Kogani, they made their way to Aqlua, a city near the Liboi border

with Kenya. They walked for another three days to the border, surviving off of rotten rice and bad milk. The mood was heavy and tired, everyone “crying out with tiredness.”

Next they went to the Kenyan border where they were met by UNHCR refugee workers:

So we went to the border. When UNHCR came to the border, when they saw us you know even they did not ask us a lot of questions because of the way that we were, the way we look like. They left the other people and started with us. In front of us there were people who were there at the border many days but right when they saw us they came and started writing our names because we looked tired and sick. UNHCR came with vehicles to take us to a place in Kenya. They took us to a hospital before they took us to the camp. We spent over there like 14 days in the hospital.

The process of flight was a long and arduous one, filled with hunger and pain. The long journey had taken a heavy toll on the health of Habiba and her now fellow expatriates. This is evidenced by her statement *when they saw us you know even they did not ask us a lot of questions because of the way that we were, the way we look like. They left the other people and started with us.* She described their health condition and their fourteen day experience in the hospital as follows:

The doctor saw a lot of wounds on our body and that everybody had a big stomach but the other parts are very thin. The doctor gave us a lot of medicines and gave us a lot of needles and we don't know what kind of disease we had because we didn't understand the language of the doctor and what they were speaking at that time.

The wounds on their bodies, evidence of their difficult experiences, compelled the refugee workers to pay special attention to Habiba and her group. Despite the language barrier, the wounds spoke a universal language of suffering and violence which the doctors and refugee workers recognized and understood. *Everybody had a big stomach but the other parts are very thin* speaks to the experience of malnutrition resulting from famine and starvation which plagued many people in Somalia during this time, Somali Somali and Somali Bantu alike. It tells about the experience of war and the difficulties that people face as a result of it. The body here is a

powerful communicator of experience, as it serves as a sign of proof that one was in fact drastically affected by the war.

After being treated for two weeks in the hospital, they were taken to Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya:

When we came to the camp and again the people who were disturbing us in Somalia were there too. The UNHCR gave us a tent, temporary housing, and then these people would come and start raping people and hitting people. Every block Somali Bantu were living you can hear the sounds like this (starts screaming and yelling), shouting and screaming at night because the men were raping the women. I can still hear these sounds now in my mind. I heard the sound because when the people were chased from the other block they were running to past where we are. One day my sister, they tried to shoot her, they were about to kill her but the bullet passed in front of her. If she would have moved it maybe could have hurt her. When UNHCR saw that all those problems happening over there, they brought Kenyan police to guard us. They put in each block some police. They said everybody has to stop walking when the time is like 8 at night. That helped us a little bit when they did that.

*When we came to the camp and again the people who were disturbing us in Somalia were there too.* Fleeing Somalia landed Somali Bantu in the refugee camps, where they were reunited with their oppressors and had to live within the same restricted space. They were forced to reinhabit the world with a new knowledge of the ability of Somali Somali to commit atrocious acts of violence against the Somali Bantu. Habiba seems to be shocked that perpetrators of the violence and victims of the violence were afforded equal protection. How could perpetrators be given protection in a place that was meant to shield victims instead? More than just the memory of violence was the reality of the new violent atmosphere that began to take shape in the camps.

*I can still hear these sounds now in my mind* reveals how the memory of the screams of women being raped during the night continue to haunt Habiba in the present, as she reenacted these sounds during the narrative. The threats to their lives which they had hoped to leave behind followed them into the refugee camps, filling their new world with the same worries and

fears of the old. The memories of Somalia were brought to life everyday as they attempted to adjust to refugee life amidst the people responsible for their suffering and pain. Habiba used the example of her sister, a personal relationship, to illustrate how close to her the violence in the camps really was. While there was a general atmosphere of hostility, it was directed at Habiba and her community, inserting particularity and specificity into the experience. The problem of rape was widespread during the war in Somalia and carried over into the refugee camps as well. Habiba will return to this issue later in the narrative.

While police protection and the implementation of a curfew helped ease some of the fears and troubles, there were other problems in the camps as well:

At first the camp was very good about the food. They were giving us rice and canned beef, tomatoes, onions. But the government said that once you give this special food to this people they will not be safe from the bandits because the bandits are coming because of that food. So you have to stop giving them these good foods and give them only corn and beans. That's what the government said, you have to change the food. At that time I had a baby one year old. He died because there was not enough food. I took him to the hospital there but they could not help him. He went to *Jannah* and I stayed in the camp.

The situation of food improved somewhat when Habiba first arrived. The looming threat of “bandits” however, stealing food and committing violence against Somali Bantu in order to do so, created a new problem. Food was a commodity in this refugee camp life. With the already subjugated position of Somali Bantu, Somali Somali in search of food for their families saw them as ideal targets from which they could acquire more food. In response, the camp organizers decided to *stop giving them these good foods and give them only corn and beans*. This response is an example of how international refugee organizations attempt to deal with the problems of refugee camp populations. Rather understanding the causes behind the violent fight over food,

they remedy the problem by taking away the desirable, nutritious food, and giving the refugees food that is less filling and also conveniently less expensive.

Habiba connects the actions of the “government” with the consequent malnutrition of her child. As the “government” made the decision to change the kinds of food they offered in order to curb stealing and looting, they consequently limited the nutritional value on which the life of her young child depended. But Habiba’s feelings about the event seem to be accepting, as her statement: *he went to Jennah* (the Islamic term for heaven) *and I stayed in the camp* suggests a sense of comfort by the fact that *Allah* spared him from the suffering which she had to continue to endure. According to Islamic doctrine, babies and children who die are automatically granted paradise. As a Muslim, Habiba finds comfort in this promise that her baby is now in the presence of *Allah* where he can find an abundance of food and nutrition.

We were saved from the bandits when they stopped giving us the food. But the other problem now was the food. We had to go to the bush to get the wood. When you go to the bush to collect the firewood they are there, the bandits are there. They rape, they kill, they beat, in the bush. And what we were doing is we were asking for a job from Somali Somali so we have to model houses for them. Because they have cattle and goats they are keeping those things but we the Somali Bantu have nothing over there we were living under UNHCR only.

Solving one problem resulted in another more serious one: *we were saved from the bandits when they stopped giving us the food. But the other problem now was the food.* By substituting canned food, which does not need to be cooked, with grains and beans, which do need to be cooked, the Somali Bantu were forced to find firewood to cook with. This led them to the Bush which was isolated from the eyes and ears of refugee camp officials. In this “free-zone,” *the bandits are there*, raping, killing, and beating the Somali Bantu.

When I asked Habiba to explain who these “bandits” were, she replied:

Somali *Eeya-lew! Eeya-lew!* The same (emphasis on “the same”) Somali’s! The same (emphasis on “same”) ones! At the day time Somali Somali are human but at night they change, they become animal. So when we go to the firewood they are there and at night they’re also there.

I have included the original Maay Maay response here because I found it to be especially powerful. While most of her story had been narrated relatively quietly and calmly, this statement was made with a burst of anger that carried a deep irony with it. *The same ones!* shows a sense of almost disbelief that these *same* people, who for years before, continued to intrude upon the everyday lives of Somali Bantu, even in a new and foreign place. How could it be that this was possible?! The statement following it is perhaps the most honest and clearly stated characterization of Somali Bantu feelings about their Somali Somali aggressors: *At the day time Somali Somali are human but at night they change, they become animal.* This is a powerful comparison to draw about the transformation of Somali Somali. During the day they are human, masking their lust for rape and blood with the niceties and pleasantries of civilized life, only to show their true animal nature in the darkness of night. Perhaps Habiba’s strong words here come from the place of a woman’s heart. While rape is an act usually committed to emasculate the men of a particular group, they are committed on the bodies of women. Habiba, as a woman against whom the violence is perpetrated, compares this act to an animal. For Habiba, human beings do not commit rape, animals do, thus connecting the action to a deep sense of immorality. The following section of the narrative clarifies these strong feelings and sentiments that Habiba translates.

To understand the deeply transformative nature of rape—whether experiencing it as a victim or as a second-hand witness—on the everyday lives of Somali Bantu women, we must listen to the words of women like Habiba:

I encountered many women, including my own daughter who lives in Somalia who were raped. She was raped by five men while she was pregnant 6 months. Another one, my sister's daughter, she also was raped. My sister's daughter, while she was a virgin was raped by five men in front of her mom and her dad. So her dad put a *hijab* for her after that and married her to his brother's son. All of this because the ones who were supposed to protect us could not protect us anymore.

Rape was omnipresent during and after the Somali Civil War of 1990-91, whether through first-hand experience, second-hand witnessing, or rumors. The presence of this particular form of violence was undeniably felt by the Somali Bantu. Rape has surfaced before in the narratives of Somali Bantu men during the camps and in my research among the community members of the Somali Bantu refugees of Kansas City. Stories of rape were common, but the aftermath of the experience was rarely discussed. Seldom has it been talked about by the women themselves. In the narrative of Osman, for example, his wife remained quietly tucked away in the kitchen, tending to her daily chores, while her husband spoke of the event of the rape. But the meaning and significance of rape varies across gender, as it is experienced differently by men and women. Habiba's daughter who was raped while she was six months pregnant brings forth an incredibly disturbing image. The rape of a young virgin girl in front of her parents is another that is perhaps beyond words. Yet in this narrative Habiba is forced to attempt to describe them through the limited nature of language.

When she states, *so her dad put a hijab for her after that and married her to his brother's son*, Habiba is referring to the Somali Bantu custom that girls who are have not reached reproductive maturity (that is, they have not yet begun menstruation) are not required to wear the Islamic *hijab* (a sign of having reached reproductive and/or sexual maturity in Somali Bantu culture). Upon her first menstrual cycle, a girl is transformed into the beginning stages of adulthood, and dons the *hijab* as a sign of her new social status. Sexual maturity, reached upon

consummation of a marriage, is a later stage of this developmental process. Girls, who chose not to wear the *hijab* at the initiation of their menses, were expected to begin veiling after their marital initiation into sexual life. Habiba shows how rape forced women into their *hijabs* suddenly and much earlier than they normally would have. *Hijab* for these girls then became a symbol of the rape experience.

*All of this because the ones who were supposed to protect us could not protect us anymore.* In Somali Bantu society, as mentioned earlier, men are the caretakers of women. They are responsible for their protection, provision, and well-being. But the Somali Civil War did much damage to this relationship, as men were physically unable to protect their wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters from rape. The war introduced a new idea, or perhaps a new fear, into the minds of the women; the men cannot always protect us. For a patriarchal society such as the Somali Bantu, whose traditions and customs date back to pre-Somali times, to think that the men could no longer protect the women shakes the entire foundation of their society and identity. But maybe this knowledge has been useful in the post-resettlement phase, as traditional family structures are altered and women must learn to fend for themselves. This will become more apparent through the remainder of Habiba's narrative.

The problems of rape and violence in the Dadaab camp motivated the removal and relocation of Somali Bantu to Kakuma refugee camp in western Kenya. But the problems continued with a new group. The local population of this region, the Turkana, sought to benefit from the presence of international organizations and a surplus of food, water, and people. Habiba explained how they set up posts outside of the camps in the Bush where, with guns, they forced camp residents to exchange food for firewood. In this way the Turkana people monopolized the firewood, complicating the situation for the Somali Bantu. UNHCR began to

provide small amounts of firewood to the Somali Bantu but these efforts were generally inefficient, as the firewood would be consumed in a matter of a week or two. The situation of Somali Bantu refugees suddenly changed, however, as they were selected for resettlement by the United States:

We got the process to come to the United States. We had to be tested to come to the United States, so some people were told that they failed and some people were told that they passed so the people who passed their name will be fixed on the board so you can see your name on the board. Many families came before me to the United States so I was just waiting and praying I would come. My name was fixed on the board that I passed everyday but I would always look for my name and didn't see it because I couldn't read and write so I didn't know what my name looked like. Somebody told me that I passed and when I passed they brought me here in 2004.

Qualifying for resettlement rested on passing medical exams that tested for certain infectious disease and illnesses, such as Tuberculosis, for example, that could cause a threat to the American public, as well as verbal exams that were used to illustrate why one should qualify as a refugee. While Habiba refers to these tests, she does not seem to fully understand what they were for or how they could impact her chances of resettlement. This ambiguity is compounded by the fact that as many Somali Bantu could not read or write, they could not recognize their names on the board. Habiba's life during this time was consumed with worry and anxiety, her fate lying in the hands of a people she did not know and could not understand. She put her faith in *Allah*, praying that He would remove her from the violence of refugee camp life to the safety of the United States. In 2004 her prayers seemed to be answered and she was granted resettlement. But the process of resettlement had serious implications on her personal life:

I came with my children. My husband has another wife so he came with the other wife so I came with my children. But we came the same day. I wrote that I don't have a husband because I couldn't come if my husband has two wives. So I came alone and I live alone with my two children. But I still see him. Anytime he gets the chance he comes to see his children. Sometimes on the weekend. But we can't live together. His

other wife was married to him first and I was married before him to a man in Somalia. He died. So this husband he married me in the camps.

Like many other Somali Bantu, Habiba's husband had two wives. Marriage to multiple wives became more common as Somali Bantu moved to the camps. These marriages were conducted as part of a communal effort to shelter and provide support to the women whose husbands had been killed or died somehow during the course of the war. Habiba's first husband passed away in Somalia from what she describes as malnutrition. After her arrival to the camps, she was married to this man as his second wife. Habiba had two children with this husband. However, when applying for resettlement, her husband was forced to choose between the two wives: *I wrote that I don't have a husband because I couldn't come if my husband has two wives.* There was unstated recognition that her husband would select to resettle with his first wife who he had been married to longer than Habiba. So Habiba suddenly found herself without a husband and with two children to care for. The process of resettlement had torn the already worn threads that tied together her social world. But the dilemma of qualifying for resettlement or remaining in the refugee camps indefinitely led to the need to make a choice; in this instance, a choice that altered Habiba's entire life as she knew it. While she maintains communication with her former husband, it is for the sake of the children who she believes should not be forced to grow up without a father. Therefore she continues to see him, but the relationship has been drastically altered. She has moved from being a wife, to a widow, to a divorcee, a concept that is very unfamiliar to her.

In another instance in the politics of resettlement, Habiba had to make a difficult decision:

When the JVS and INS was testing us, I did not mention my daughter in Somalia because they told us if you tell them that you have other children, you have to bring her otherwise

you will not go to the United States. That's why I did not mention her name. My daughter wanted to come but I did not mention her because I was afraid they will not take me to the United States and I needed to leave that bad place. She lives in Somalia so she cannot apply to come here. She has to be in the refugee camp to apply. But she can't go to the camps because my sister who had no children she was keeping her. She is older than me, she's an old woman so she was taking care of her. Now she's old and she can't walk to the refugee camp. So my daughter has to take care of her now.

The situation with Habiba's daughter is similar to the situation of Mukhtar and his uncle. In a gesture of love for her older sister who could not have children of her own, Habiba gave one of her daughters to be cared for by this sister. After the outbreak of war, Habiba was separated from her daughter and her sister indefinitely. In applying for resettlement, she did not mention her daughter because *they told us if you tell them that you have other children, you have to bring her otherwise you will not go to the United States*. The fear of not qualifying for resettlement, driven by Habiba's desire to leave the camp, meant she had to leave her traditional maternal obligations behind. In having to choose between tradition and opportunity, she selected opportunity, abandoning her daughter and sister. But the situation is not so straightforward, as it is fraught with feelings of sadness and guilt:

I feel sad now that I did this but I can't change it. I see the tape of my granddaughter telling me 'oh my grandmother, I want to come to the United States to be with you.' When I hear that I just cry. I can't do anything about it now. I just cry. I worry for my daughter a lot because she has no brothers over there, no sisters there. Her mom is here and siblings are here. Only her and her husband and her children, but she has no relatives there. I encountered all these problems to get to the United States. Some of them I forget. If I try to remember, my mind will change to forget. When I think about this I feel very bad. If I remember, my heart changes. Something changes inside me. When the heart grows sad everything stops. I cannot move, I feel heavy things on my heart. I feel frozen. In 2007 my heart stopped and I fell down and my children called 911.

This decision has led to an ongoing sadness and guilt in her post-resettlement life. Despite having escaped the violence, she continues to feel the effects of the violence on her life. The voice of her grand-daughter wishing to be reunited with her grandmother, and the thoughts of her

daughter living without the family network which is so important to Somali Bantu life is difficult for Habiba. What she may not realize however, is that her reasons for feeling sad for her daughter are the same circumstances in which Habiba herself now lives. Perhaps this knowledge of how it feels to be isolated from family and familiar social support networks makes the decision to abandon her daughter even more difficult to bear.

*If I try to remember, my mind will change to forget.* This statement shows how the mind attempts to protect the body by blocking out or making one *forget* the difficult experiences one has been forced to endure. When the mind fails to forget, however, the memories rush in like a flood, placing an overwhelming amount of pressure on the heart that makes Habiba feel *heavy* things on her heart. The guilt of leaving her daughter behind, the knowledge of what this entails, is too much for Habiba to handle. Her feelings of sadness are coupled with feelings of frustrations because she can do nothing to change what has already passed.

Expanding on the trauma she experiences, Habiba makes an important observation: *When the heart grows sad everything stops. I cannot move, I feel heavy things on my heart. I feel frozen.* This shows the paralyzing power of traumatic memory recall. Memories left unsaid, or violence left unexamined, are hidden in the heart. As the heart attempts to conceal the ugly nature of the memories, it becomes too heavy a burden to bear. Recalling Somalia and her experiences creates a continuous feeling of suffering that Habiba must carry with her. But sometimes, concealing these memories is too much for the individual to handle: *In 2007 my heart stopped and I fell down.* Habiba suffered a heart attack and was rushed to a nearby hospital. Despite the medical reasons for why she suffered a heart attack at such a young age, Habiba understands that it is intimately connected to the sadness she has carried in her heart for all of these years. What is powerful about her statement, *when the heart grows sad*, is her belief

that the heart then physically ceases to work. Her physical body could no longer harbor the weight of the memories and thus embodies the suffering she had quietly, and for so long, endured.

I'm not working and the hospital sent a lot of money for me they want some money back. I don't have a way to pay because I only take cash assistance from SRS so they gave me an appointment to go to the court. This is my letter to go to court (shows me court summons). The problem I encountered in 2010, I went to many hospitals for treatment. Then they told me I have to pay 50 dollars a month and I don't have the money for this because I have to pay rent and buy food and pay bills. SRS is only giving me 400 dollars cash a month. So I didn't pay the 50 dollars and the court sent me a letter that I have to go. I already went one time to the court and I told them I can't pay but they said I still have to pay. But I still didn't pay because I can't. So that's when they sent me this other letter. Now I have to go back. Before when I was working I was ok, but now I have problems because I don't work. I want to find another job but the problem is I do not speak English and every job wants somebody who speaks English. I'm too old to learn the language. I'm going to school to learn, but up to now it's not helping.

After her hospitalization and surgery, Habiba found herself in a large amount of debt. She owed medical bills amounting to \$11,000. Receiving only \$400.00 a month in SRS payments, the agreed upon amount of \$50.00 a month seems almost impossible. During her recuperation she was laid off from her job. The prospect of ever paying off the large sum seems unlikely. She was summoned to court to explain why she had failed to make any payments on the due amount. She attempted to explain her difficult situation to them, but the linguistic and cultural barriers between the courtroom and herself seemed worlds apart. She was again directed to pay \$50.00 a month until the amount would be paid off. Habiba began to look for a job, but has been unable to find one due to her very limited English. She seems hopeless that she will ever learn the English as she states: *I'm too old to learn the language*. This difficulty stems not only from the fact that she is unfamiliar with English, but that she never before learned to read or write. She never attended school and learning to read and write in a foreign language makes the situation

more difficult. She has currently failed to make a single payment and has been called back to court.

Despite the hardships she faces in this new phase of her life, Habiba is thankful:

Life in Somalia and this one is a big difference. This one is better than that one. The change is that when we came to the United States we are safe, we have food, we have education for our children. Even me, I couldn't even check my name on the board in the refugee camps because I didn't know what it looks like, but now when I see my name I can recognize it. I did not know the difference between men and women. Now I know. I never knew what a job was like in Somalia and now I had a job and I was making my own money.

Despite the many difficult experiences that have culminated to bring Habiba here, there is much to feel thankful for. She measures what is "good" and what is "bad" by comparing life in the United States to her memories of Somalia and the camps. Her ability to be thankful in spite of the financial difficulties she now finds herself in, are due to the fact that *when we came to the United States we are safe, we have food, we have education for our children*. To be thankful for these commonly taken-for-granted things usually means that one has understood the extreme difficulty of their absence. For Habiba, and many Somali Bantu refugees who experienced hunger, disease, violence, and the difficulties that a lack of education can bring to bear, they are thankful for food, health, peace, and educational opportunities. The troubling memories seem to be a small price to pay in Habiba's opinion. But are they such a small price? Can trauma really ever be healed? Will Habiba ever be truly free? These questions are difficult to answer, but are extremely important to take into consideration.

Habiba's strategy for moving on so far has been one of forgetting:

This is the first time I tell my story. I never talked about it before. Nobody ever asked me about it. If someone would have asked me I would have told them, but no one ever asks me. I have a lot of relatives here and friends. I have one special friend who is Somali Bantu. If we try to talk about these things, everybody will feel very bad. And everybody knows that this happened to everybody. So we just

talk about other things. We don't talk about these things. We try to forget it. When I think about it I feel very worried. So I do my best not to think about them.

I was very surprised when Habiba told me that no one had ever asked her about her story before. I understood that perhaps with other Somali Bantu this might be the case, as I had noticed a general sense of silence surrounding these issues during my time in the community. But what about the resettlement organizations that labeled Habiba as a "persecuted refugee" in the first place? What was this decision based on? How could they have arrived at this conclusion if they had not listened to her story and realized that she had in fact deserved such a title? The answers to these questions are quite troubling and reflect the tendency to generalize refugee experience within resettlement organizations.

*If we try to talk about these things, everybody will feel very bad. And everybody knows that this happened to everybody. So we just talk about other things. We don't talk about these things. We try to forget it.* This attitude characterizes the general approach toward remembering and forgetting within the Somali Bantu refugee community in Kansas City. To have people sit down and share their narratives of trauma with me was something new and strange, especially among the women. While many of the men, representing their families to the resettlement organizations in the camps, had shared their stories on behalf of their families, the women have generally remained silent and in the background. Their presence in the kitchen, the decorations around their homes, their brightly colored Somali Bantu dresses, surrounded by children, generates a sense of normalcy within the community. As the men take the forefront, heading up the Somali Bantu Foundation, educating the children of the community, the women make a decent into the ordinary; they are quietly tucked away, silently weaving the social fabric of their society back together.

## Chapter 6

### **Silence in Mending: Embodiment and the Social Reproduction of Identity among Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City**

#### *Recasting Identity: Removing Somali Bantu Refugees from the “National Order of Things”*

Since the 1648 Peace Treaties of Westphalia, identity has become intrinsically rooted in the national space (Fulcher 2000; Kastoryano 2004). From the concept of a bounded, nationalized, sovereign territory emerged a new notion of personhood that revolved largely around one’s participation and recognition within a functioning nation-state. Liisa Malkki has argued that, “in the national order of things, the rooting of peoples is not only normal; it is also perceived as a moral and spiritual need” (Malkki 1992:30). Conversely, “our sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced” (Ibid:33).

Based on this nationalist conceptualization of identity, the uprootedness of refugees is seen as problematic. Refugees are often characterized as occupying a “liminal” category; no longer citizens of their respective nation-states, not yet citizens of the states in which they will be resettled (Malkki 1992, 1996). Harrel-Bond & Voutira (1992), drawing upon Turner (1969), define refugees as “people who have undergone a violent ‘rite’ of separation and unless or until they are ‘incorporated’ as citizens into their host state (or returned to their state of origin) find themselves in ‘transition’, or in a state of ‘liminality’” (7). They elaborate on the diversity of this liminality by pointing to the legal, psychological, social, and economic implications that accompany displacement.

Defining refugees within the framework of the “national order of things” (Malkki 1992), however, is problematic on many levels. First, to define refugee identity through the discourse of the nation-state is to impose a Euro-centric notion of identity and meaning-making on these individuals and collectivities. Second, it is to overlook the very diverse ways by which different groups derive meaning and understand their respective identities. Third, the tendency to understand “refugeeness” by placing it within the “national order of things” causes resettlement organizations and international relief agencies to understand suffering as a result of the loss of national citizenship, and thus frame “healing” through the recreation of the sense of national belonging either through repatriation or resettlement.

Yet these nationalist-centered characterizations of identity, and of the alleged suffering that follows the loss or violation of such an identity are insufficient grounds on which to base anthropological approaches to identity amongst Somali Bantu refugees because their exclusion from the nation-state began in Somalia, long before the event of flight to the camps. Therefore, identity, traumatic memory, and suffering must all be contextualized in order to avoid generalizations and inadequate “healing” efforts. For the Somali Bantu, as it was revealed through this research, meaning and identity are not derived from a legal or imagined affiliation with the Somali nation-state. In fact, long-term social and political marginalization within Somalia has resulted in the normalization of the experience of social and political isolation for many years.

Firstly, for the Somali Bantu, the realm of the political has long-since been considered a place of corruption and vice, as evidenced by Osman’s statement, “Somali Bantu never worked in the government but Somali Somalis did and they still work that way here and Bantu still don't work with the government...once we get a job that's good enough for us. We don't need

anything else.” The indifference to, or exclusion from, the political realm is also prevalent throughout Mukhtar’s narrative, as he differentiates between the *habaat-keent* and the *habaat-sugaay*, revealing the distinction that existed between the Somali Bantu residing in the lower Juba, and the politics of the war of the early 1990’s. The confusion surrounding the causes of the war is also a sign of this political isolation, as the Somali Bantu in this research unanimously expressed genuine surprise and bewilderment concerning the war, and the reasons as to why they were targeted by Somali Somali militias.

Secondly, the fact that all participants in this research identified themselves first as Muslims, and second as “Somali Bantu,” is an important point that requires further elaboration. This practice reveals how identity has, for many years, become deeply rooted in a deterritorialized concept. Religion, and particularly Islam, allows the Somali Bantu to construct an identity that surpasses the boundedness of any particular nation-state. The emphasis on Islam, largely initiated after the flight from Somalia to the refugee camps in Kenya, has become an increasingly important focal point for the Somali Bantu community, especially as they renegotiate and reconstruct their identities in changing local moral worlds in the United States. The process of flight during the war, which physically distanced the Somali Bantu from a sense of national belonging already withered by an emotional or psychological disconnect, did not mean that this group suddenly stopped “being” Somali Bantu. Instead, the reproduction of identity was renegotiated and consequently re-rooted in an alternative framework: the identity of Somali Bantu as “Muslims”.

The construction of “mythicohistories” (Malkki 1995) has continued on after resettlement, emphasizing the “positive” attributes of the Somali Bantu community by stressing their avoidance of political involvement, while revealing the “negative” characteristics of the

Somali Somali community, whose perceived corruption, greed, blood-lust, and unchecked ambition are understood as inevitable consequences of political participation. Therefore, far from deriving a sense of belonging from a national affiliation, the Somali Bantu have been able to maintain a sense of moral purity and absolve themselves from any participation in the violence perpetrated during the war by maintaining a noticeable distance from the politics of the nation-state. Thus political and national involvement has, for many years, been regarded as existing outside the realm of Somali Bantu concerns. These narratives show how identity can be constructed without reference or belonging to a nation-state. As a result, one may notice that the sense of identity within this population is framed outside of the political rhetoric of national belonging and citizenship. Bearing this in mind, one must also recognize that describing the situation of refugees as “liminal” relative to their citizenship status, while perhaps fitting from an universalistic western perspective, is irrelevant or out of place when identity is contextualized and particularized.

*The Somali Bantu Community—an Alternative to Nation-Based Models of Identity*

But if anthropologists working with refugees are to abandon such nationalist-inspired conceptions of identity, then what is the alternative? If, in this era of the nation-state, identity is not derived from the sense of national belonging, where can it be located? My research with the Somali Bantu community in Kansas City is especially useful in clarifying this particular point. First, one must recognize that in the absence of national belonging, the Somali Bantu do not stop “being” Somali Bantu, but rather, find ways to negotiate and renegotiate not only identity, but also the foundations from which their identity is derived. Throughout the duration of their obvious exclusion from political citizenship and national personhood in Somalia, the Somali Bantu have been able to maintain a strong sense of community, and through this community,

build social bonds and relationships that direct their lives in various social, cultural, and political settings. For the Somali Bantu, identity, and consequently, meaning-making, is derived from the personal relationships that bond together the members of this group.

This ongoing sense of community is a major distinction between the Somali Bantu and Somali Somali populations in Kansas City. While for the Somali Somalis, the sense of trust in one's neighbor was seriously eroded by the betrayals of the war and its aftermath, the Somali Bantu, excluded from the larger socio-politico-cultural setting, do not exhibit the same feelings of betrayal. For them, the betrayals of Somali Somali are not surprising, nor do they impact the sense of self within the Somali Bantu community, as they had, for many years, existed outside of the larger Somali Somali society. The Somali Bantu, instead, as illustrated throughout the narratives presented in this text, have maintained a unique communal bond, which according to Osman, dates back to the days of slavery. This bond continues to emphasize values of obligation and responsibility towards other Somali Bantu throughout the war, the arduous process of flight, and the refugee camps.

The narratives illustrate how, during the events of the war and flight, Somali Bantu attempted to maintain and protect this communal bond. The man who returned to the place of devastation after escaping the massacre of the men of Habiba's village is a sign of his obligation to other families who were left to wonder about the fate of their family members (5:111). Mukhtar's discussion of Somali Bantu "collecting" each other before venturing out to their occupied farms for food is another example (4:91). Risking their own lives to fulfill the duties of burial towards the bodies of the deceased, an event discussed by both Mukhtar and Habiba, is another sign of this strong communal bond.

In the post-resettlement phase, where the work of resettlement agencies stops, the everyday work of repair within this community continues. Drawing upon the collective bonds of Somali Bantu identity, they have reconnected with one another, established a communal focal point, and initiated a process of communal mending. This “community” has also become the liaison between the individuals within the community and members of the outside world. This sense of community, vested in a deterritorialized concept, even extends to the members still residing in the camps and in Somalia, as discussed in the narratives of Osman and Mukhtar. The emergence of a “provider complex” (3:76) whereby families who have resettled in the United States feel morally obligated to help those left behind is a further demonstration of the strength of Somali Bantu relationships and their relevance to everyday life. In a constantly changing world, the ongoing sense of community provides familiar direction regarding relationships, obligations, morality, and religion.

*Mourning the Loss of the World: Reconceptualizing Traumatic Memory*

The literature on violence within anthropology is beginning to explore a new kind of violence that moves past the traditional focus on “major events” (Das 2007) such as, in Das’ research, the Partition in India, and in other cases more generally, war, genocide, and a host of other associated events which strike, command, or more often, divert our attention from the subtle violences of the everyday. This alternative approach tends to look beyond these isolated moments to the ongoing flux of everyday life and the way experiences of violence are not overcome, but are incorporated into the everyday. The aim here is not to separate daily life from these major events, but on the contrary, to tie them together to form a more holistic picture.

Whether one invokes the term “poisonous knowledge” (Das 2007) or “loss of the assumptive world” (Kauffman 2002), the notion that violence changes the subject, or even,

recreates the subject (See for example Aretxaga 1996), is an approach now widely used across the disciplines to show how these major events are very much connected to daily life even after the fact. I have here drawn upon these terms as a way to capture how violence devastates our personal worlds by destroying the world once assumed to be safe and secure. As survivors of violence return to these places of violence, they find them somehow changed. The knowledge of life before and after the trauma is what connects these events to everyday life. Das refers to this as the sense of reinhabiting the world “in a gesture of mourning for it” (Das 2007:77).

The concept of “mourning” for the world is deeply connected to the pervasive absences that accompany a world changed drastically by violence. To understand the forces behind this mourning requires a discussion of the differences and overlaps between “loss” and “absence”. In his essay *Trauma, Absence, Loss* (1999), Dominique LaCapra suggests a problematic conflation between absence and loss. For LaCapra, *loss* is something personal and historically specific such as the death of a family member or friend. *Absence*, on the other hand, is trans-historical, connotes an existential condition revolving around something that may or may not have happened in the first place, and is associated with national myths and cosmologies. Absence is a timeless existential state, while loss is always historically particular and therefore, historically situated.

LaCapra stresses the distinction between the two because he associates personal trauma with loss and argues that conflation of the terms leads to the silencing of the traumatic event through the rhetoric of absence as it is used by the nation-state. Though speaking of loss may include absence, absence does not always incorporate or acknowledge loss, especially when stories of loss diminish the sense of national unity. Thus, LaCapra argues, speaking of absence

at the national level often marginalizes or completely excludes the losses real people suffer during real historical events if and when they contradict or trouble national stories and histories.

Though I also stress the distinction between the two words, my use of the terminology differs somewhat. I understand absence to be that loss which is absorbed into everyday life after the initial event of the loss has passed. While loss is temporal and thus can be traced back to a particular historical moment, absence is timeless and omnipresent. It is the feeling one must live with after the loss or death of a loved one. Loss is the traumatic event of the past, while absence is the ongoing memory of the trauma in the present. In this way, loss and absence are interconnected and happen to, as well as take place within, the same historical actor. The loss of a relationship—either through death or some sort of transformation—becomes absence after the violence has subsided. This absence is the condition of a life of suffering. Therefore, in order to understand the experience of Somali Bantu refugees more fully, it is the combination of “losses”, “absences”, and consequently, of “lived suffering” (Das 1996, 2007; Farmer 1996; Kleinman & Kleinman 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1996) which must be invoked.

By contextualizing suffering, one recognizes that identity and meaning are intrinsically connected to the maintenance of relationships within this community. Therefore one must ask how the violence of the war and the consequent traumatic memories of losses have impacted or changed these structures of meaning-making in the present. Because of the emphasis placed on relationships, therefore, the “deaths of relationships” is a useful theoretical approach with which to characterize the suffering that emerges through the numerous narratives collected during my fieldwork.

Through the violence of the war, the sense of everyday was drastically altered. Even when speaking of the major event—the Somali Civil War—Somali Bantu narratives revolve

around the day-to-day activities that were hindered by the presence of war. The focus of these narratives is not the war itself, but rather, the subtle yet overwhelming sense of losing the familiar world. Take for example the narrative of Osman who, when speaking of the death of his brothers, does not discuss the explicit details of how they were killed, but focuses on how their deaths lead to an ongoing disruption to his sense of “everyday-ness” (3:63). This same trend can be found in Habiba’s narrative when she speaks of the absence she now lives with as a result of the death of her brothers (5:103) and the loss of her first and second husbands; the loss of her brothers resulting from the primary event of the war, the first husband through a secondary cause—malnutrition during the process of flight, and the third resulting from a tertiary cause—the rigorous American resettlement policies concerning monogamy in marriage.

Traumatic memories of betrayal of the collective bond also surfaced in many of the narratives as a source of lived suffering. These feelings of betrayal show how violence targeted the bonds of loyalty and trust, and diminished the solidarity of family and community, such as the decision to desert or abandon family members who fell sick or could not continue to the journey to the refugee camps (4:89). One common experience that also illustrates this sense of betrayal was the inability to bury the bodies of the dead. Gruesome stories recounting the degradation of countless bodies left exposed to the elements, or others anonymously dumped into mass graves, were always accompanied by feelings of regret (4:86; 4:88; 5:106). The traumatic memories of the bodies, and of the larger violence that these bodies symbolized, remain deeply engraved in Somali Bantu consciousness. The incident with the knife in Habiba’s narrative further illustrates how forced betrayals specifically targeted social bonds of trust and loyalty (5:110). Mending the damage caused by these betrayals is now an ongoing part of the everyday work of repair (Das 2007) in the post-resettlement phase.

Another way by which relationships, and therefore structures of meaning-making, were targeted was through gendered acts of violence. Olujić (1998) has argued that such gendered violence is efficient in its goals to create devastation because it undermines the very institutions that structure and organize the local social order. These forms of violence target traditional social structures in an effort to erode or destroy them. When the structures of peacetime are transformed by violence, then war-time extends into peace-time even after the major event of the violence has subsided. These gendered acts of violence were meant to target local structures of organization by, as Habiba stated, making men incapable of fulfilling their roles as “protectors” and consequently, leaving women unprotected.

Perhaps most detrimental is the strategic use of rape to unravel the social fabric by drawing upon sexuality to contradict and undermine notions of shame, transform marital and familial relationships, disorganize gender norms, violate the sense of privacy, and belittle any claim to Islamic religious doctrine concerning sexuality to which the Somali Bantu ascribe. This is especially evident in Osman’s recollection of the rape of his wife. The sense of shame must be situated within the larger context as it is inextricably connected to his inability to fulfill the traditional gendered obligations of guarding the sexuality of his wife. This failure, and consequently, the death of the familiar relationship between wife and husband, has become a source of lived suffering in the present with which this couple must cope.

Rape also altered religious traditions that related to rituals and rites surrounding women’s “coming of age” ceremonies. As in other African contexts (Boddy 1989; Thomas 2003), the presence of gendered spaces does not necessarily constitute inequality, but rather, stresses distinct differences between masculine and feminine roles in an effort to promote a sense of gender equity suited to culturally specific notions of gender. These traditional structures of

power allocate certain domains to men and others to women. In the Somali Bantu community, one such domain of female power was over matters of reproduction. This power encompasses many smaller rituals, ceremonies, and rites through which women legitimate their places as rightful members of the community.

Traditionally, as I came to understand it through my time within the community, the decision to wear the *hijab*, the Islamic headdress, was tied to fertility and reproduction. The practice of donning the veil symbolized the initiation into sexual maturity, as the act of veiling took place soon after the first menstrual cycle. This symbolic act represented the transformation of the girl into a woman as she was now considered viable for marriage and reproduction. Before the war, this ritual was placed within the realm of women's roles and therefore the question of *hijab* was an important aspect of female gendered power. However, as rape forced girls into sexual maturation at early or unexpected ages, the rights and ceremonies relating to *hijab* were severely diminished. The story recounted in Habiba's narrative of the young girl who was raped shows how power over *hijab* was renegotiated in light of the introduction of rape as an everyday reality.

Gradually, *hijab* was placed under the domain of men, or those considered responsible for the sexual modesty of women. *Hijab* became a way for men to deal with the problem of rape in the Somali Bantu community; girls who were raped or even suspected to have been raped were made to wear *hijab*, and married off in inconspicuous ceremonies to protect the reputation of both the girl and her family. Within this tense setting, relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, and parents and children, were slowly transformed. The knowledge of these transformations pitted against the cultural taboos on speaking of matters regarding sexuality, however, complicate matters further. While the full implications of rape on Somali

Bantu life are beyond the scope of this particular research, further exploration of how women within this community renegotiate their gender roles in light of these transformations in the post-resettlement phase is an important point for future research.

Although these are only a few examples of the pervasive nature of traumatic experience, they illustrate the specificity of Somali Bantu experience and the need for a more specific approach to traumatic memory and identity amongst refugee groups within the discipline. Approaching traumatic memories through the lens of loss and absence allows one to recognize how the “death of relationships” is a residual, ongoing effect of trauma. Consequently, one must recognize that common-place Western characterizations of refugees as victims of “post-traumatic stress disorder” (Morland; Westermeyer 1989) are insufficient assumptions on which to base our understandings of the present Somali Bantu refugee condition. The term “post-traumatic” infers an assumption that the trauma is “post” or has passed into a historical realm. Healing is then understood as the attempt to work through the memories of trauma in the present. For the Somali Bantu, however, this is not the case. Thus their suffering in the aftermath of violence and war must be understood as a continuation of suffering rather than as a relief from it.

Resettlement or relocation does not cause the trauma to fall into a previous plane of experience, but instead, continues to tear apart the already worn threads of a social fabric built on personal relationships and community. As illustrated in Chapter 1, resettlement, far from alleviating previous traumas, causes them to be compounded by new sources of trauma in the present. Resettlement, a continuation of the effects of war and trauma, complicates traditional understandings of family, gender, morality, and obligations.

*Renegotiating Identity: The Price of Collective Silence on Individual Bodies*

Amidst the hubbub of war, death, famine, losses, absences, refugee camps, and the difficulties of post-resettlement life, one may wonder where the potential for healing may lie. Working with this group, researchers who optimistically and arbitrarily search for healing may turn up empty-handed. After all, how can one heal from something that is, in a matter of seconds, forever vanished? Perhaps, therefore, as Janzen & Janzen (1994) have illustrated, healing is an inadequate approach to understanding the ways by which people deal with the experience of trauma. Rather, I prefer the term “mending” which more effectively captures the particularity and specificity with which traumatic memory is met within this population.

If we can understand the trauma not only as physical and mental violence occurring during the major event, the Somali civil war, but also as the ongoing suffering resulting from the destruction, transformation, and death of relationships within this community, then the concept of mending actually seems quite fitting. The term “mending” here seeks to capture a more encompassing approach to traumatic memory. As lives are forever changed by the loss of the familiar world through the absence or deaths of relationships, efforts to deal with the trauma center on *mending*, rather than *replacing* the social bonds devastated by the war; bonds which are the foundation of everyday structures of meaning-making. Thus at the heart of mending is the desire to reproduce collective identity in the aftermath of violence.

The mending of tattered and worn relationships is accomplished through the use of strategic silence to exclude memories that damaged the sense of social solidarity in the first place. This silencing occurs primarily at the collective level, but is facilitated through the compliance of individuals. Habiba has explained her individual desire to remain silent on these painful memories even in the presence of fellow Somali Bantu (5:124). Osman (3:74) and

Mukhtar (4:102) have also alluded to silence as an essential component of post-resettlement life. But why silence instead of discussion? Here traditional approaches to healing and suffering must be reframed. While often in the West, and particularly within the field of psychotherapy, revisiting traumatic memories through words is associated with healing, and silencing trauma is associated with suffering or “repressing”, this is not necessarily the case for all people in all parts of the world.

The general strategy within the community in dealing with traumatic memories so far has been one of *strategic* silence. They do not share their stories, nor do they speak of the traumatic memories with other Somali Bantu. This, as it was explained, was done out of a desire to protect fellow Somali Bantu refugees from revisiting the pain, hence the purposeful use of the term “strategic” silence. By not discussing the traumatic events, they believe they are in fact protecting one another from the pain of having to remember. But silence is driven by more than the desire to comfort fellow Somali Bantu; it is out of the necessity to preserve collective identity. Their presence around one another is directed towards the goal of recovering a sense of continuity in the face of that which had been disrupted during the course of the war and resettlement; the sense of ongoing community and solidarity. While they acknowledge that suffering has become normalized as an intrinsic part of the collective consciousness, verbal acknowledgement of the suffering is not always incorporated into the collective narrative of Somali Bantu experience.

One example of this silence can be found in Somali Bantu approaches to dealing with the problem of rape. While I have earlier discussed the implications of rape on everyday social relations, it is also important to note that remaining silent on rape, or discussing it through generalizations, as in Osman’s statement, “this is what they did, they raped the women, raped the

girls. There was a lot of rape at that time” (2:67) removes the pressure from the individual women who experienced it, and the blame from the individual men who were unable to “protect” (5:115) them. It places the experience within the realm of the collective and through the collective, it is then generally silenced. Yet this practice of silence is not new. It is characteristic of a traditional approach to traumatic memory within this community that began in Somalia as a way to deal with an identity stigmatized by a history of slavery.

The near complete absence of any mention of slavery is a helpful example to explore because it began prior to the more recent events of the war and therefore has the advantage of retrospect. During my fieldwork I noticed that the narrative of slavery only surfaced in three specific contexts in the recent past. The first was amongst resettlement workers in the camps, during which time it was drawn upon by Somali Bantu and resettlement workers to justify the title of “persecuted” refugee status (UNHCR 2002). The second instance was during group interviews I conducted with the Somali Bantu Foundation leaders and only upon my direct inquiry, illustrating how knowledge of this particular memory is monopolized by the community leaders. The third is through Somali Bantu Foundation websites across the country. Interestingly, many of these websites, regardless of location, use the same exact slave narrative to discuss Somali Bantu history. This new venue reveals how, in an increasingly technological world, the internet has become a discursive space in which silenced, marginalized, or forgotten narratives become publicly remembered, claimed, and shared, but are not privately recollected or mentioned. Analysis of these settings in which the narrative of slavery is given voice shows how silence on slavery within the community does not always translate to silence on slavery outside of the community, and vice versa. In other words, silence is specific to intra-group contexts and is implemented to benefit Somali Bantu in very particular ways.

Within the community the memory of slavery has been largely forgotten. Though the people of Osman's older generation recall some version of the slave story (3:68), it is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. The bits and pieces that are recollected do not tell a story of hardship and suffering, but instead, recount a heroic tale of emancipation. In another version of the slave narrative collected from the leaders of the Somali Bantu foundation, the prophet and prophetess Michindiro and Mwanakuja, lead the Bantu people out of slavery, contributed to the construction and foundation of Somalia, and established towns, including Nasib Bundo village; a village whose origins are allegedly unknown by Somali Somalis. This version of a more positive slave narrative is commonly drawn upon by descendants of slaves living in the post-slavery contexts to legitimate social identities in many parts of Africa (Klein 1989).

For many members of later generations, however, even this heroic account of the slave narrative has been forgotten, as memories require the vessel of narrative to remain present in the collective consciousness (Halbwachs 1992). As discussed in Chapter 1, silence on slavery became prevalent during the institution of Barre's "laws of nationhood" which sought to minimize social disunity (1:17). Somali Bantu living in Somalia during the 1970s implemented the practice of strategic silence on slavery in the hopes that by downplaying the reasons for their subjugation, they would finally realize an equal social status to their Somali Somali counterparts (Besteman 1993). Buckley-Zistel (2006) has discussed this "chosen amnesia" in her work with Rwandan refugees, as a coping mechanism through which refugees silence trauma in order to continue to coexist in the same social space with perpetrators of the violence. Within the Somali Bantu community, silence has bred a disappearance of the slave narrative from the collective memory and is therefore no longer incorporated consciously into Somali Bantu identity.

This example informs one of the primary research questions I began with regarding the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies between literature on the Somali Bantu and Somali Bantu narratives (Introduction:7). These examples illustrate that “forgetting”, and the inconsistencies that consequently arise, are not the result of carelessness or negligence on the part of the Somali Bantu community. Rather, they are the result of strategic uses of collective silence that illustrate collective efforts of mending Somali Bantu identity. Initially, strategic silence is drawn upon to eliminate traumatic experiences from the collective consciousness in an effort to reduce the stigma associated with Somali Bantu identity, as well as to reproduce the sense of social unity. Thus at the start, silence breeds the loss of a particular historical narrative deemed negative in the present in the hopes of gaining an alternative through which positive social changes may be realized.

Over the span of generations, however, the loss becomes an absence; no longer strategic or “chosen”, but genuinely absent from Somali Bantu collective memory. The absence of such an important piece of Somali Bantu experience leads to a troubling conflation between the causes and effects of violence among members of this group. Without this narrative, many Somali Bantu today are left to wonder about the causes of their persecution without the major event of slavery to inform their inquiries. While the history of slavery was a major reason for the social isolation, persecution, and marginalization of Somali Bantu in Somalia, members of this community today who have little to no knowledge of this history attribute the reasons for this isolation to their status as “black” or “African”. As a result, many comments surfaced during the course of my fieldwork which revolved around the idea of black as something negative or bad, signaling a collective internalization of racism.

The traumatic memory of slavery reveals how narratives of trauma advantageous to universal public notions of the “refugee” may be considered detrimental to the collective identity. Remaining silent on this particular memory, as the Somali Bantu leaders explained, protects Somali Bantu from recalling an unnecessarily painful memory that is “irrelevant” to their present lives. But this “irrelevance” is called into question as one begins to notice the internalized racism that has emerged, first from the loss of the story through silence, and second from the genuine absence of the narrative altogether. As discussed in the narrative of Osman, silencing the story of slavery within Somali Bantu collective consciousness has also meant forgetting about the social construction of race in Somalia and the economic reasons for which slavery became rooted in racial rather than religious differences (3:76). Instead, the causes of their violent experiences are traced back to their racial identity as *jareer*, and the body maps (Malkki 1995) of Somalia are reproduced in the post-resettlement phase.

Here Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic violence” becomes especially helpful in understanding class divisions, Somali Bantu subordination, and the reproduction of the body maps. The lower social status of Somali Bantu is symbolic of the racial violence associated with the history of slavery. Being *jareer* extends beyond the physical features it seeks to characterize. It is a reference to a very particular historical lineage based on slavery and infused with a long history of social subordination. As Besteman (1999) has explained, “it is a term which refers to history—that of non-Somali pagan slave origins; a history devalued in Somali culture and ideology. The effect in social terms of carrying a *jareer* identity was a denigrated status within Somali social structure” (118). Yet after years of silence, and the eventual erasure of this heritage from the collective memory, the resulting racialized inferiority of Somali Bantu has become so deeply intertwined with the social fabric of Somali society that its origins are now

taken for granted as universal and absolute. The residual effects of this symbolic violence thus surface in the Somali Bantu self-image. The silences surrounding the more recent traumatic memories of the Somali Civil War, though perhaps beneficial in the immediate context, may also produce such lingering effects in first-generation American-born Somali Bantu.

But what of the individuals whose silenced stories are excluded from the collective consciousness? While in a sense silence is deemed beneficial to collective efforts of mending, in another, it may be detrimental to individuals through whom the silence is facilitated. As Das (2007) has illustrated, the individual cost of belonging to a collective often comes at a very steep price. In recent years, the literature on trauma and embodiment within medical anthropology has grown vastly. Through embodiment theory medical anthropologists approach the body as “the subject of culture, or in other words, as the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1990:5). While studies of embodiment focus on the body as the site through which traumatic memories are transmitted and expressed, the question at hand is not of the body itself, but of the larger culture and experiences to which the body is both engaged and subjected (Csordas 1999). Green (1998) has characterized the dual identity of those who experience war or trauma as both victims, as well as survivors. As victims, they experience loss, harm, threats, and numerous other forms of violence, but as survivors, they are forced to continue to experience the trauma on both their bodies and in their memories.

The case of Habiba, though perhaps extreme, is one illustration of the powerful ability of the body to speak up when words do not. Even in the silences of narrative, or in the exclusion of traumatic memory from narrative recollections, the memories remain embedded within the individual as a sort of “poisonous knowledge” (Das 2007). The memories overwhelm the body, and with no verbal or emotional outlet, begin to manifest themselves in the body itself. Habiba’s

illness embodied the violence of her social reality, and testified to the Somali-led violence campaign against Somali Bantu civilians during the Somali Civil War (Green 1998). Recalling Somalia and the absences her experiences have bred creates a continuous feeling of suffering that Habiba must carry with her into the present. And yet not remembering Somalia is next to impossible, as every aspect of Habiba's present reality can be traced back to these traumatic events that began with the war and the loss of her brothers.

Despite the "medical" reasons behind the heart attack, Habiba understands that it is intimately connected to the sad secrets her heart has been forced to carry for all these years. What is powerful about her statement, *when the heart grows sad*, is her belief that the heart then physically ceases to work; that the physical body will bear witness to the traumatic memories, betraying her silences, and speaking up where words do not. Therefore, while embodiment can, as illustrated in the case of Habiba, be extreme, in other cases, such as Osman's injured knee, or the scar of the bullet on Mukhtar's leg, it can be more subtle. Regardless, however, these embodiments of traumatic memory are more than individual accounts of post-traumatic stress disorder. They are part of a larger body of social representations that testify to the atrocities of the Somali Bantu past and of the ongoing suffering that characterizes Somali Bantu life even after the fact.

Through these examples one may begin to understand the intentional use of silence in mending Somali Bantu collective identity and the dire price individual members of this community often pay for belonging. Remaining silent on the traumatic memories of the past protects Somali Bantu collective identity by quietly mending the social bonds which would otherwise continue to unravel in the face of remembering and of consequently wanting to place blame. Silence on traumatic memories, therefore, can be understood as a selfless act, conducted

out of love and concern for one's social counterparts; it is an exertion of agency that places another above oneself, even, as illustrated by Habiba's heart attack, at the expense of one's physical and mental well-being.

### *Conclusion*

Anthropological attempts to “get at” the issue of traumatic memory may run the risk of overly generalizing traumatic experience to a set of conditions and symptoms in order to create an academic framework for traumatic memory within the discipline. Furthermore, placing refugees and other persecuted groups within the framework of the “national order of things” universalizes refugee experiences and makes it difficult to recognize suffering, or to formulate meaningful responses to it when we do. Characterizing the suffering of refugees as “post-traumatic stress disorder” fails to capture the totality of traumatic experience and the ongoing nature of suffering even after resettlement. Through these narratives I have hoped to cast doubt on these traditional approaches by revealing the diverse ways that individuals within communities and collectivities differentially experience and define trauma, and consequently, how it is individually and collectively expressed, repressed, challenged, embodied, silenced, or discussed in the post-resettlement phase. Troubling anthropological approaches to traumatic memory and refugee studies is an essential step this discipline must take if it attempts to truly understand the way identity and meaning are differentially negotiated and reproduced within these various settings.

If the noble goal of resettlement is to truly alleviate the suffering of refugees and other displaced populations, then this requires developing culturally embedded understandings of suffering, and how it is differentially defined and experienced within specific settings. Not only are “cultural assimilation” classes important for refugees preparing to live a life abroad, but also for resettlement workers, mentors, and other people whose task it is to facilitate the process of

resettlement in the first place. More than providing a basic understanding of foreign cultures and practices, these classes should focus on the historical development of identity and structures of meaning-making in order to understand how violence targeted these structures and if and how they are still relevant today.

Medical anthropologists interested in understanding the identities of individuals and groups who have experienced and survived violence and trauma may provide useful direction for these resettlement organizations working with persecuted refugees. Studies such as this one reveal the very real ways by which traumatic memory weaves itself into the social fabric—submerging itself into the everyday realities of individuals and collectivities—impacting outlooks, interpretations, identities, and structures of meaning-making. Though the violent events may have passed, the memories of the trauma live on; they are ever-present, creating a heavy, dismal cloud, through which the past and present are intimately and undeniably intertwined.

Through the narratives collected during my fieldwork, I have attempted to show the particularity of traumatic memory in this community; how the war, and consequently their refugee status, has created a state of lived suffering not because of the way it altered citizenship status and national identity, but because of the way it resulted in the transformation and deaths of relationships between members of this community. Within the Somali Bantu refugee community in Kansas City, traumatic memory is lodged in the everyday lives of those who experienced the violence because of the way the deaths of relationships have created an ongoing sense of absence that remains pervasive even after resettlement. Traumatic memory of loss becomes absence, and absence is slowly incorporated into the everyday reality of the members of this community.

Collective efforts to silence these memories and to mend the damaged or broken relationships results in the embodiment of traumatic memories on individual bodies.

Utterances and silences, carrying the weight of memories of trauma, fill the spaces of a quiet and desolate life abroad. Violent experiences descend into the everyday, surfacing in subtle yet damaging ways; disrupting the social order, altering relationships and social dynamics, restructuring gender and social roles, and slowly silencing Somali Bantu traditions and ways of life. This suffering is further compounded by the process of resettlement where refugees are suddenly faced with new difficulties in a strange and foreign world. Yet silence extends even into this realm, as the pressure placed on refugees by both the lens of their traumatic memories and local populations in the post-resettlement phase force them into a “thankful” silence—thankful because their lives have supposedly dramatically improved, silent because they are consequently given no social space within which to voice their suffering. But throughout these experiences the Somali Bantu have remained steadfast. Once again in the face of difficulty, they have quietly come together in an effort to mend and rebuild their shattered worlds.

Mending this trauma has become a regular part of the Somali Bantu life in Kansas City, centering their lives on the reproduction of an identity that has been altered by violence in many ways. Their lengthy exposure to violence pitted against their dedication to each other and to the preservation of their collective bond shows the remarkable ability of the Somali Bantu to reconstruct meaningful worlds out of the rubble of their own shattered lives. It is this resilience in the face of hardship that has compelled me to share their story.

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