Soomaali Mi'yaa? An Ethnographic Exploration of Somali Identity Formation in Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

Somalinimo is the blood, breath, and bone of this research. Meaning "the essence of being Somali," this word walks through borders, creating transnational communities. Somalis are viewed as one people, and Somalis believe themselves to be one people. This thesis explores the meaning and transformation behind this essentialism and how Somalis in South Africa employ this one-ness to form interconnecting Diasporas with ease. This ethnography pieces together the stories of a few Somalis I had the privilege of working with during my time volunteering with the Somali Association of South Africa (SASA). With the office located in Bellville, truly at the heart of Somali society in Cape Town, I attempted to understand and document the ways Somalis construct and hold together their multiple identities, while also unpacking my own. Belonging, conviviality, movement, and performance are significant themes throughout this research. As oral history is a historically significant part of Somali culture and society, it is especially important to preserve the Somali voice, and those voices *outside* of Somali lands.

In a world that is actively decolonising and recolonising every day, perception and power are everything. How do Somalis express themselves culturally in a generally "non-Somali" like place? Can South Africa be considered a "home" at all? Thus, my principal research questions are as follows: 1) How do Somalis in Cape Town define their *Somalinimo*? 2) What cultural tools do Somalis utilise and essentialise in efforts to mobilise? While Somali Studies is a small, but growing field, the pool of research surrounding Somalis in South Africa hovers steadily around a series of themes: the shopkeeper, the victim, the foreigner. Somalis in Cape Town are nimble-footed and nimble-minded, forever marked by their journeys, and their *Somalinimo* travels with them.

Introducing *Somalinimo // Soo Dhawoow*

The storyline of my identity starts and ends with my *Somalinimo*. The patrilineal blood of ancestral nomads courses, with resistance, through my American-bred veins. The long-winded tales of a thriving, glorious capital city never fail to meet my eardrums, juxtaposing the colonial remains and rubbled structures that encompass large chunks of the sandy terrain. The blissful smells of jasmine, cumin, *oonsi* (incense), and lemon trees engulf my nostrils with nostalgia; I'm instantly transported to my grandmother's home in the heart of Boorama, right in the city centre. My pride in my Somali heritage is very much present. However, it is impossible to think deeply about my Somali identity without the trials that come with it. My identity multiplicity, my cultural hybridity – as coined by postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, is a significant tenet of self-defining processes. While I identify as a Somali, reaching that point has been extremely difficult, rifled with the perceptions of others, some dear to my heart, and the complexities that come with growing up in the Diaspora, physically separated from my geographical, ancestral "home."

For the past few years, my mother made it known to my brother and I that we must lay our own roots, not merely depend on hers, as we've done for years before. I love going to the Horn, Borama in particular, my grandmother's town in the Northern region, Awdal. As a trend in previous years, my brother, Sammy, and I typically treated these yearly trips, or "vacations" to my mother, with dismay and feelings of hesitancy. While we cannot speak Somali fluently, in rooms filled with cousins and extended family members, it seems that people think our language barrier also extends to body language. We can feel the disappointment radiating from various sets of piercing eyes; we do not belong, no matter how often they *say* we do. That time around, usual feelings of fear were met with unexpected feelings of excitement and hope. In the last few months of 2021, whilst navigating travel restrictions enacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic, I stayed with my mother and grandmother in Boorama and Muqdisho, the capital city. It was also around that time when I started journaling daily.

> *We landed in Hargeysa yesterday. I don't remember the drive [to Boorama] to be honest; I was bobbing in and out of sleep, catching glimpses of grazing camels and huge patches of green. It's greener than last time. Well, it has been three years. I'm probably remembering it differently. I'm here without Sammy for the first time. Feels weird. Mama asked me yesterday if this feels like home. No. She was shocked, to my surprise. I was like girl, I don't live here. I don't speak Somali. Although, I am getting better. I just don't know*

small talk. Tell me to go make you some tea. I'll understand, but where is the kettle? "Go ask the girl.".

Boorama // 14 October 2021

With little Wi-Fi and very few friends with whom to spend my time, I spent most days journaling, reading, sitting in wonderful silence with my grandmother, and contemplating the parameters of my future research at UCT. Accessibility, decoloniality, community, storytelling, and cultural hybridity: these themes filled my everyday thoughts, debating ways I could interrogate and explore the Diasporic Somali's experience in Cape Town. Luckily, in terms of background academic and theoretical knowledge, I'm not starting completely from scratch. At every point in my academic career, if one were to ask me what I want to study, my answer always has and always will remain the same. That is because, all my life, my Somaliness has been defined by others.

At night, I'm awakened by the adhan. Beautiful, yet so loud. I listen until I'm able to fall asleep again. Maybe here is where I finally start praying. Like a good Muslim. Or whatever that means. I love that Ayeeyo still finds joy in the day, creates it for herself. She's aware of her age, yet sometimes acts older or younger, depending on her mood, or if it's too cold. "Dhaxan ma'aha, Ayeeyo." When she makes a joke, the room erupts in laughter. A queen in every way. Even if the joke isn't funny, we laugh. Cause that's what you do when your queen expects you to.

Boorama // 15 October 2021

I have studied the intricacies and complexities of Somali identity formation in an American context. How do Somalis form community in a South African context? As the culmination of my undergraduate career, I researched and submitted a project exploring the psycho-cultural limitations of language development in young Somali Americans living in Minnesota. Throughout that research process, I implemented an autoethnographic reflection component, taking lessons for myself and my confidence in taking ownership of my own Somali identity, one riddled with perceptions of what it means to be a "true" Somali. What does it mean to be Somali enough? With language loss? When living far from one's geographical homeland?

Here in South Africa, I strived to learn all I could about the Somali community in Cape Town. I attempted to explore how one defines what it means to be a Somali. How is the Somali sense of self constructed in a South African context? Is this sense of self inherently Somali, or do South African conceptions of Somali culture become intrinsically ingrained into the individual's

definition of *Somalinimo*? This research project is especially important to me because while Somali Studies is a small, yet relatively growing field, the pool of research surrounding Somalis in South Africa hovers steadily around specific themes: the shopkeeper, the victim, the foreigner.

Ayaan's Story

The interview lasted sixteen and a half minutes. She told me her story as long as she could. Migration journeys are often journeys of hardship. "If I [knew] the journey, I would have never done it." From the push factors to the journey itself, and feelings of separation upon completion – Ayaan succumbed to her emotions. Naturally. Openly. I felt immense sadness and discomfort. As I apologised profusely at the end of our interview for the tears welling up in her eyes, it is this very discomfort that the most honest, but the most vulnerable ethnographies are born. This is where decolonial and mindful research is most important. I did not push her to finish her story.

"So, I came 2010. […] I come by land. I travelled, and when I was coming, I didn't have any documentation. So first, I left Somalia in 2009. I spent 2010 in Kenya, then I left Kenya to come to South Africa. It took me almost two and a half months to come to South Africa." At SASA, Ayaan is an Advocacy Officer, meaning she helps migrants and refugees with documentation. Ayaan and many of the people she helps share similar stories of migration. It took Ayaan two and a half months. Modes of transport included a bus, a bigger bus, a motorbike, a truck, a boat, and her own two feet. Leaning back in the office chair, hands folded on her jilbab-covered lap, her eyes travelled from the ceiling to the floor, then back up to me.

Initially, after starting the official journey in Kenya, she was told she would be in South Africa within a week. She soon faced the harsh reality of the truth. After riding a couple of buses, stops here and there, some people getting off to hop on a boat – "I didn't want the boat," she saw a man on a motorbike after stopping at the border of Tanzania. "I could speak some Swahili at that time. He said, *come, come, let's go!* I was very skinny that time, very thin. Me, another guy, and the driver, the three of us, we took the motorbike." As a refugee, Ayaan had to travel through the forest, avoiding checkpoints to slowly make her way through the country. "I was wearing abaya. A hijab, small one. I was wearing three quarters, the tights, so it's only to my knee. So, all the way down, there was nothing." Capping the outfit with flats and small socks, the motorbike cut through trees, "things that are very sharp," leaving behind pieces of skin and a bloody trail.

Along the motorbike journey, for two nights, Ayaan had to stay put. Ayaan then travelled through Tanzania in a truck. “It’s a container. Then, during the day, you sweat a lot. It’s very hot. At night, it’s very cold. I think we spent two days at the back, and we didn’t eat.” As she uttered those words, I couldn’t cover my shock. I asked her again, confirming the fact that I had no idea just how troubling these journeys can be.

After she got off this truck close to Zambia, she took a break from the claustrophobia. “When walking, I feel dizzy. They take us to a Somali restaurant, but it was very late. He asked the man to go to the kitchen, to maybe find the leftovers. But I couldn’t even eat. I couldn’t eat. I feel like nothing could go in. After some time, I stay with a family, a Somali family was there. She was a very nice lady. This is still Tanzania, but if you walk five minutes, you are at the border to Zambia.” Ayaan then spent two months at the border. Not from her doing, but because her guide left her there. An unfortunate yet common occurrence for migrants. From there, Ayaan travelled to Zambia on another truck – one that was “better this time” – and then walked for some time, crossed a lake on a boat, then on to Zimbabwe on a minibus, then “straight, we come to the border.” Upon landing in South Africa, a Somali man who knew Ayaan’s father met her there, and she found herself in yet another Somali restaurant to recuperate and recover.

“So that’s how I come. ‘Til now, I’m here. I stayed with my brother for some time, looking for work. It’s very hard to find work.” Since then, Ayaan got married, worked in a shop, lived in Parow, moved to Bellville, and had two beautiful daughters and a baby boy. I’ve helped the girls with their homework, and I can attest that they are smart, kind, and caring – just like their mother. Ayaan has finished that journey, but awaits another as she, like many Somalis, view South Africa as a temporary stop on their way to the West.

I asked Ayaan why she left Somalia, naively unaware of the response I was about to receive. “When I was in Somalia, my father was killed. So, when my father passed away, I stayed with my mother. Then… um…” After long pauses followed by soon-tear-filled eyes, she continued. “…my mother passed away.” She broke eye contact, and a tear slowly travelled down her cheek. She apologised unnecessarily. “Then, I became alone… Sorry, can we continue later on?” This story has some gaps. This story may sound incomplete. However, it is the story Ayaan chose to share, parts of a long, painful, memory-filled story that continues in the lives of those recovering or making the journey themselves.

Establishing Significance

Building from the works of revolutionary theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Faye Harrison, James Ferguson, and James Clifford, I am grateful to have embarked on a complicated journey where I attempted to prioritise to the highest degree the voices of my participants, to provide a platform where Somalis in South Africa can forge their own story, take back the narrative. As oral history is a historically significant part of Somali culture and society, it is especially important to preserve the Somali voice, *outside* of Somalia. In a world that is actively decolonising and recolonising every day, perception and power are everything. How do Somalis express themselves culturally in a generally "non-Somali" like place? Can South Africa be considered a "home" at all? Thus, my principal research questions are: (1) How do Somalis in Cape Town define their *Somalinimo*? And (2) What cultural tools do Somalis utilise and essentialise in efforts to mobilise?

A Literature Review // *Waar Maxaa Taqaanaa?*

When I first began this literature journey, I struggled to find Somali stories written by Somalis. My cousin Iman, whom I look up to, quickly fixed this problem for me. She provided me with the main Somali pieces of literature I would later read repeatedly, helping construct my understanding of *Somalinimo* and how that essence came to be. I was particularly struck by these words from Somali scholar Ahmed Qassim Ali: "Can the Somali intellectual live in peace with the Western media which every day presents a distorted image and an exotic interpretation of the reality of his/her country?" (1995:79). Throughout my academic career, I sought to fight the perceived Somali narrative exacerbated by the West. From a defence of the Somali piracy network to a storytelling of Somali identity outside of its terrorist-engulfed image, I have utilised my academic career as an advocate. This chapter is structured around these thematic subheadings: (a) The Somali Migration and the Nation; (b) Somali Experiences in South Africa – The "Foreigner" Narrative; (c) Selfhood, Culture, and *Somalinimo*; (d) Researching the Somali in South Africa. Not only does Somali history reflect instances of unity, nomadism, and a diversity of livelihoods, but the history also tells a story of racialization, "whitening up," and how these ideas permeate Somali cultural performances both inside and outside of Somali lands.

The Somali Migration and the Nation

The nomadic history of the Somali as a people stretches far; that history is repeated through Somali movements in the world today, constantly on the move, places never completely permanent. The Somali Diaspora found its roots primarily after the fall of the socialist regime, governed by Siad Barre, in 1991. However, issues regarding Somali identity formation can be traced deeper into the very beginnings of Somali clannism. Somalis tend to believe they descend from one common ancestor: Samaale (Gregory, 1992). This common ancestor unites the Somali people, but it creates division as Somalis find pride in their ability to recite clan lineages back for centuries (Gregory, 1992). Divided by tribal lines, Somalis find difference and community wherever they go, but even through tribal differences, Somalis are still united as a single entity.

Clan divisions have been ingrained in Somali society and governing structures since before colonisation; cultural divisions were, in part, historically due to differences in class, one's means of survival, and regional locations (Ahad, 2014). The formerly war-torn country is known by the rest of the world as a harmoniously homogenous society where everyone speaks the same

language, practises the same religion, and indulges in the same cultural traditions. This notion of a homogenous society first emerged from British anthropologist I.M. Lewis's field research, dominating the limited knowledge of Somalia at the time. Lewis studied a few Somalis in one region and attributed these qualities he witnessed to the rest of the nation and its people (Lewis, 2010). Looking past Lewis's deeply problematic yet esteemed work, this apparent duality in sameness and difference within Somali culture fuels my research and dominates available research.

To unpack Somali identity formations and diasporic patterns, it is essential to understand what Somalia is – to lay down the groundwork of the foundations for Somalia as a country, nation, homeland, place, an imagined and real space. A perceived one-ness of Somali culture drives this research, yes, but it is important to know where that one-ness comes from, and how Lewis created a Somalia rooted in Western visions of global order (Lewis, 2010). While Benedict Anderson theorised the concept of imagined communities and how the connections felt between people of the same nation or community are imagined and felt psychologically, Meyer posits that much can be gained by replacing the words "imagined" with "aesthetic" and "community" with "formation" (Anderson, 1983; Meyer, 2009).

The denial of the presence of people creating "aesthetic formations," shaping and re-shaping culture through experience and increased encounters, is where Mahmood Mamdani comes into play. The view of Somalia as a homogenous nation, rather than one with varying cultural traditions depending on the region, Lewis's homogenous Somalia, was utilised by the post-colonial regime to mobilise independence efforts (Lewis, 2010). In his theories of the creation of the "minority" and how European colonisers enforced regimes of the "nation-state," Mamdani states that "the violence of postcolonial modernity mirrors the violence of European modernity and colonial direct rule" (2020:4). It is a well-known fact that Somalis were forced to unite to gain independence from the British and Italian colonisers in the region; however, that unification also caused for a dominant narrative to take shape because for "the nation-state…to homogenize its territory," it must "eject those who would introduce pluralism" (Mamdani, 2020:4).

Contributing to the revisionist school of thought, going against Lewis's homogenous Somalia, Mohamed Eno's work, *The Bantu-Jareer Somalis: Unearthing Apartheid in the Horn of Africa,* tells the revolutionary and decolonial story of the Somali Bantu population, an overlooked and oppressed group of people (2008). Eno provides a historical analysis to unlearn the "orientalists' Somalia" (2008:12). Reading this book, I would get flashbacks of my childhood, a

pseudo-Somali vision, cultural stones passed down by my mother and father and chiselled into a new shape by me. I read the words of a political song, and I remembered learning this song on the piano when I was little, except for me, the lyrics went "Maanta, maanta, maanta, blah blah blah blah maanta." Until that day, reading this book, I discovered its not only real lyrics but its political, nationalist message behind it. My parents were raised in a post-colonial Somalia, sprawling with nationalist ideologies and clan-based customs dripping at the seams. I grew up with the impression of a homogenous Somalia; the more I read, the deeper I ventured into my research journey, I struggled to differentiate the customs I grew up with from "pure" Somali tradition versus Somali nationalist tradition. And even further, what even constitutes as a pure tradition?

Eno unpacks the symbol of the camel, a symbol I've grown up understanding as the most important to Somali identity. In actuality, the "*mandeeq…* [is a] she-camel that symbolises Somali independence" (2008:166). It's a manifestation of Somali *nomadic* history that was politically employed in efforts of nationalisation and mobilisation (Eno, 2008:172). Eno states that "as an identity, Somaliness is an emblematic metaphor designed out of the image of a nomad's dream" (2008:256). To him, Somali homogeneity is a "social myth." However, whether a social myth or not, I argue that Somali oneness is a perceived experience, thus etched into reality and living bodies through encounters all over the globe.

It is this perceived shared definition of *Somalinimo* that I find so interesting to unpack as the Somali sense of self finds construction through community, through shared and at times forced upon beliefs. From unravelling the intricacies of Somali identity as a place and highlighting the potential for racism and tribalism oozing into national constructions in a supposed "homogenous" nation, we can begin to understand the ways *Somalinimo* is created and passed down. Furthering these ideas, I would like to introduce a special academic book, a cornerstone in Somali studies, *The Invention of Somalia*, compiled by Ali Jimale Ahmed (1995). This book confronts the construction of the homogenous "Somali myth" through articles written by Somali and non-Somali scholars stretching from topics like the origins of the Somali peoples to the spread of Islam in the country (Ahmed, 1995). Mohamed Haji Mukhtar details the history of Islam in the country and the ways that history has been perverted through time for political reasons; however, at the end of the day, Somalia remains "the only country in the whole continent whose population is virtually all Muslim" (1995:1). Catherine Besteman tells the story of the Gosha tribe, the "descendants of slaves acquired by Somalis in the 19th century," and further shows that the "perception of a

homogenous population of cattle-and-camel herders is historically incorrect…" (1995:43). Abdi Kusow discusses the origins of the Somali people and where the myth of Arab ancestry comes from, how Northern Somali tribes attempt "to link their ancestral origin to that of Southern Arabia in the hopes of raising their Nasab" or "invented culture" (1995:102). These main takeaways display elements of Somali identity construction that will continue to be fledged out such as the pervasiveness of Islamic-turned-Arabized culture and the prioritisation of Northern traditions.

Marnie Shaffer, Giulia Ferrato, and Zaheera Jinnah's research article not only traces Somali migration patterns outside of the country but also details where the importance of Somali clan lines came back into life during the end of Barre's dictatorial regime (2018). Before his defeat in the Ogaden Wars with Ethiopia in 1978, Barre's "vision for Somalia included…downplaying 'tribalism' by banning any formal relationships that promoted social inequality…" (Shaffer et al, 2018:160). After that loss, however, his "unpopularity grew" resulting in him turning "to clan identities to retain power…" (Shaffer et al, 2018:160). This idea is important for the exploration of my research topic as Somali identity is transformed when crossing border lines. Tracing the reasons why Somalis migrated to South Africa, the main argument outlined in their research is that "the geographies of forced migrants are dynamic, fluid, carefully planned, and subjectively rational," and in the Somali case, South Africa as a destination may have been temporary originally, but pull factors made Cape Town a final stop for most (Shaffer et al, 2018:160).

According to Meritt Buyer, as "Somali history has created one of the largest displaced populations in the world," South Africa's position as an economically prosperous and opportunistic country, let alone its stability as compared to Somalia's previous condition, was very appealing and a necessary location for many Somali refugees (Buyer, 2008:228). The story of the Somali immigrant leaving Somali lands and entering South Africa is one fuelled by a desire for government stability, to decrease a sense of statelessness to the best of their ability; this is represented through the 1998 South Africa Refugees Act which grants Somali refugees with official documents and legal status (Shaffer et al, 2018). Because of this status, Somalis can claim South Africa as a manifestation of "home," displaying a "transnational space of belonging" for Somalis across the Diaspora (Shaffer et al, 2018:163).

As Somalis engage in "step-migration," staying for a significant period in each migration stop and still desiring to move to a *better* destination, it can be assumed that places like South Africa are viewed as "ultimately not a home, but a place of transition" (Abdi, 2015:27). Factually

migrants and continuing to embody those characteristics, how does this almost embodied transitional experience affect the Somalis in South Africa? Now that many Somalis have settled in South Africa, Johannesburg, and Cape Town in particular, it is important to discuss the multiplicity of experiences encountered once settling into this context, whether that experience is unwanted or shaping the narrative of the migrant Somali experience in South Africa.

Somali Experiences in South Africa - The "Foreigner" Narrative

The Somali Diaspora stretches far and wide – from Minnesota in the United States to London, United Kingdom. Somalis have established communities wherever they go, and strong, distinct features of Somali culture allow for these communities to be fostered in the most unlikely of places. Somali communities in South Africa not only formed quickly, but tightly as pockets of Somali community are viewed as highly concentrated and isolated from the rest of South African society (Alhourani, 2015; Gastrow, 2013). Many Somalis took advantage of the feelings of security, finding opportunities for economic mobilisation in various townships. According to Daniel Thompson, "the confluence of urbanisation and (economic) segregation led to growing populations in predominantly black-inhabited townships, where Somalis found a niche market for high-volume, low-margin retail trade" (Thompson, 2017).

Vanya Gastrow reinforces Thompson's assertions through quantitative data collection proving how since 2004, South Africa witnessed a rise in business robberies by 380% (2013). Of those attacks, "foreign nationals compromised 96.5% of reported business robbery victims" (Gastrow, 2013:6). Reasons for these attacks, looking past the consensus of a xenophobic atmosphere, point to the isolated nature of Somali enclaves inside these townships. These chambers of community separate themselves from their South African neighbours through "linguistic, cultural, and religious differences" (Gastrow, 2013:9). Gastrow claims that Somalis' lack of aid from law enforcement in response to these attacks is due to how Somalis in Somalia were previously subjected to lawlessness (Gastrow, 2013) – an extremely problematic narrative that justifies local South Africans taking the law into their own hands and "cleansing" their streets of the *terrorist* Somali (Thompson, 2017).

The most striking feature of the rising xenophobia that has been experienced across South Africa lies in hypocrisy. This "rainbow nation" – one founded under the principles of Ubuntu, an African philosophy that "thrives to instil the virtues of tolerance, forgiveness, kindness, sympathy,

dialogue, trust, peace, and love" through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – instead instils fear into any person appearing to be not of South African descent or heritage (Agyeno, 2019). In their analysis of the xenophobic violence in the country in juxtaposition to the Ubuntu philosophy, Oboshi Agyeno argues that it's the government's lack of efforts to "mainstream" the Ubuntu philosophy that caused the reoccurring violence (2019). South Africa holds a large immigrant population from several African countries; the rise of xenophobic violence has created a scholarly discussion around the politics of cultural cohesion and the conventions of a home. The Somali experience in South Africa is that of "the story of the Non-Southern African in South Africa," a story of physical and psychological violence, as South Africans and others living in South Africa contemplate who can claim to belong and through which cultural and social characteristics (Flockemann, 2017).

Ingrid Brudvig explores place-making in Bellville among the Somali migrant community, unravelling the refugee experience in South Africa (2014). By becoming a migrant-receiving country, South African borders are ones of transition, ones where what it means to be a South African is more fluid (Brudvig, 2014). While Somalis are allowed to enter the country – refugee rights are in place where *legal* migrants are welcome, Brudvig explains how Foucault's "mechanisms of control" are present every day for the Somali refugee, living a life where one must fight language barriers, obstacles to proper education, and finding employment (2014:38, Foucault:1995). Brudvig states that Somalis in South Africa "are considered as 'prima facie' refugees, meaning that the mere notion of being Somali grants refugee status due to the political circumstances of Somalia" (2014:42). As Somalis are automatically considered refugees in South Africa, that label can be all-consuming, creating another reason for community building for Somalis here. We can connect this to Gupta and Ferguson's conception of the construction of othering (1997). The refugee label on the Somali person in South Africa insinuates layers of "exclusions" and "otherness" as they survive in sometimes hostile and violent environments.

The narrative of Somalis in South Africa is one fraught with the overpowering perception of the local South African; this perception is fuelled by the differences seen in Somali society and the uniqueness and identifiability of an average Somali walking around their new neighbourhood. Ala Rabiha Alhourani, in their ethnographic study centring on the voices of Somali immigrants living in Cape Town, discusses the processes of community formation and how Somali culture transpires in a South African context (Alhourani, 2015). The author delves into how Somalis living

in Bellville, known locally as "Little Mogadishu," define what it means to be a Somali, particularly through sharing language and religion. Formations of the Somali community centre around common conceptions that "Somalis are 100% Muslim," and "to be considered a 'true' Somali is predicated on an individual's ability to speak the Somali language" (Alhourani, 2015:105). Language loss in many diasporic populations is common; however, for Somalis, complete engagement and ability to identify with the Somali community is dependent on necessary knowledge of Somali customs and language. This idea is reinforced by Alhourani's application of theories of "aesthetic formations," asserting that community building is not built off of "performances of a pre-existing 'imagined community,'" but that Somalis are actively and purposefully implementing authentic expressions of *Somalinimo* in an inherently non-Somali location (2015:106). In Bellville specifically, the Somali's habitus is "influenced by a 'field' of social space in which cultural performance takes place." (Brudvig, 2014:8).

In *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity*, Cawo Abdi conducts a study looking at Somali community formation in the United States, South Africa, Kenya, and the United Arab Emirates (2015). Using participant observation and ethnography to explore the ways Muslim identities are carried transnationally, she shows how Somalis negotiate boundaries and borders to survive in the diaspora (Abdi, 2015). Employing Ann Swidler's "cultural tool kit," she shows how Somalis in South Africa use Islam as a tool for community formation among Somalis but also stretching to a South African community, Indian Muslims specifically (Abdi, 2015:16). Abdi discusses how Somalis would "consciously identify as north-eastern, Muslim Africans to build alliances," strategically becoming a type of "middleman minority" (2015:112). South Africa's apartheid history also provided an opportunity for Somalis to lean more on their Muslimness and Umma connections as they were forced to find a new home in already culturally and racially divided areas (Abdi, 2015:114). A Somali's "cultural tool kit" includes the Somali language, clan ties, being Muslim, and a sense of national unity. In South Africa, that "tool kit" becomes a mode for survival.

Selfhood, Culture, and *Somalinimo*

The average Somali in South Africa lives day by day in constant fear and anxiety of exclusion and moments of potential physical violence, as shown by the experiences outlined in the previous section regarding Somali business owners. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's theories

of space and belonging can be applied to this experience as they state how "the irony of these times," being rapid globalisation and culture mixing, "is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992:10). For many second-generation Somalis living outside of Somali lands, the Somali identity is rooted in movement, where a homeland is geographically, and for many second-generation Somalis living outside of the country, psychologically far. While the number of Somali immigrants is continuing to rise, Somalis are still seen as an "other" in South Africa, even during this seemingly postcolonial era. Martin Sökefeld asserts that "there can be identity only if there is more than one identity, and in this sense, difference constitutes and precedes identity" (1999:418). Somalis choose which aspects of their multiple identities to preserve; these multiple identities inform one's sense of self and cultural consciousness.

Somalinimo is a term used to describe the collective identity, culture, and sense of belonging shared by the Somali people. It encompasses the cultural, historical, and linguistic traditions that have evolved over centuries and have been passed down through generations of Somali communities. *Somalinimo* is characterized by a strong attachment to the Somali language, customs, and traditions, as well as a deep connection to the land and history of Somali lands. It is not a static or homogenous concept, but rather a dynamic and evolving expression of Somali culture and identity, with aesthetic cultural styles constantly forming and re-forming. Influenced by various factors such as migration, globalization, and changing political and social circumstances, wherever Somalis find themselves, room is made for *Somalinimo*.

Speaking of migration patterns in particular, Somali scholar Nimo Abdi's research on Somali identity displays the way *Somalinimo* is racialized and how that racialization plays a role in the settling patterns of Somalis in new homes (2020). Her analyses of anti-Black sentiments within Somali society, while situated in an American context, contributes to global understandings of *Somalinimo* as she claims that "Somali identity is continuously fleeing from Black identity and attempting to gain access to something to which bodies with Black skin have not had access – whiteness" (Abdi, 2020:274). This echoes the stories of *Song of Lawino*, Ocol becoming a "walking corpse" in the eyes of his wife in his efforts to assimilate into white society (p'Bitek, 1966). Abdi points the Somali American's dissent towards blackness to "their minority-majority status in the homeland" (Abdi, 2020:275; Mamdani, 2020). Like the Somali migrant's story in

South Africa, Somalis in America prioritise their Muslim identity to separate themselves from Black Americans, contributing to the ancient and still persevering narrative of the primitive African, the pagan African (Abdi, 2020).

Ali Jimale Ahmed's piece in *The Invention of Somalia* implores people to push the bounds of the typical narratives in Somali studies (1995). Ahmed highlights the words of British writer Marjorie Perham as she comments on the Somali woman: "She stood as straight as a spear and had regular features, a European profile" (1995:140-141). Not only do Somalis attempt to Arabize themselves whether through Islam or clan ties, but Western scholars have historically separated Somalis from the rest of the continent, pushing "the creation of a Somalia that is *in* Africa, but not *of* Africa" (1995:141). This idea of a non-black Somalia also stems from the myth that some Somali tribes trace their ancestry to Arab peoples. Northern Somali tribes like the Isaaq and Darood claim that "the supposed arrival of some Arab individuals who married local Somali women…produced the first ancestors of the current Somali ethnic population" (Kusow, 1995:82). When they say, "current Somali ethnic population," it is important to remember that this definition constantly excludes the Somali Bantu population (Eno, 2008). Racism and clannism exist in Somali society; how does this affect Somali life in South Africa, a place very much *of* Africa?

Whether belonging to the homogenous or heterogenous school of thought, certain markers of Somali culture and people allow for the formation of community, most notably in the Diaspora (Osman, 2007). Both a dividing and uniting factor, the clan system is one of the most important and identifiable aspects of Somali society, often placed above political affiliations and class – uniting in the sense that belonging to the same clan instantly creates a sense of family but dividing in the sense that Somalis can be placed into separate boxes depending on your patrilineal lines (Osman, 2007). On the other hand, in the homogenous school of thought, looking past clan divisions, Professor Ahmed Samatar questions, "why and how could this society, one of the few nations in the continent with one ethnic group, one culture, one language, and one religion, find itself in such parlous circumstances – verging on self-destruction" (Osman, 2007)? While Somalis have historically and contemporarily divided themselves between clans, instrumental factors that unite most Somalis are language and religion.

The spread of Islam quickly became one of the most identifiable facets of Somali culture, with Somali scholar Hawa Mire asserting that "to be Somali is to be a 'pure' Muslim" (Mire, 2020:46). The spread of Islam as a uniting factor also bled into the wardrobe as wearing Islamic

dress such as abayas, hijabs, and kamiis, became just as important as identifying with the religion altogether (Ingriis, 2014). Sharing the story of the importance of Islam in Somali identity and society, Abdi states that "wherever there were Muslims, there was a community, an umma" (2015:116). In South Africa, mosques served as the first place refugees and migrants could wash and collect themselves after the traumatic, sometimes dirty, dangerous migration journeys; Somalis were often welcomed with open arms (Abdi, 2015:117). Islam plays a large role in Somali identity, highlighted especially by their experiences in the Diaspora.

The *refugee* identity and narrative agency are important themes to discuss. Buyer claims that "refugees choose which aspect of their identity to put forth, depending on their audience and the coping resources which are at their disposal" (2008:226). Telling the stories of refugees and immigrants is a delicate practice as identity becomes extended past ethnicity and culture and towards a state of being, a state of legality. Buyer's ethnographic research highlighted that identification as a refugee is central to the Somali's conception of the self; at the same time, some Somalis strongly identify with their specific clan/tribe rather than as a Somali in general. This stems from the decades-long civil war, which brings about another important concept: trauma and narrative agency when recounting migrant stories (Buyer, 2008). Somalis must not only formulate their identity for themselves as refugees and/or immigrants but must also grapple with the trauma of leaving one's homeland and settling in a place much different, filled with their perceptions of who the Somali *truly* is or where their place in South African society *should* be.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha defines liminal space and hybrid cultures as the "in-between" spaces people of multiple identities often hold as their identities no longer fit in one box – categorical restrictions set by colonial and imperial efforts to subjugate and oppress *the Other*, non-Western peoples (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha states that these spaces "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1994:2). Somalis must redefine their identity in South Africa upon the first step. As immigrants, refugees, or second-generation, Somalis living in South Africa are no longer *only* Somali; they're not completely South African either. They manoeuvre both identities simultaneously, creating new identity formations for themselves, in new ways. "Hybridity is heresy," and Somalis are forced to empower themselves to express themselves culturally whilst facing backlash for being different, for not fitting into the typical box of a South African, or who

a South African is *perceived* to be (1994:225). Whether South Africa was the intended final destination or not, the Somali's sense of self is made up of constant decision-making; which parts of their culture do they choose to keep or lose to participate in South African life? Or is the term "lost" too strong of a word for this context? Is this perceived assimilation merely a performance?

Mobility is at the heart of being Somali. That is where the joy of identity formation lies, within its mobile, hybrid potentialities and imaginations (Nyamnjoh, 2013; Brudvig, 2014). A Somali is nothing without motion. In his lecture titled "Diasporas as Incompleteness in Motion," Francis Nyamnjoh states that "there are as many diasporas as there are homes and dislocations" (2023:8). Not only do Somalis cross borders in the literal sense, but in terms of personhood as well. Brudvig highlights the complexities of forming community through connection and friendship in the Somali migrant communities, displaying the culture of reciprocity needed for migrant communities based on mutual need and respect (2014). She asserts that "there is a shared imperative for harmony in convivial society" (Brudvig, 2014:7). Somalis and other migrant communities create this sense of conviviality through multiple connections and a shared understanding of survival, of creating a relatively safe space, distant from the xenophobia felt across the country.

Brudvig explains that isn't Bellville itself, but "the meaning ascribed [to it] by lived history, shared understandings, and a de-territorialized sense of home" (2014:87). Samadia Sadouni's research discusses the alignment of Somalis in South Africa with Indian Muslims in South Africa, positing the question: how does a Muslim connection provide and create the platform for resource cultivation for Somali migrants (2014)? Islam has a deep history in South Africa dating back to the colonial period; the author investigates this history to show how both race *and* religion affect Somali place-making in South Africa (Sadouni, 2014). The threat of physical violence is a disempowering event that stays looming and ever present in South Africa. However, Somalis find agency in mobility and the systems of care put in place to alleviate the neglect of governmental institutions.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter tells a story of migration, to finding the meaning of home. The Somali Diaspora stretches far globally and socially, showing the opportunities for the convivial melting of cultures, identities, and beliefs. While there is a division between schools of

thought debating the supposed homogeneity of the Somali people, there is a common thread of experienced unity that cannot be denied. Aspects of Somali history like clannism, racial marginalisation, and political nomadism hold characteristics present in the Somali communities of the diaspora. In the coming chapters, utilising an auto-ethnographic and decolonial lens – as a *post*-colonial era can never be possible, specific realms of Somali identities are explored in the historical, contemporary, and South African contexts: clan, language, and Islam.

My Methodology // *Waxan Sax Mi'yaa?*

> *Somalinimo is my ayeeyo and her endless cups of shah. It's her voice elegantly demanding another piece of canjeero. Somalinimo is even my broken Somali. "She's not very good, but at least she's trying." My last day in Boorama is spilling over the brim with emotion – can my Somalinimo live when my ayeeyo no longer does?*
>
> *Boorama // 15 January 2023*

Some would say it's cliche to admit that my journey of self-discovery has stretched the extent of my lifetime. However, as a product of cultural mixing, as a citizen of a Diaspora, and as a contested member of the Somali community, that is my truth. Although I could rephrase – my *academic* journey of self-discovery, of reflection, didn't start until I invested myself in the growing world of Somali studies during my undergraduate career. And I am more than grateful to have had the opportunity to continue that journey at UCT, diving into a new world of Somaliness, one filled with familiars and unknowns. This journey of fieldwork sparked endless debates with uncles, aunts, and parents, with my research never-ending. I strive to produce work that reflects the decolonial learning I have continued to hone under the guidance received here in Cape Town, both from the academic institution and the community. A decolonial work is a self-reflexive work, one constantly questioning the ways knowledge is gathered and put together. By detangling the divisions between the Self and the Other through viewing myself as a participant as well (Abu Lughod, 1991), this thesis attempts to contribute to "authentic anthropology" and create a collection of ethnographies moving towards new ways to document, understand, and problematize culture, away from a static and linear Western framework (Harrison, 1997).

Fieldwork Journey

Uber. SASA. Uber. Repeat. In its most simple terms, that has been my fieldwork experience for the two and a half months I spent throwing myself into the Bellville community. *This is a Somali place. It's little Muqdisho. Welcome to Somalia*. Quotes from the various Uber drivers I have conversed with, both Somali and non-Somali, who have braved the taxi ranks next door to the office to safely drive me where I need to go. My fieldwork begins even before I reach Bellville, frantically jotting down notes on my phone as drivers discuss with me their experiences in Bellville, their encounters with Somalis, and their journeys in South Africa. When I first started

volunteering at SASA, I did not expect to learn and discover so much so quickly. This experience would have looked and felt extremely different had I not chosen Uber as my primary mode of transport, an opportunity I surely recognize as a privilege. Yielding an auto-ethnographic approach, my methodology follows one priority: to keep the Somali voice in mind, in front, and in the spotlight. Autoethnography is the practice of including and acknowledging the voice of the narrator/author/researcher amongst those of the participants – to utilise one's positionality to inform the research and insights drawn.

My fieldwork begins every day when I enter the Uber. Upon first step, I am already conversing with potential participants, attempting to unravel the complexities of Somali identity formation in Cape Town. My first day at SASA started like any other: in an Uber. In your typical sedan, I sat in the backseat, making sure the seat belt didn't wrinkle my headscarf. The driver was quick to inform me that in the future, I should always sit in the front seat with the driver so we can glide undercover without the taxi drivers noticing once we inch closer to the ranks. The SASA office lives right next door to one of the busiest hubs of Bellville, which is something I grew to enjoy seeing on my fieldwork days – life oozing and screaming from every corner and pothole. I had a lot of firsts that day; I realised how much learning I had in store for me, and that anthropological practice in the field is constantly shifting and moving – much like what first-year anthropology students learn in the classroom, like culture itself, the practice is never static, truly flexible in nature (Malkki & Cerwonka, 2007). Before stepping out of the car, a moment shared with many non-Somali Uber drivers, he asks me where I'm from and goes on to say "My best friend is from Somalia. He's a good guy. Somalis are good people. They're not like South Africans." From Malawi, a part of the immigrant community, his sentiment has much to unpack, themes I will delve into later in coming chapters.

South Africa serves as a transitional space for Somalis, and thus, I am in a space of transition, monitored constantly, attempting to display my best behaviour, my "best" expressions of *Somalinimo*. My first day in the children's classroom served as a blaring reminder of "good behaviour" in this space; my jeans-shirt-abaya-hijab combo turned out to not be the best choice.

> *Walking into the classroom, I see that the children have split themselves up by gender. There are girl-only tables and boys-only tables. This reminds me of the schools in Somalia. The teacher is not Somali. His name is Wilson, and he's from Zimbabwe. I don't remember the last time I sat in a math class, I don't understand anything on that board (exponential*

equations). Thank God I'm just observing today because I am so, so nervous. The students whisper to themselves in Somali as the teacher lectures in English. The ages range (primary-aged boys sitting together in the back next to a table of teenagers). Some of the younger boys in the back don't have books to refer to. I'm sitting at a table in the front next to three young girls. I'm helping them with problems of rounding up to the nearest ten. Because of the mix of ages, Wilson splits his classroom, teaching both simultaneously. Kaltuun asked me if I was muslim because I was wearing pants. Next time, I'll probably wear a dress.

15 February 2023

Established in 1996, SASA is based in Cape Town, partners with human rights lawyers, and has created self-reliance workshops, women's workshops, youth sports groups, children's classes, after-school programs, adult English classes, and computer literacy programs. Starting from the 15th of February, I volunteered with this organisation three to four days a week, by their policies, for the first four to five weeks of my research. A typical day followed this schedule: walk in around 10:00 am, help teach the children's class until 12:00 pm, have my lunch and converse with my co-workers until around 1:00 pm, complete office work or cover the reception desk until 2:30 pm, help teach the Adult English class until 3:30 pm, and end my day working with students coming in for academic help during the After school program until I leave the office anywhere from 5:00-6:00 pm. During this fieldwork period, I was able to get to know the people in charge, other volunteers, and members of the community with whom I could form connections for a potential series of interviews. My first point of contact was with the organisation's directors. We would often discuss my research and its mutual benefits for both myself, the organisation, and the community.

Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I hoped to capture people's narratives with their complete agency in mind. *If I were to tell your story, how do you want it to be told?* As I write this, Zeinab's voice echoes through my head: "Keep it positive, Billan." That's how she wants her story to be told, and I aim to fulfil her wishes, in pursuit of academic empathy. Through processes of collaborative ethnography – by not only working with other researchers and my professors, but involving participants in the conceptualization, conduction, and writing up of this research (Lassiter, 2005), I will keep narrative agency at the forefront by allowing my participants to define Somali culture for themselves. Participant

observation in the form of volunteering with my role as a researcher as transparent as possible is integral, especially so my participants are aware of my presence there, with hopes that the experience will produce embodied knowledge without running the risk of participating in a disguised form of research, as outlined by Russell Bernard in *Research Methods in Anthropology* (1995). Disguised research is harmful research, recording observational data in secret without the participant's knowledge (Bernard, 1995:437). At SASA, I made sure to make my position clear, bringing up my research intentions whenever possible and never hiding when jotting down experiences, observations, and conversations between myself and others in my notebook.

The interview participants range in gender and age, identify as Somali, have moderate to full proficiency in English, and live in Cape Town (primarily Bellville). There is a cross-generational point of inquiry incorporated into my research as well, encapsulating how stories of home become entwined with expressions of nostalgia. This is inspired by Francis Nyamnjoh's study of the Mbororo-Fulani peoples and the differences in desire between those parents and their children (2013). The semi-structured interviews with each participant lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour, sometimes in the computer office or at the reception desk during a lull in client traffic. However, I quickly realised during this journey how much I would rely on intermittent comments quickly jotted down as a part of participant observation data. That is where transparency is so important in this project. The authenticity of the participant's words was mostly captured in moments that may normally pass one by. Storytelling is also a salient tenet of Somali culture. How do I maintain the agency of my participants when thinking deeply about the historical importance of storytelling in the Somali community (Ahmed, 2002)? As I aim to uphold Somali morals to a certain degree and ethnographically prioritise the voices of my participants, I sought to reflect critically throughout my fieldwork on the impact of my chosen research methods.

The Construction of the *Aqal*

In my junior year of college, I interned at the Somali Museum of Minnesota for about seven months. During that time, I worked on the monthly newsletter, leading tours through the museum, and general upkeep of the exhibits – a small, yet informative space. The end of the guided tours led visitors through a traditional Somali home: the *aqal*. Standing inside the one large room, looking up at the branches and camel skin rope holding together fabrics, I would tell the story of a typical, nomadic Somali family. Given the hot, temperate, arid climate of the country for most of

the year, this dome of community life was primarily meant for sleep. A deceivingly large space once inside. So, why am I bringing this up exactly? A theoretical framework I employ in this research attempts to unravel the architecture of *Somalinimo* – reflecting the materials that come together creating a *seemingly* harmonious Somali identity and one that mirrors the literal construction of the building where the SASA office finds shelter.

> *Before the class, Sabriin took me downstairs to introduce me to some of the women who own the shops (her friend, her mom, and her aunts). "Come, I'll introduce you to the aunties." The shops have tailors, dresses, abayas, oonsi, perfumes, henna. We first walked into Asha's shop. When Sabriin introduced me, Asha came around the counter to hug me and say hello. As Asha is describing her store and catching up with Sabriin, I look around to see all the dresses hanging from floor to ceiling, in vibrant colors and patterns. We went next door to the other shop. Three women were sitting inside and one sitting at the door. They were relatively older. My hands were so sweaty and my face, I'm sure, was keeping the most anxious smile as I was trying to keep up in the conversation and answer whatever questions I understood. I thought I bombed, but then as we were leaving, I overheard one of them say "She's cute, mashaAllah."*
>
> *21 February 2023*

Sabriin works at SASA within their Communications and Media Sector, and she quickly became a friend – leading me into her worlds, unconsciously instructing me how to navigate them. The SASA office exists above almost a dozen women-owned shops, unveiling intermediary layers of assurance, a surrogate family of aunties. Like the *aqal*, the building of Somali identity is a communal activity, assembled and disassembled by the women of the tribal family. Somalis actively build the *aqal*, placing every piece by hand, weaving every rope with their tireless fingers (Meyer, 2009). This building also juxtaposes the building and unassembling of the makeshift storefronts outside the building as well, at the busy intersection of Kruskal and Wilshammer. An *aqal* is one big room, community is unavoidable, and Somalis find each other wherever they go. Like the materials used to manufacture this makeshift, movable home, the community formations and cultural aesthetics of Somalis in the Diaspora are purposely created, with the intention of performing expressions of perceived *Somalinimo*. What are the materials needed to build a culture in a new land? If the *aqal* represents the whole culture, what material is the language? The religion?

The clan? And what represents other indicators of identity such as the food, clothes, or *oonsi* sold in shops like those mentioned above?

Auto-Ethnographic Route

I must incorporate instances of auto-ethnography into my fieldwork because I simply cannot write myself out of this story. This research process is a sustained systematic observation. Every day I breathe is a day spent undergoing some type of research. Over the past few months, I can't help but nit-pick and analyse every conversation I have had with my mother over the phone. I never realised before just how much her *Somalinimo* spews through the invisible telephone cord from a complaint regarding some new Ethiopian political development or something Ayeeyo's maid said to her the other day. Everything is usable; every little piece of information that may seem insignificant can become something else when seen from a different vantage point. From the distinctiveness of the smells in the Somali shops I pass on my way to the office, the familiarity of the sound of the adhan pouring through the windows while I help a client, to the colours of the chipping paint on the walls – I see *Somalinimo* everywhere. Perhaps because a part of my own is projecting itself, taking this auto-ethnographic approach was not a choice, but a given.

Auto-ethnography is an integral component of this research inspired by the works and teachings of Abu-Lughod, Harrison, Bourdieu, and Foucault. This is one way to avoid speaking *for* participants and working *with* participants, making space in the field for the native anthropologist and multiple consciousnesses (Clifford, 1983; Harrison, 1997). I choose to advocate for incompleteness, for recognising differences in articulations of identities; conceptions of Somali identity should be conceived as limitless, with every new encounter attempting to "unflatten" the static categorizations of identity found in 18th-century ethnographies (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Sousanis, 2015).

In this chapter, the fieldwork excerpts I have chosen to highlight solely centre on my first few days volunteering at SASA. This choice is significant to the development of my methods because that first day was instrumental to how I moulded my previous research knowledge to the specific field site. From that first day, I changed my typical dress, my daily greeting, and my general mannerisms when in a room with men versus women. "Good morning" turned into "Salaam Alaikum." My loosely wrapped scarf turned into a tightly worn hijab. I was treated like family, and thus immediately got questioned like family. One day, the director Ahmed said to me,

"Somalis, we ask questions. We get to know each other." Reflecting on *Somalinimo* and my experiences at SASA constantly battled with one warning in my eardrums, first heard in my research proposal presentation from a faculty member of the Anthropology department: be wary of committing essentialisms. However, as per the statement above from my boss, a statement not alone in preaching lessons about *all Somalis*, essentialism and Somali culture have gone hand in hand.

Employing essentialism within this framework is important to acknowledge the development of Somali identity transnationally. As a first-generation Somali American growing up in Northern Virginia, I was raised with essentialist ideas of Somali culture and identity. This is because my parents were raised under a nationalist regime. This was in part due to postcolonial efforts to unify the country and its people, thus homogenising Somali people with the nomad narrative (Eno, 2008). The mobile Somali. The camel. And the *aqal*. I have learned that there is no one Somali culture, although there may be one *identity* – a *perceived* singular, homogenous Somali culture (2008). In the diaspora, one may self-essentialise to foster community or feel more connected to the Somali identity in a seemingly, and oftentimes blatantly non-Somali place. *Somalinimo* is the essence of being a Somali; thus, this research must work within a framework of essentialism.

Taking Professor Fiona Ross's advice, I dived into an issue of *Anthropology Southern Africa* entitled "Ethnographic Encounters with Essentialism." According to Kurzwelly among other anthropologists, "seeking the core (essential) characteristics that comprise or define a social identity is a meaningless, fallacious and potentially dangerous exercise for social analysis" (2020:67). Essentialism is a tool for colonisation and the spread of whiteness. However, as "classical Greek philosophers saw essence as the necessary characteristics of a thing" and the dangers of employing essentialism as a political tool become clear, the reality of essentialist thinking in identity politics also becomes clear (Kurzwelly et al, 2020:66). There are clear ideas of Somali culture that I have grown up with. #SomalinimotillIdhimo (translation: S*omalinimo* 'till I die) is a *real* hashtag, and, according to Spiegel, "one needs to regard essentialism as a universal…" (2020:150). This can be connected to Bourdieu's habitus as Spiegel speaks to a passive form of essentialism, "an everyday essentialism," one that accounts for "ordinary and normal" practices that construct a perceived identity, practises that at times may present themselves as unconscious or necessary (2020:150). Commenting on essentialism is the

recognition of fixed identity categories that have blossomed from the persistence of colonial rigidity and cultural classification systems. In no way am I trying to reproduce reductionist thinking on identity, like Malinowski and theories of separate socialities (1945). Instead, I choose to recognise the inherent essentialism embedded within the creation of the Somali sense of self.

Ethical Considerations

The Somali community in Cape Town is one with much experience with psychological, emotional, social, and physical threats - a vulnerable community. With that in mind, it is extremely important to consider the ethical considerations at play, and how my research practices could potentially bring harm to my participants, as with any anthropological ethnographic study. I have read and considered the UCT Faculty of Humanities Code of Ethics (including the UCT Research Management Policy), the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Ethics, and the Anthropology Southern Africa Code of Ethics ("Ethical guidelines and principles of conduct for anthropologists"). Ongoing consent was practiced throughout my fieldwork journey. Anonymity was offered in the form of pseudonyms and no surnames. Pseudonyms are used in this dissertation for all participants, including those mentioned in observational data.

One of the main ethical concerns I had for my research journey was the inevitable language barrier. Somali is technically my first language, but once I entered school for the first time, I started speaking English and never looked back. I can still understand some Somali but speaking fluently and holding full conversations in Somali is a struggle. While I conducted the interviews in English, I kept in mind that the language of this research is potentially the second or third language of my participants. It is my responsibility to ensure that I am hearing my participants correctly or if that's what they meant to say during our interviews. Misunderstanding is a common part of communication, and I grappled with the potential issue of certain things or concepts becoming lost in translation.

A second ethical concern that could have come from the interview process is the potential for illegal events or storylines to unfold during conversations. While South Africa's refugee protection act ensures that, legally, the participants in my study should not fear deportation, I still had to tread carefully around traumatic stories coming up in those spaces. As a community with much experience with threats from living in South Africa, I tried to find out how to behave properly in these Somali spaces without unintentionally causing more harm to an already vulnerable

community. That process involved learning how to dress, knowing when to speak, and changing the subject as per the participant's wishes. A part of this learning process involved figuring out how and where to meet people to interview. I am a young, Somali, black, American, non-visibly Muslim woman. I kept my identity and appearance in mind when approaching these spaces, for not only the safety of my participants but my own safety as well. With this in mind, all semi-structured interviews were conducted inside the SASA office, either before, during, or after work hours. Other interviews, both informal and semi-structured, occurred with Uber drivers during the length of the trip.

The Clan // *Qabiilkeed Tahay?*

It was a normal, yet somewhat hectic day on campus. Working through the *Invention of Somalia*, I felt my phone buzz in my back pocket. *Call from Mama*. The timing felt almost divine as at that moment, I was wondering about my mom's thoughts on this: the Somali "myth" and the scholars in this book attempting to unravel it. *Mama? Is tribe important to Ayeeyo?* Her answer was quick and simple, almost snappy. *No. She's from Saylac*. She described Saylac as a very special place, one different from the rest of the country. A place where during colonialism, as a centre of trade, there were so many different ethnicities living in the city that clan didn't matter as much. This was a shocking conversation for me. To me, clan and Somalia have never lived without each other. To me, my clan connects me to my homeland in a way language, culture, and religion do not.

This chapter focuses on the significance of clan/tribe to the Somali people and what clan means for Somali identity and community formation –utilising autoethnographic accounts, specific literature, and fieldwork data – through the following structure: (a) defining clan as a concept; (b) exploring the complexities of racial constructions and marginalisation in Somali lands historically and currently; and (c) understanding these phenomena in the South African context. The main point of this chapter is the understanding of how ideas from the clan system infiltrate Somali community building in South Africa. This exploration is two-pronged: (1) Somalis acknowledge the importance of kinship through loyalty to one' people, thus the strength in these communities, and (2) Somalis feel a clear divide between them and South Africans; this divide is also fuelled by manifestations of race exacerbated by the clan system. While it is true that anthropologists rarely use the words "tribe" and "tribal" due to fears of repeating the mistakes of the past, often attributing those words with ideas of a "static" and "primitive" people (Leach, 1986:1-12), mine and the Somali experience of clan is not wholly negative.

Defining the Clan

The clan; the extended family; and the lineage of one's ancestors. A clan is a type of kinship that has the power to link strangers. Some who have never met, and who may never meet, seek shelter with one another in times of need. All due to a common ancestor. Or a *perceived* common ancestor. According to structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, our mind constructs the world in oppositions and binaries that complement each other (1968). Clan systems are on some

level built and sustained on unconscious parts of the mind (Levi-Strauss, 1968). The Somali people are seen as united from a distance; however, if one looks inward, the clan system unveils fissures in this unity, fissures displaying the presence of implicit laws (Levi-Strauss, 1968).

Growing up, most weekends, my father would take my brother and me to our grandfather's house. I can't remember exactly when it started. Every time my brother and I would see him, Awoowo, sitting in his office chair amid framed family photos on cream-coloured walls, would give us a new name to add to our lineage. *Remember this, and I will quiz you next time*. It became my signature party trick at school. I mean, not everyone has 18 names they can list. Just say the word. I would recite it proudly and still do. *Billan Mustafa Mohamed Jaamac Cumar Alaale Geedi Hoosh Mudhux Hodal Dudub Cismaan Khayre Jibriil Yonis Makahiil Makador Samaroon*. I felt proud of successfully reciting the entire lineage to my Awoowo when he asked. This is the little piece of Somalia he could give us. Living in the Diaspora, struggling to learn our mother tongue, at least we knew our clan.

> *At 12:40, the third client of the day walks in, and Ayaan helps them on the computer. Ayaan shows me the Advocacy spreadsheet. A client comes in during my lesson. He wants a new ID. She explains the process to me in real-time. She first checks that he has all the necessary documents. I notice Ayaan has henna on her fingertips and the client is wearing a kamiis. Beyond these four office walls, if I looked out and saw the streets of Boorama or Hargeysa, I would not be surprised.*
>
> *15 February 2023*

From the outside looking in, Bellville felt like Somalia in a vacuum. Zooming out, one may see one people, echoing Article 1 of the 1960 Somali constitution: "The Somali people is one and indivisible" (Eno, 2008). On the 25th of April, an Uber driver turned over his shoulder to say, "This is a Somali paradise." Inside Somalia, the laws display a message of oneness. Inside South Africa, Somalis are viewed with a sense of oneness. However, if we were all transported back to Somali lands, would we see each other differently? Looks can be deceiving; and while Somalis may appear united in spirit, community, and culture (materially and otherwise), beneath the surface, whether in Somali lands or the Diaspora, clan divides are present. There is a Somali proverb I stumbled upon during my research: *Tol waa tolane*, meaning that "clan is something joined together" (Mansur, 1995:122).

To understand what it means to be a part of a clan, it is important to see it in connection to the definition of a nation. The anthropological definition of a nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1983:6). This definition is important, because, in the Somali case, the native lands of clans can function similarly to national borders (Zoppi, 2018; Mansur, 1995). The conception of the nation is an imagined one; the creation of the nation-state was imperially and globally enforced. The Somali clan system has proven to supersede the "modern" state, as shown through the violence and conflicts that occurred during the state collapse of 1991 (Mansur, 1995). Anderson stated that a nation is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members;" the same can be said of the Somali clan system (1983:6). So, like the nation to some degree, if the clan is a social construct, then it provides "communities with the myth of common origin," thus creating an identity (Abdi, 2015:41; Zoppi, 2018:62).

> *At 5:00 pm, I left the office and went downstairs to wait for Adeero Amiin in his wife's shop. "Call me habaryar or edo, either one, we're family." As I'm waiting for Adeero Amiin, Sabriin comes into the shop with a plastic bag tied at the top in her hands. "They won't let us leave until we finish this." I gave her a confused look. She opens the bag and I see rice and meat. "There was a wedding and lots of leftover food. […] Habaryar leaves the shop and comes back a couple of minutes later with two bananas. This does feel like family. After we finish eating, Sabriin leaves and I speak to Habaryar for a bit longer. She insists on giving me a couple of hijabs and lets me pick any baati I want from her endless supply next to her. Adeero walks in, and he drives me all the way home. But before I got home, we took a little detour. He drove me to his house so I could meet his children.*
>
> *21 February 2023*

Reflecting on my first couple weeks volunteering at SASA, that period experienced a mixed bag of feelings. From moments of welcome to turbulent times of imposter syndrome, I can say with certainty that the moments of welcome were due to my identity as a Somali biologically, ethnically, and tribally. Habaryar and Adeero Amiin excitedly and immediately treated me like one of their own. And for that, I am forever grateful. In Bellville, I instantly felt welcomed. Just being a Somali meant that I had a family to lean on. With a shared connection to a homeland, whether mythical or tangible, survival instincts in a new place make Somalis excellent community builders. When I wear my baati of reds and blacks in their geometric design, I think of Habaryar,

her shop, and her daughters. In Bellville, my *Somalinimo* rested upon my clan ties. In Somalia, clan lines are evident and follow certain cultural traditions, rules, and political and government affairs (Zoppi, 2018; Abdi, 2015; Samatar, 1992). Serving as "the fundamental Somali political unit," the clan follows "specific agreed arrangements called *xeer*" (Zoppi, 2018:58). Like nations, clans also have laws and traditions to follow.

At numerous points in its history, Somalia operated as a pseudo-federalist nation-state, with regional borders often falling along native clan borders or with a specific clan in charge (Samatar, 1992). *Xeer* agreements "detail the ways in which a group of kin evaluates, protects, and eventually demands for the life and property of their members when a harm is perpetrated" (Zoppi, 2018:58). However, while clan bonds are exemplified through the application of *xeer*, Samatar warns for the effects of the clan, when the *xeer* is lost (1992). Yes, there's truth to this argument, but moments like the excerpt above show the potential positive. Whether traditional *xeer* practices have been lost or not, the community aspect of clan togetherness stays strong in Somali life. Insert relevant proverb: *Dad buu dugsan aa dugaagna geed*. "Humans seek shelter with other humans […]" (Abdi, 2015:57).

Being part of a clan means being part of a larger family network; being Somali means I have an instant community, like a family. Every time Husein would leave the office for prayer, he would always come back with shah and bur (fried, sweet bread). *With milk and sugar right?* I remember feeling guilty that I wouldn't have anything to give in return. I soon realized that's not the point. His generosity was yet another reminder of the way community is built and fostered. At SASA, I felt taken care of. One's clan can also create that sense of comfort. I discussed how most Somalis share a founding father while some clans claim descent from the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad (Mansur, 1995). Sharing a founding father means recognizing the existence of a clan system, "the primary category of social organization in Somalia" (Kusow & Eno, 2015:412). However, it is imperative to understand the hierarchical framework within this system.

There are a few major clans that are recognized as the primary "modern" and "ethnic" Somali, those with power in central and regional government structures (Kusow & Eno, 2015). These clan families are the Darood, Dir, Hawiye, and Digil-Mirifle (or Rahanweyn). These clans are not only stratified historically and socially, but geographically as well with, natively, the Dir inhabiting mainly the northern part of the country in Somaliland, the Digil-Mirifle primarily settling in the South in Somalia around the Jubba and Shabelle rivers, the Hawiye mainly settling

in the southern region of the country, and the Darood in the northeast and southern parts of the country (Kusow & Eno, 2015). See Figure 1 in the Appendix for reference. While a clan is one way to foster community, the regional government structure inevitably created conflict in the country, especially regarding the marginalization of Somalis belonging to tribes not recognized as part of the major four. Some of these minority groups are the Somali Bantu, the Madhibaan, and the Banadiri Reer Hamar (Kusow & Eno, 2015; Mire, 2020).

Race, Ethnicity, and Minoritisation in Somalia

> *I am back in Habaryar's shop waiting for Adeero Amiin. I usually sit behind the desk with her, eyes on the door, both of us eagerly waiting for someone to shuffle in. She gives me shah, two sambusas, and a piece of bur. Another auntie walks with a bounce, a smile, and a hijab and abaaya of browns and beiges to match. While we're chatting, the aunties ask me about my lineage. "Ayaa katahay?" I answer her by stating my subclan's name. "Jibriil Yonis." They both clap in excitement that I know it correctly. My aunt says, "[My daughters] don't even know it!"*
>
> *7 March 2023*

Somali clans often run a certain narrative. While outside of Somali lands, one's clan can serve as a steadfast cultivation of community. Inside Somali lands, that narrative is one of exclusion and racialization of a presenting "homogenous" people. My tribe hails from the North; my tribal cousins – the Issa – reside in Djibouti; and we are stereotypically and historically known as the educated. Somali tribes have nicknames, stereotypes, and typical regions of stay/origin. Adeero Amiin asked me about my tribe's nickname, the sub-clan of my father and my father's father. Gadabuursi is the nickname of the tribe called Samaroon. In Somali, *Gadabuursi* translates to *people of the mountain*. That evening driving back home, I learned of that nickname. *Reer Jaamac Dogox*. Roughly translating to "dark and handsome," referring to my grandfather's father. I belong to this clan, yet so much of its culture, history, and people I may never know or am still learning. Is this not the acting nature of a nation according to Anderson?

The Gadabuursi come from the Dir major clan, also perceived as the oldest and northernmost Somali clan. Mansur recognizes that "the Somali clan structure typically is not based on blood relationship, but rather […] a fruit of nomadic pastoral life" (1995:122). Not all Somalis are nomads, and not all Somali tribes are counted in this system (Mansur, 1995; Ahmed, 1995).

Ahmed calls this a "fetishized consciousness" as pastoralist traditions are overplayed and overhyped by not only the Somali government itself post-independence, but Western scholars and media as well (1995:137). Perhaps characterized as "a unity that borders on xenophobia," the political establishment of the Somali clan system provided opportunities for conflicts bordering on ethnic cleansing (Samatar, 1987:29).

From 1969 to 1991, Siad Barre, a military and political leader, controlled Somalia, following the principles of scientific socialism, officially as president from 1976 (Ingriis, 2016; Zoppi, 2018). This new regime entailed establishing a regional government where sixteen administrative regions had their government structures, with the central government still holding ultimate power (Zoppi, 2018). Some of these regions, each spearheaded by a majority clan, were privileged by Barre, including the Mareehaan, the Ogaadeen, and the Dhulbahante tribes – all sub-clans of his tribe, the Darood (Schatz, 2000). On the other hand, some regions experienced persecution like the Isaaq and the Majeerteen as Barre committed acts of clan collective punishment (Samatar, 1987:13; Samatar, 1992). His presidential cabinets throughout his rule had especially more Darood representation than other clans (Ingiriis, 2016:75). What makes this head of state any different from an elder clan leader in the mountains?

Here is where the irony lies. It is a fact that Somalis during this time under a dictatorship were treated in groups. However, it is also a fact that Barre viewed "tribalism" as negative and "an obstacle towards the formation of a national spirit and of a 'modern' country" (Zoppi, 2018:56). "Tribalism" connotates negatively. "Nationalism" transforms into homogenous. "Modern" implicates a Western framework. From his very first speech over the radio, establishing this ironic and hypocritical narrative from the very beginning, Barre found justification in creating a more unified nation, a completely connected people through *Somalinimo* (Ingiriis, 2016). Under the guise of fighting against clan conflict, Barre proved a sentiment shared by many Somalis that "our cultural traditions are not compatible with the constructs of a modern state" (Mansur, 1995:115). Then, where does the myth of a nationalist dream come from? How did Western academics shape the Somali historical narrative?

The myth of a homogenous Somalia is based on the European construction of the nation-state, strategically employed by Barre for political gain and shaped by Western academic thought and expeditions (Ahmed, 1995). Anthropologists and scholars like I.M. Lewis, Richard Burton, and Enrico Cerulli deployed the Orientalist's army onto Somali lands and peoples, positioning

Somalia as a "part of the Orient" and directly "in opposition to their 'Black' or 'Bantu' African neighbors" (Choi Ahmed, 1995:158-160). The Western school of thought created two ideas: (1) Somalis are a monolithic group, and (2) this one group of people is closer to whiteness than other peoples of the continent (Burton, 1856:86; Choi Ahmed, 1995).

As a result of this proximity to whiteness ideology and yearning, Somalis were forced under this idea that they were different from other Black Africans, which then reinforced the marginalisation of clans that appeared as "more African." The more northern your origins, the "purer" Somali one is. The narrative is that Somalis are of Arab origin (Ahmed, 1995). These ideas infiltrate the Somali clan system. Unlike the rhetoric of the Western academic historically, many Somali intellectuals belong to the revisionist school of thought, one that recognises the diversity and presence of clans and languages not represented in the clan system or government. A supposed homogenous nation sharing the same religion and language is home to two different versions of Somali: Af-Maxaa and Af-Maay (Eno, 2008). Before diving into this research, growing up, I had no idea there were variations in the Somali language; even only after visiting Somalia for the third or fourth time did I start to understand the different word choices between speakers in the North versus speakers in the South, complicating my image of Somalia as a nation and people.

Not only were specific tribes included in the clan system persecuted by the Barre regime, but other clans like the Somali Bantu tribes and other occupational caste groups like the Madhibaan had been and continue to receive ill-treatment and blatant othering in Somali society. At times, this othering follows these clans into the Diaspora. Kusow and Eno assert that "Somali society is… fundamentally racialized" (2015:413). In Somali lands, occupational caste groups are ostracized because they have historically "practiced occupations that the members of the major Somali clans have historically despised" (Kusow & Eno, 2015:413). The Madhibaan on the other hand, unlike the occupational caste groups, experience discrimination based on a story, a myth "that tells a tale of two brothers following a father's instruction" (Mire, 2020:42). The two brothers embark on a long journey and unfortunately run out of all their food. Both starving, eventually, they come across a dead animal in their path and consume parts of the animal to stay alive and continue their journey. When they find an area with food and water, as advised by their father, one brother throws up the dead animal meat while the other brother refuses; "from that day forward, the brothers were separated, the elder brother was disowned by his family and his descendants were from that moment forth known as the Midgaan" – a derogatory term (Mire, 2020:43). At the

end of the day, this is a myth. One based as a warning of going against the principles of Islam, of eating impure meat, not *halaal*.

Also based on myth, but one based on the serious reality of an oppression that crosses borders – racism and colourism – is the marginalisation of the Bantu-Jareer, who experience "chronic discrimination" based on differences in physical appearance and language (Menkhaus, 2003:323). The Somali Bantu tribes are perceived to be "not ethnically" Somali, but in reality, "…only a portion of the Bantu population remain outside of the Somali lineage system" (Menkhaus, 2003:326). Eno highlights how "to fall into the category of Somaliness," it is not enough to "be just an indigenous born and bred in the country" (Eno, 2008:199-200). Eno speaks of a Somali agenda – a nationalist image of a Somali with "soft" hair, a tall and thin body, a pointed nose, and a nomadic history. To Eno, these are the "right properties to Somaliness" (2008:200). I fit into this category, and I have clung to this fact to prove my Somaliness in Somali spaces. Put our pictures side by side, and I look like my mother and my mother's mother. I look the part, and because of that, according to the Somali Constitution, I technically have more rights to citizenship than a Bantu-Jareer person born and raised in the country (Eno, 2008). Knowledge of my lineage and being able to prove my patrilineal ties to a recognized clan grants me my Somaliness.

Barre's regime of nationalism lasted decades, but in 1991, ended in exasperated conflict. After the toppling of Barre's regime, his nationalistic efforts that created a façade of anti-tribalism had the opposite effect with warlords claiming power over their native areas (Samatar, 1992). This "left the country fractured, and instigated hatred based on blood-ties…" (Samatar, 1992:638). From 1991 onwards, there began "the era of Warlordism and fiefdoms" (Abdi, 2015:40). The effects of Barre's regime were clear as armed men would target people belonging to the clans they *believed* received privileges from that regime (Abdi, 2015). Soon, clan interests quickly faded, and clans turned one each other from within.

To the rest of the world, words like "lawless" and "failed state" became synonymous with Somalia. In the North, the region belonging to the Isaaq, Gadabuursi, and Issa broke away from the South to form Somaliland. The SNM (Isaaq party), now holding majority power in the Somaliland government, attempted to "convince the international community that the original inhabitants of the former British Somaliland were all members of the Isaaq clan…" (Samatar, 1992:638). This is simply not true. Every time I travel back to Somalia; I enter through the Hargeysa airport, followed by a couple-hour drive up to Boorama. Northern cities like Boorama,

Dilla, Tulli, and Saylac are non-Isaaq towns historically, part of the Somaliland region, yet not fully represented in the SNM government. My goal here is not to be political but to show how pre-Barre, Barre, and post-Barre periods of Somalia were ruled and continue to be ruled by clan politics. However, clans and clan belonging should be seen as a fluid and ever-changing process (Abdi, 2015). How does the Somali understanding and manifestation of clan carry into the Diaspora? Is that where we find its fluidity? Or is its innate rigidity part of what makes diasporic community formation possible?

Jibriil's Story

"*Inay midoobaan."* Those were Jibriil's words at the end of our interview. I asked him if there was a message he wished he could say to all Somalis. "I want to tell them that they should try their best to unite," Jibriil said this from experience. He has three Somali roommates, hangs out in Somali spaces, and sees Bellville as belonging to the Somali community. I only met Jibriil once. However, on the 14th of March, two strangers became familiar.

It was my usual afternoon routine. After a full day at SASA, it was time to call for an Uber. Jibriil picked me up at the crossroads of Kruskal and Wilshammer around 6:00 pm. He first asked me where I was from. Once I said I'm Somali, an excited grin stretched across his face followed by the poking and prodding of Somali phrases and words to test my language skills. Driving through downtown Bellville, passing by spaza shops, the mall, and Somalis around every corner, I am beginning to understand and see the ingrained somaliness of the city.

Choice is a privilege. Jibriil felt he had no choice but to leave Somalia when he did and had no choice but to continue the gruelling migration once he started. Jibriil travelled to South Africa by truck. "I jumped over six borders." Secretly making his way through Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, he journeyed for three months. "The journey was very hard. You have to hide yourself from any police or any border that you want to cross over. You must hide yourself. No one mustn't see you at all. They keep you in the truck. When you get close to the border, they tell you to lay down and to not talk." Zooming down the N1, overtaking cars and being overtaken again, even though his journey was very difficult, he still acknowledged that his wasn't the worst. "If you ask my friends, they had it harder than me." I asked Jibriil how he felt not being able to go back to Muqdisho. His answer echoed that of many others. "I didn't have any

other choice." While having lived in South Africa for over a decade, he still calls Somalia home. And one day, he hopes to return.

Ten minutes into this drive home, it feels like I'm speaking to a cousin, uncle, or even friend. The air is frequently cut up however by stories of violence and harm shared. Jibriil holds refugee status, meaning, for him, he feels like a foreigner most of the time. "As a Somali, we're here, we're second place." His face shifted from smiling to concerned, a furrowed eyebrow. He began talking about monthly protection fees run by gang groups in Khayelitsha, where he used to live. "If you don't pay the protection fee, then you get shot. I have been through that already before. The protection fee come, they use that to kill everyone and rob the shops. Me, also, I was not supposed to be an Uber driver. I used to be a business owner. But then everything, I've been robbed of."

For Jibriil, living in South Africa meant he had no choice but to form community with his fellow Somalis. For Jibriil, South Africa represents a place of hardship, where one's business can be taken away in a day. Where one's friends can be taken away. "I have lost my own friends. My best friend. I lost here in Cape Town." It was difficult for me not to feel emotional sitting in that car. "We feel safe close to each other." Jibriil has lost hundreds of friends, members of his community to the xenophobic violence experienced in Cape Town. That's why places like Bellville are so important for Somali survival in Cape Town.

In Somali lands, kinship ties to one's clan run deep; in the Diaspora, Somalis like Jibriil and my family extend those kinship ties outside the clan – to one large Somali clan. "If you are Somali, we are different from other communities in the world. If I go somewhere now, a Somali shop, I can eat whatever I want. I can stay at that shop, freely. Freely! I don't have to pay anything until I get a job. If I don't have a job at that time. It's a community, yeah. If I'm walking somewhere and I pass a Somali shop, I take chips and a cool drink freely. If you go to another town or a township or somewhere you don't know, the first question you ask the people is if there are any Somalis around. If you find a Somali, then you're fine. Nobody is far away from home."

Clan did not come up in conversation, however, the *community* did. And what parallels can we make from the Somali clan system to the ways community is manifested and made tangible here? Jibriil described who a Somali is. He described the Somali in a way where the Somali is not only in communion with their brothers and sisters, but also looks like them, speaks like them, and

acts like them. As we pulled up to my apartment building, I felt thankful for his time, courage, honesty, and humility.

"Clan-ness," Somaliness, Muslimness, and Blackness in South Africa

What characteristics of the Somali clan system find itself intrinsically woven into Somali community-building skills in the diaspora? This theory of cultural tools becoming survival tools needs imagination. I imagine myself living as a stereotypically Somali woman, nomadically living in Somalia, perhaps in the brush between Boorama and Tulli, weaving together my *aqal*. What makes up my *Somalinimo*? I see pieces of acacia branches waiting to find a place in this puzzle, animal skins laid out flat glaring back up at me, pieces of straw yearning to soon be braided into the multi-coloured mat in progress, and curved wooden stakes, boning the structure of my home once again. With each move, we unassembled and put back together the *aqal*, each time actively choosing and placing those materials together to form a home. In South Africa, I take this *aqal* with me. I negotiate and re-negotiate my Somaliness by putting together these tools to build a home away from home. How do Somalis use the clan as a tool for survival, as a tool to perform one's *Somalinimo* in a place like South Africa? How does the meaning of clan change in a more globalized, transnational space?

> *Waiting at a traffic light. A young Somali man wearing a blue and white patterned macawis crosses the street in front of the car. Walking towards the office, I pass people selling things on the street. Some with storefronts that are assembled every morning and disassembled every evening, some with mats laying flat on the sidewalk. Selling everything from pots to clothes to bins to fruits and vegetables. A man holding some boxes cuts me off on the sidewalk. "Where should I put this, Mama?" A Somali lady turns with her phone strapped to her ear in her hijab. The Qur'an plays in the background. I smell oonsi as I trot past.*
>
> *6 March 2023*

Even before stepping foot inside the SASA building, I immediately sensed the Somaliness of the town. It made me wonder; how do I experience Somaliness through the senses? What senses are evoked when travelling through this city (Auerbach, 2020)? Does clan evoke a particular sense? "Bellville is our home, my dear." A Somali Uber driver said that to me on the 19th of April. It's as if Bellville was paved with *Somalinimo*, with a Somali person, sign, or shop in view almost every few meters. Bellville could very well be the poster child for transnationalism as it's not only

seen as a miniature Somalia to the Somalis that live and have business there but to other South Africans as well. Whenever I had a non-Somali Uber driver, they would take a glance at the destination and immediately say something along the lines of, *oh, you're going to the Somalis*. In Bellville, "the separation of people and space is hard to make" as "the streets are the heart of living" (Brudvig, 2014:54). I never had to search for *Somalinimo* in Bellville. It almost always came to me. One can find mosques, madrasas, Somali restaurants and shops, and of course, SASA. It's a buffet of a culture and a people fighting to stay alive in a xenophobic country.

For Somalis, "movement takes place within dense kin and clan networks" (Brudvig, 2014:75). The fact that Bellville is seen as a Somali space, one ebbing and flowing with transnational moments of belonging, shows a clear distinction and divide between Somalis and South Africans. Why is it necessary for Somalis to extend clan networks in Cape Town? It's because of stories like Jibriil's – because Somalis are at risk of harm and/or death resulting from plain xenophobia or common business robberies (Gastrow, 2013). And like Jibriil, many Somalis lose faith in the South African government systems as oftentimes, aid is scarce after becoming a victim of petty crime and senseless violence (Gastrow, 2013). If the Somali may feel fearful in South African spaces and cannot rely on the South African government for relief, that leaves the Somali with no choice but to rely on their community in times of hardship and joy.

On my first day at SASA, Zeinab and I talked about assimilation. She thought it to be necessary for a Somali to successfully live here. However, assimilation isn't always an option. So, what do you do when you can't blend in? Or that's simply not the choice you make? The Somali finds modes of survival – modes of forming kinship. Levi-Strauss asserts that kinship formation "exists only in human consciousness" and "is an arbitrary system of representations" (Levi-Strauss, 1968:50). This fails to notice the Somali as an active agent, an agent in forming connections outside of one's strict clan.

> *I continue my Somali lessons with Husein. "You remember the alphabet, right?" Our Somali lesson was interrupted by a student, Abdikariim, grade 8, coming in to use the computers for a project on Ramadan. Donning a navy blue suit, his school uniform still on full display. "I don't like anybody in my school," he tells me. "I only talk to the Somalis." Abdikariim at one point turns to his cousin and says, "She's really from America, you know!" He then goes on to mock my accent and have a laugh.*
>
> *9 March 2023*

Abdikariim was a regular student of mine. He always walked into the computer office, home to the afterschool program, with a story to tell and a smile on his face. Much of my time at SASA was spent with the younger generation. I observed in the role of the teacher. Sometimes, as a friend. On that day working with Abdikariim, standing in front of the whiteboard, my untouched-since-high-school algebra skills were put to the test. Attempting to explain how to solve for "x" and simple quadratic equations, Abdikariim would pick his moments to insert comments here and there, introducing me to his world, his particularly Somali world. Abdikariim showed me how he feels solidarity with other Somalis and how he looks to his Somali friends in school where they may not fit in with the majority Coloured population. Ahmed, the director of SASA, once said to me: "Billan, if you're Somali, you can't hide from the Zulus. You can't hide from the Xhosas. You can't hide from the whites. Wherever I go, I'm Somali." And wherever Abdikariim goes, he is Somali and is extremely aware of that.

Having grown up outside of Somalia, Abdikariim may not have had the choice in picking and choosing the Somalis to form a community with. As affiliation to one's clan may become less important, it's evident that those of the younger generation rely on their Somali friends to feel belonging. When I asked Abdikariim *why* he didn't like everyone else except for his Somali friends, he couldn't give me a reason. *I just don't like them*. The loyalty to one's clan of his parent's generation became a loyalty to one's people. However, clan affiliation is still present in South Africa, just not to the same degree as in Somalia. For example, Asad Abdullahi from *A Man of Good Hope* created and sustained networks initially through his clan identity (Steinberg, 2014). Living in South Africa and witnessing the ability of Somalis to form such strong communities, I realized quickly that that is due to the sheer number of Somalis in the country. But why? Asad Abdullahi eventually found a final relocation to the United States after spending considerable time in his "temporary home" of South Africa (Steinberg, 2014). A couple weeks into my volunteering and daily visits to SASA, Ayaan, the head of Advocacy, informed me that she has been in the resettlement program for ten years now. Ten years waiting to continue her migration journey with her husband and three kids. She, too, feels the temporality of South Africa as a home and seeks to finally reach the Global North.

Seen as *makwerekwere* by many of their neighbours, Somalis, especially those living in townships, have experienced two large swells of xenophobic and anti-migrant atmospheres in the years 2008 and 2015, in particular (Hickel, 2014). Many migrant communities, not just those of

Somali descent, have experienced violence in settlements around Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, perhaps a "reaction to neoliberalism" (Hickel, 2014:104). Feelings and manifestations of exclusion may force South Africa to never become a permanent home for Somalis. However, these seemingly permanent moments of exclusion reinforce the need for a strong community. Maybe Abdikariim couldn't give me a reason because it's simply all he's known. A world separate from South Africans. A Somali world.

> *After the two students left, I said bye to Sabriin and headed down to my auntie's shop to wait for Adeero Amiin. I walked in, gave her a big hug, and sat down next to her behind the counter. I waited with her for about an hour talking about our families, her life in South Africa, and the upcoming holy season. "You have to stay with us during Ramadan. Who will you eat iftar with?" This is only my second day meeting her, and already, I am treated like her own daughter. A tall Somali man entered the shop, who seemed to be a friend of her and Amiin's. "Who's this girl?" he says in Somali. "You want to move to South Africa? I'm trying to move to America!" Adeero Amiin walks into the shop not long after. "You know his nickname means tall in Somali?" he says. The three of them engage in quick exchanges as I do my best to follow along, catching a few words here and there. Around 7:15, we decide it's ready to leave. We wait for Habaryar to close her shop, turn off all the lights, and lock the entrance gate. As we head down the corridor, we pick up five more aunties on the way. Driving his mini-van, Adeero turned to me and said "Somalis, we take care of each other." Five stops later spent with many laughs, feeding of gossip, and comments my way here and there, I'm on my way home watching the sunset in front of me. Devil's Peak, Table Mountain, and Lion's Head all glow behind the many colors of the sun saying goodnight. Adeero turns to me with one eye still on the road. "This is like our New York skyline."*
>
> *22 February 2023*

That evening was not unique. The moments in her shop, in his minivan, or visiting his home – I felt like a part of the community. I felt in my bones, in my skin the strength, generosity, and beauty of Bellville. While clan affiliation aided me in my fieldwork, this is not the same experience for all Somali researchers. During her fieldwork in Cape Town, Abdi discussed how elder participants would ask of her clan during interviews and how for her, she "grew up in an era when asking others their clan was frowned on" (2015:24). In attempts to tether somaliness in a

non-Somali like place, clan affiliation is a part of that in the Diaspora. Because she is Somali, "the community recognized [her] as a partial insider" (Abdi, 2015:23). My Somaliness granted me not only access to certain spaces but also to the conversations shared in those spaces. Reflecting on this blurring of insider versus outsider meanings, Abdi states that because she is "bound to Somalia and Somalis by birth," the participants felt "comfort in expressing themselves more freely than may have been the case with non-Somali researchers" (Abdi, 2015:23). Like the shock the tall Somali man felt when I said that I like South Africa and have considered moving here more permanently – South Africa is not perceived as the *best* place for Somalis. I am expected to also feel this way. It is the ethnographer's job to reflect on how the participants view them (Leach, 1986); I had to not only constantly reflect, but re-negotiate my roles as a researcher, partial insider, and Somali American woman studying at the University of Cape Town.

> *After the students leave, around 5:30, Ahmed comes into the computer office and we just chat for the last thirty minutes of my shift. "I'll make an official SASA email for you – your name is spelled with two L's right?" Yes, I replied. "Okay, but I'll say it the Somali way."*
>
> *16 February 2023*

Another characteristic of clan identity that permeates life in the diaspora is the inherently homogenising efforts of the clan in Somali history and society. Ahmed would often speak of Somali things, people, behaviors, and places. An "*all Somalis do this"* type of conversation. A conversation I grew up hearing. This idea of a oneness among the Somali people and diaspora asserts the idea that there is one way to be a Somali. The narrative that all Somalis are Muslim and are "100% Muslim" is part of this homogeneity, intermingling with clan in ways of racialization (Alhourani, 2015:110; Abdi, 2020). Any divergence from that image is not enough to be considered a full member of the community. Ahmed said my name "the Somali way." My name is a traditional Somali name. My mom would tell me, *you share your name with people way, way older than you or way, way younger than you*. I grew up thinking it was special. Just spelled a little differently. At SASA and Bellville, I felt that I was constantly fighting with my *Somalinimo*; whether internally or externally received from students, coworkers, or clients. At times, I felt that "American" should come first. While homogenizing effects of the clan system seep through Somali mindsets, it is that very homogenizing effect that allowed me to take back my *Somalinimo*.

This is how Somalis strategically utilise essentialism to their advantage. There is an apparent "Somali" way of doing things. However, if I am a Somali, does that not grant me the

freedom, or more so my parents, to change a traditional name without negating its Somaliness? While a nationally and internationally perceived homogenous Somali definition has harmful side effects, the bigger picture shows a people united by one perspective, seeing each other as kin. The reproduction of cultural tools in the diaspora causes those tools to become essentialized, for easy transport. Somalis in South Africa are in the constant process of "preserving their identities, fervently recreating familiar lifestyles by guarding ethnic and religious identity, often in isolation from local society" (Brudvig, 2014:72). Employing essentialism is a political tool, coined by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak; with this framing, Somalis preserve their identities by identifying with essentialised characteristics in efforts to organise (Eide, 2010). A reverse mimicry of sorts, this is called strategic essentialism – exacerbating the image of oneness and accepting the sacrifice of isolation into larger South African society (Eide, 2010). By bringing clan system ideals into a South African context, Somalis become engulfed in various inclusions and exclusions, displaying a fierce loyalty to their communities. I embrace these clan ideals because they make me more *complete*, pushing me closer to that "perfect" version of a Somali (Nyamnjoh, 2015).

> *A coloured lady comes in. The room erupts in happy screams and laughter. It's been nine years since she's seen Husein. She walks into the office and stands in front of the desk. "Well, come on and give me a hug!" Zeinab gets up, walks steadily over and says, "Men don't give hugs; I will hug you on his behalf." Husein introduces me as an American volunteer who's "originally Somali" – emphasis on the "originally." She looks at me surprised. "I thought you were South African." Husein agrees, "Yes, she looks very coloured." I nod along smiling, stripping away my Somalinimo with each nervous laugh and shaky head nod. […] Asli came back for some Tech class help. "Billan, hi! I remember your name." She's wearing a green jilbab with her hands and nails painted in intricate henna details, displaying a red gradient on her fingernails some nail techs only dream of achieving for a client. She used to be part of the youth classes in the morning, graduated, and entered public school.*
>
> *14 March 2023*

During my first few days at SASA, Sabriin explained to me the racial geographies of Bellville, bringing me into the loop of the basic things I should know for my research. The explanation of those geographies first clued me to how Somalis view and place themselves within the South African racial framework. This positioning exposes the "malleability of religion and

race" (Abdi, 2015:112). The first Somalis that step foot on new soil set a trend for those to follow. An absence of shared identity with the black community deepens the divide between them and places Somalis closer to the Indian South African community simply from a shared religion (Abdi, 2015:116). Indian South Africans employed new Somali migrants as "a source of cheap, trustworthy labour," and soon they became small business owners themselves (Abdi, 2015:236). I remember one day on my way home from a long day of volunteering at the office, the South African Uber driver turned to me and said, "Can I ask you a personal question? I always mix up you guys [Somalis] and Indians. What's the difference?" Coming from the US and the one-drop rule, I was taken aback by this question. I am and have always been black. In South Africa, I soon realized that the Somali's distance from blackness is not only self-perceived, by some, but outwardly perceived as well.

Nimo Abdi also researched this phenomenon through a study of Somalis in the US, asserting that Somalis attempt to enter "a brown Muslim racial space" because "brownness is proxy for whiteness" (2020:276). This is part of a wider conversation involving the equalization of Arab and Muslim identities and the anti-black attitudes that exist both within Somali lands and the Diaspora itself. From people throughout my life confusing my blackness to a phrase I heard in Somali once from one of my participants: *Xhosa tahaay*, Somalis strategically use Islam to negotiate their layers of blackness and Africanity. However, at the same time, through conversations with Husein, such as the one described in the above excerpt, *Somalinimo* is just as defined by the individual as it is by the collective. Husein once said, "I am an African. I'm Black African. I was born and raised in Africa. My parents are Africans. Somalia is in Africa. So, I'm African." In South Africa, there may be a "socio-psychological belief of being above black Africans" (Eno, 2008:201). However, in a world where multiple and combatting identities are juggled, some characteristics must be left behind depending on the situation.

> *Ismahaan is talking to me about what it's like living in the Somali community here: "They feel entitled to your life even if they don't know you. [speaking about the aunties]." There's a double standard between her and her brothers. "People are so nosy here. They're always in your business. My mom will call and ask, 'Why are you not home' and it's because the Somali aunty downstairs saw me and called her."*
>
> *23 March 2023*

That afternoon in the computer office, Ismahaan came in for homework help, but of course, we ended up chatting for an hour about her school, Justin Bieber, and the aunties. For Ismahaan, the aunties downstairs are always snitching, but ultimately keeping her safe. This is a prime example of the strength and power of community. In the same way the aunties keep Ismahaan safe by watching over her when her mother cannot, the women in Bellville keep each other safe, creating a "sense of security" from extended kin networks (Brudvig, 2014:84). It is no surprise that there is "a lack of state support in South Africa" for Somalis (Shaffer, et al, 2018:161); this then increases the need for Somalis to create a self-reliant community that can fend for itself. Fostering belonging through community is a survival tool; one way Somalis craft that tool is through a culture of kinship. By viewing every Somali as an automatic member of your community, Somali diasporic communities are formed through groups of "intimate strangers" sharing space and identity (Nyamnjoh, 2010).

Husein's Story

When Husein walks into the office every day, as most Somalis do, every person is greeted with "Asalamu Alaikum." The day of our first interview was no different. The 16th of March. In the computer office, his desk stands alone, positioned in line with the doorway, eyes on the rest of the office as well. As the Department Head of Social Services, Youth and After School Manager, and Welfare and Counselling Officer, just the naming of his responsibilities alone displays the depth, strength, and passion for his community, his unpredicted home.

"I was born in Somalia, in central Somalia. In a city called Dhuusamareeb. Prior to civil war Somalia. Then, around age five, the civil war started in Somalia. Then we moved to Northeast Somalia, where my father is from – a city called Boosaaso. That's where I grew up. I studied my primary up to my secondary school and finished my studies there." His life was soon marked by relocation; his nimble footedness began as a child. He moved for stability, moved for education, and moved for opportunity. After secondary school, Husein moved to Sudan to study medicine and graduated in 2013. And with this degree, he moved back to Somalia to bring his knowledge home. "I started working at Boosaaso General Hospital."

The next part of his story is marked by another period of movement, a journey of forced relocation. "…some of my colleagues were attacked or targeted by Al Shabaab." I couldn't help but feel a sadness I had felt before. "Some of my friends, they were killed in Boosaaso, in Garoowe,

in Gaalkacyo. Then my family and I decided that I have to leave the country. […] I went back to Sudan as a visitor for one month… Then from there, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Tanzania to Mozambique, Mozambique to Zimbabwe. I arrived here in South Africa early 2014."

As his journey to South Africa came to an end, so did our interview that day. The door to the office burst wide open and words in Somali are exchanged. He turned to me, "We have a visitor. Can we stop here and continue later?" Our next interview lasted almost an hour and began with a reassurance that we would not discuss anything he was uncomfortable with. "Because sometimes, when you're a refugee, you're scared what you say. It could come back to you again."

We talked about why South Africa became his destination. The discussion fell upon one culminating thought: "Freedom of movement." He said, for reasons of safety, security, and resources, South Africa is "the best place to come." He was first granted the status of an asylum seeker, then two months later, travelled to Pretoria and received refugee status. From his first couple of years in South Africa, Husein dived straight into the community, volunteering with the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town as a program facilitator for refugees and asylum seekers. As a medical doctor unable to practice in his new country of residence, Husein tried for years to receive his license to practice in South Africa. "Still, I don't have anything."

In late 2016, Husein joined the SASA team as he found a new passion: mentoring the youth. Husein started the after-school program by tutoring for free himself when the funds were cut. For him, it is crucial to connect with the young Somalis here and provide guidance not otherwise provided by their schools and even the government. "I interact with them all the time. They tell me their concerns. Some of them, they will feel they are stateless. […] They don't know Somalia, and South Africa doesn't recognize them as South Africans." But for some young people, their identity stretches beyond stepping foot on Somali soil. Husein said, if you ask some young people today – *Are you Somali?* They will say, "Yes, I'm Somali and I've never been to Somalia." For the youth, there lies an in-betweenness.

From his first days in the country, he has felt comfortable with religious expression. "Actually, I feel in Cape Town… I feel like I wasn't limited to practice. […] If you see in South Africa, even when I'm working, I can come dressed in my *kamiis*. It's traditional clothes. I can even go outside wearing whatever I want to. You can hear the adhan. You can go to the masjid. You can practice what you believe in freedom." He instantly felt welcomed in the country. He connected with other Somalis. He connected with the community.

"I'll tell you something. For me, when I am in Bellville, I feel like I am protected. When I'm somewhere else, outside of Bellville, I feel like I am alone. […] An easy target. To anyone. But when I am in a community, I always support each other, stay together." There is a certain cadence in his voice mirroring the beauty of transcending other divisions in favour of a common goal – survival *together*. In Bellville, Somalis are not just migrants. Somalis are not just refugees. "I hope one day that you will change the narrative. Insha'Allah." He, like many Somalis around him, feels safe in Bellville, in a community that takes comfort and reliance in sharing the same faith and the same beliefs. Islam is essential to *Somalinimo,* to Husein's *Somalinimo*.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to show that racism and marginalisation can exist within an already marginalised community itself. Somalis in South Africa bring with them ideas of a racialized order, backed by clan lineages, with them to their new home. Not quite fitting in with the Black South Africans, and not quite accepted by the Indian South Africans. The significance of clan structures in Somali society is a double-edged sword – on one side, Somalis extend family past the nuclear bubble, aiding others in the survival as a migrant, and on the other, definitions of who counts as a "true" Somali, enlarges the rift between Somalis and South Africans. At some point, Somali traditions become Islamic, and Islamic traditions become Somali. In South Africa, that confusion is often used to their advantage as Islam is used as a tool to survive, and Somalis are often associated primarily with Islam rather than their Africanity. I found a sense of comfortability in Bellville, a place that's not my own. As a Somali, I was also treated as different from other Africans and sometimes questioned of my Africanity altogether. By framing the clan as one cultural tool utilised by Somalis, this chapter displays the intricacies of family ties from one's original "homeland." The Somali identity in Cape Town carefully weaves through waves of belonging depending on context.

The Language // *Soomaali Ma Taqaanaa?*

Language learning and language loss are extremely personal and exciting journeys for many. It is also a journey that requires honesty. Negotiating my *Somalinimo* through language meant meeting moments of affirmation with surprise. From being labelled the "American who can't speak" on every visit to my family's hometown, I entered this space with that same expectation. Language and identity feel almost synonymous, and during moments sitting in reception or teaching the Adult English Class, I felt that requirement the most. If issues of mother tongue are personal, then, this chapter should be as well – as writing "in" is one of the only honest approaches in anthropology (Auerbach, 2020). My life as a Somali has been defined by my ability to speak Somali. To my understanding, Somali is a very large chunk and necessary component of Somali identity, for complete inclusion into the community. Does the same ring true for Somalis in South Africa? How is the Somali language carried through the diaspora? This chapter uncovers the complexities of processes of assimilation, discusses the seemingly "unconscious" condition of *Somalinimo*, and delves deeper into yet another homogenizing tool for Somali community formation in South Africa and the wider global community.

A "Standard" Somali

> *Husein gets up from his desk and says "Okay, I'm going to pray sister." He laughs as he buckles in the latch of his watch, his hands and face dripping wet from wudu. "Can I call you sister? Or uncle?" Either one I say as I realize how Somali English translation isn't always perfect. See, in Somali, the same word you call your uncle (Abti [maternal] or Adeer [paternal]), your uncle (or any elder man) will call you the same back as a common term of endearment. The same goes for Hooyo (mom), Aabo (dad), Ayeeyo (grandmother), Habaryar (maternal aunt), and Eedo (paternal aunt).*
>
> *16 March 2023*

I have often felt like the only Somali in the world who struggled to speak her mother tongue. I try my best to fight that narrative. What I have realized since then is that there is no way to fight the narrative, to refute it. I have learned to accept my identity multiplicity and the new meanings diasporic Somalis are creating by their very existence. However, most summers, I experienced and saw one people, one language. Does this mean I have an "essentialist imagery of [my] self" (Kurzwelly et al, 2020:67)? One perceived imperative for Somalis is finding unity

through language. Where did a standardized Somali come from? Historically, it's a land of nomads and some farmers. How do Somalis in the North and Somalis in the South speak the same language? Or is it even the same language at all? How different must a dialect be to be considered another language in its entirety? To unpack the significance of the Somali language anthropologically, it is important to keep in mind that "all meaning is conventional" – a Derrida teaching (Wilson, 1986:102). Language is a creation, a manifestation of thought in the region it was birthed from. So, if language is a convention, then those in power dictate its meanings, expansion, and implementation. The "Somali myth" is not only an ethnic one (Kusow, 1995; Osman, 2007; Eno, 2008).

> *I helped teach the Adult English Class with the other teachers. There are three levels in one classroom. I had the middle group: past tense verb practice. Around seven or so individuals, all older than me, an even split between men and women, tables segregated by gender. Towards the end of the class, they figured out I could understand some Somali and they started to like me a bit more after that. A game of broken whispered telephone started making its way across the classroom. "She speaks Somali?" "What's her name?"*
>
> *15 February 2023*

When I enter a Somali space without speaking Somali on my own, unprompted, my somaliness is immediately questioned. After this class, I later found out that many of the students thought I was just a Muslim South African woman who *looked* Somali. The excitement when they learned of my Somali background was experienced on both sides. I was excited to feel any amount of acceptance; they were excited to have a Somali teacher. The two other English teachers, Sarah and John, are both from Zimbabwe. In that room, physically, I stood out from the other teachers; linguistically, however, is a different story. Much of *Somalinimo* is linguistic prowess. However, has the Somali language always been an indicator of *Somalinimo*?

Mohamed Nuuh Ali traces Somali migration stages through a linguistic analysis (1983). While he tells a story of Somali origins from a Proto-Somali society, his research and others alike "gives no clear indication of the first identifiable Somali community from which modern Somali speakers are derived" (Kusow, 1995:89). This means that no one clan or region can claim Somali purity in terms of the language. However, that statement also unveils the hierarchy of Somali dialects (or even languages). In Northern Somali oral tradition, there was an effort to "link their ancestral origin to that of Southern Arabia" (Kusow, 1995:102). Northern linguistic supremacy or

Maxaa-tiray language supremacy was born (Kusow, 1995). However, there is another view that "from a linguistic point of view, the older speech community of early Somalis expanded from the South" (Kusow, 1995:94).

As a Somali, my positionality is not from an outside perspective. As a *Northern* Somali, my positionality is inherently and uniquely biased. Recall the names of the four major Somali clans recognized socially and politically: Hawiye, Dir, Darood, and Rahanweyn. Now, what would you think if I told you that the last clan name (Rahanweyn) of the South is not the correct spelling and displays a deeper history of linguistic erasing? The name pronunciation as "Rahanweyn" is based on the northern dialect; it is actually spelled and pronounced as "Reewin," which means "old family" in Somali (Kusow, 1995). This piece of information may indicate that they are "the first Somali speaking group that established itself in what is today modern Somalia" (Kusow, 1995:94). Before this research, I thought there was only one Somali language. Slowly, we begin to uncover the multiple belongings and existences inside the culturally similar, yet fluid region.

> *Zeinab tells me that I have to keep notes of the new words I hear and what they mean. "You have to be able to speak to your fellow Somali," she says. Around 2:00 pm, a woman comes into the computer office with a big, black plastic bag. The lady dishes out a couple of sambusas and bur for each of them. Zeinab turns to me in between bites of her sambusa. "Billan, you want a sambusa?" Zeinab tells the lady to give me one, I say thank you to her in Somali. Mahadsaanid. There's a very distinct, specific taste of sambusa that feels instantly familiar, one of my favorite tastes. I don't know what particular spice it is, but it instantly transports me home, or to any Somali mall trip with my mom. Ayaan asked me if I knew what sambusas were. I say "Yes of course." But I realize this isn't an "of course." To Ayaan, I am an American girl with Somali parents who speaks English.*
>
> *2 March 2023*

Somali grants you access to the inner circle. Sharing food and space with the others in the office, I felt like a part of that circle – to a certain degree. I could understand the conversations they were having, regardless of whether I was a part of them. During my time at SASA, my Somali improved a little. I remember the shock I felt when Zeinab shared with me that she only learned Somali fluently when she came to South Africa. To me, Zeinab always resembled the typical Somali mother, like the aunties I would pass by in the shops or who I would see when visiting distant family. Not only did my literature research change my perspective on a homogenous

people, but the fieldwork research did as well – testing my knowledge of what a Somali looks and sounds like. Zeinab and Husein would often encourage me to speak Somali with them, to practice. It came from a good place. But it also forced me to reconcile with the fact that my somaliness by ethnicity and clan is not merely enough. In every case where I find myself in a Somali space, the "expectation" is to speak in my mother tongue, to share in language with others, and to connect through "shared images" (Sökefeld, 1999). Is the Somali's "role" in the diaspora to bring home with them where they go? Home in the form of language? The fieldwork excerpt above tells a story of Somali things – Somali people, Somali food, Somali words. From reading this excerpt alone, there very much is a perception and image of one unifying culture, with an inherently unified language.

There are two different Somali languages: the Maay and Maxaa-tiray. Lewis describes "the difference between" the Maay and Maxaa Somali languages "as similar to the difference between Portuguese and Spanish" (Osman, 2007). However, that is not the case. See Figure 2 in the Appendix for a comparison of different words and phrases between the Maay language, Maxaa language in the South, and Maxaa language in the North. Somalis from the North and the South who speak *Af-Maxaatiray* can understand each other – many words are interchangeable. People of the Rahanweyn, or Reewin, clan speak *Af-Maay* as those belonging to smaller tribes like the Bantu (Osman, 2007). If there are two different languages in the Somali region, how did Barre spread "an ideology of unity and cohesiveness" (Osman, 2007)? The standardization of the Somali language was a political act from the establishment of the official written form in 1972 and the hypocritical restriction of clannism in all forms (Osman, 2007).

The Somali language that was made official was a language *chosen*. When one truly and wholeheartedly learns about Somali clan structures, one can see "the phenomenon of linguistic supremacy in a society claimed to share the same language" (Eno, 2008:40). It is evident in ideas of northern nobility and perceived inferior tribes ill-recognized in the 4.5 clan sharing system that this "run[s] parallel with clan stratification" (Eno, 2008:41). Growing up, I had no idea other Somali languages existed. Again, is this due to my parent's vision of Somalia? A nationalist's vision? Or did it simply never come up in conversation? I was never making a conscious choice to speak the *Woqooyi* (northern dialect) Somali. I believed I was speaking *the* Somali language, not *a* Somali language. When I first learned about the transference of Somali from strictly oral to finalizing a written form, I was under the impression that this was one of the few "good" changes

the Barre regime created. This standardization was a choice and implementation of power (Eno, 2008:172). However, this occurrence is often unavoidable to successfully build a nation with citizens in congruence with each other. Linguistic imperialism exists in Somali society, and I belong to those enacting these imperialist strategies and policies. My positionality is also one of privilege.

Language plays an instrumental role in the construction of culture; those in power perform those constructions and spread "shared meaning" (Foucault, 1980; Sökefeld, 1999). The standardizing agenda was run by the "pastoral elite" (Eno, 2008:170), creating an image of the ethnic Somali nomad fluent with every other Somali within the bounds of Somali cultural vacuums. While *Af-Maay* is a minority language, its existence inside Somalia is very real. How does the diversity of Somali society affect the reality and imagination of Somali cultural constructions? Those centred around a singular voice. Kurzwelly, Rapport, and Spiegel state, "a fundamentalist and essentialist deployment of culture … *inevitably* entails … a world divided into true believers and belongers on the one hand and outsiders on the other" (2020:77). What role does the Somali language play in dividing "true" Somalis and others? And how is belonging derived from linguistic ability carried into the Diaspora? In South Africa? A place where its numerous native languages couldn't be any more strikingly, phonetically, linguistically different from Somali.

Zeinab's Story

It would be stereotypical for me to describe Zeinab with a motherly energy. She is so much more than that. As the Human Resources Director and Deputy Director of the organisation, SASA would not run as smoothly as it does without her. Yet, with all this in mind, my experience with her was *also* marked by her caring tone and kind glance, characteristics instinctual to a mother's touch. At times, my biggest supporter and defender, and sometimes, my encouraging critic. Aside from her many duties at SASA, Zeinab takes on the roles of mother and wife at home – her Stellenbosch home. She makes the trek on public transport every morning to Bellville. This is merely a snippet of Zeinab's story, a partial look into her life and experience as a transnational Somali, mother, Muslim, and woman in South Africa.

It was the third of April. The first interview of two. Sat in the computer office, I was completely comfortable. Zeinab curated that comfort. With her outstretched support. With her long

single-coloured abaya. With her steady eyes, the slightest glossiness, maintaining contact throughout the conversation. The windows are open, and a slight breeze fills the room with dispersed yelling and honking from the street directly across. That day, we continued conversations we have had before here and there in between engagements in the office. I couldn't wait to dive deeper into moments of strife, excitement, and love. "I know my community." And she knows it well.

As she spoke, she was very careful to not throw in any Somali words I may not understand, choosing her words selectively. "Before South Africa, I was in Kenya. So, I travelled from Kenya to Tanzania, from Tanzania to Zambia, from Zambia to Zimbabwe, then South Africa. The journey was tough. It was not a simple one. You know, traveling by road. Taking a bus from one country to another country to another country to another country." That was not the first time I learned of Zeinab's Kenyan background.

About a month prior, I heard her speaking Swahili to a woman from the sewing class whom I also recognized from the English class. Zeinab turned to me and said, "That was Swahili." I had heard Swahili before, but I did not expect to hear it here. The Diasporic, transnational, nimble-footed Somali is also a multilingual Somali, learning to converse and survive in every new place. Zeinab left Kenya when she was 22, having lived a life dominated by education and working for the community. "I was working for drought management." At that time, her soon-to-be husband was based in South Africa. And so, she made the journey to join him.

"When I arrive[d] in Johannesburg, from the bus station I went straight to a restaurant where Somalis are. So, we were many. I was not alone. We were like eight. We came together. So, we take a taxi. That time, there was no Ubers. So, we take the taxi. We asked the driver to take us where Somalis are. So, he took us to Mayfair, to a hotel. There was a restaurant there. We sit in the restaurant. We were given water, something to eat. Then, my husband came, and I left the others there." Zeinab touched the community upon immediate arrival in this country. It's a privilege many migrants don't experience. But for Somalis, South Africa has a chance to *almost* feel like home.

"I used to assist Somali ladies because of the language barrier. So, I help take them to the clinics. So, when you go there, the way the sisters approach – I was very shocked because they will talk to you rudely. Once they know that you don't know English, they don't care." As a multilingual person living in a multilingual country surrounded by a dominant English global

narrative, Zeinab did as many Somali refugees and migrants do. She helped. Adjusting her abaya, ten minutes into this conversation, she told me the story of her birth experience. "There was a sister there, a nurse. She was like – *all these Somali ladies. You are very rude. You don't talk to people.* I was like – *why? Why you all combining all the Somali ladies?* She say – *we talk to you and you just look at us like this. You don't want to respond.* I was like – *did you ask something?* She said – *no*. So, *how do you want me to just talk to you?* She was like – *not you. I'm not talking about you. The others. I can tell where you come from. You're not like the others who came here.*"

That nurse distinguished Zeinab from "the others." It's an age-old tale. Immigrants are bad. But don't worry! You're one of the good ones. However, there is also some truth with that in Zeinab's story, as she made that distinction herself as well, reflecting on her first few days in South Africa. "Everything was new to me. Going to the clinic, going to the hospital, everything. But there was no language barrier. Where I came from, I went to school. It's not like the other Somalis." About a month later, Zeinab and I picked up right where we left off. The fourth of May. Some questions are followed by warm smiles and trailing laughter. Others are followed by a tilted head, wandering eyes searching for an answer to not the happiest question. Zeinab recognizes the differences between Somalis and South Africans. She notes the challenges faced because of those differences.

"The first thing that helped me was English. Because if there was a language barrier, it would be difficult because you would look for somebody every time, call somebody – *can you please come and help and interpret for me?* So, those who don't know English, it takes a lot of days and hours to even to go to Shoprite and buy groceries or go to the clinic. For me, it was fine. Because I read the signs. I talk to people. And then, they usually tell me, *there are Somalis who don't know English. You, you speak very good English. Where you coming from?*" Again, her answer is school. From her stories, it becomes clear that, to the average South African, your typical Somali refugee or migrant is an uneducated one. There is no getting around the fact that South Africa, at least in public spaces, follows the global pattern of English dominance. And so, Zeinab's sentiments upon my first day at SASA ring in my ears. *You have to learn the local language*. *Teach them your culture and learn theirs*.

On my first day at SASA, Zeinab told me to feel at home there. Zeinab's second home. Or maybe even third. I wonder where Zeinab considers home to be. I remember a few days before our first interview when I asked Zeinab for her availability, she questioned her involvement. *Are you*

sure? You know, I didn't come from Somalia. But that is the very reason to share her story. Zeinab is transnational. Zeinab is nimble-footed. Zeinab is Somali. Her *Somalinimo* is ever-present. And shows the multiplicity within it. Zeinab displays the compositeness of her identity. And compositeness entails a "permanent work in progress" (Nyamnjoh, 2022:592).

The Complex Bounds of the Somali Language in the Diaspora

This section focuses on the ways the Somali language is carried in the Diaspora and used to foster survivability and comfortability. If clan is one tool of survival, language is another, even picking up on the absences clan may leave (Swidler, 1986). In the Diasporic Somali's toolkit, language is one such tool that not only builds and sustains community but constructs a Somali sense of self heavily tethered to it. My *aqal* is not complete without it. Perhaps it's the camel skin makeshift rope. Or maybe even the fabrics and materials forming a roof for those inside – protection from the elements. Rain, winds, or even words and weapons. Protection from others, and those positioning the Somali as "the other." What exclusions and inclusions are manifested when utilising the Somali language in a non-Somali place? For example, for Somali immigrants in Sweden, "the Somali language was perceived to be 'naturally' linked to Somali identity and to being able to claim 'somaliness,'" and so, "advanced Somali language proficiency was perceived as necessary for being able to pass as 'culturally authentic'" (Palm et al, 2019:64). Many young Somalis in the Diaspora, like myself and Zeinab's children, do not fully speak our mother tongue. *Somalinimo* is culturally granted. Language proficiency, and proficiency in the major Somali dialect, are viewed as necessary for full inclusion into the community.

> *As I'm working on the staff timetables, Ayaan is two computers down helping a client with papers for the DHA (not Somali). People always ask me how I can tell if someone's Somali or not. In moments of downtime, I listen to the beeping of reversing cars across the street, the click-clacking of keyboards, the screeching of moving desks in the classroom next door – a true medley of a community working to form a better one. I love hearing Somali again. There's an almost chemical imbalance in my brain – a balancing act between feeling at home and like a stranger at the same time. When I walked into the office this morning, I said hi to the receptionist – Hamdi – and my eyes immediately darted to a collage on the wall. Pictures of events and past volunteers. She pointed my attention to a story in the*

newspaper that was written about three women who graduated from SASA's adult English class, certificates in hand.

16 February 2023

Nyamnjoh teaches that through the acceptance of incompleteness as a state of being, identity formation is realised as an ongoing process, and a process defined by mobility (2017). The only permanence is the inevitability of mobility. And so, the story of the Somali in South Africa is a story of movement, of mobility, of encounters – displaying the challenge and beauty of cultural exchange. South Africa, as a nation welcoming to migrants and refugees *by law,* is home to multiple identities, multiple languages, multiple peoples, and multiple beings. A common perception in South Africa, and often the rest of the world in immigrant-increasing countries, is that all Somalis are refugees. How do we fight that narrative? Perhaps by creating room for mobility of thought and being. At times during her interview, Zeinab echoed the word "assimilation." But what happens when assimilation is not completely possible? Somalis are inherently recognizable. Reflecting on moments of mimicry in colonial discourse, Bhabha states that, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other…" (1994:86). The colonial mission is a homogenising mission. The survival of the Somali language in a place where that language is in the minority, in the Diaspora, opens up conversations of mobility, decolonisation, and resistance to a neo-colonial world of English-dominated spheres.

To explore deeper into the manifestations of mobility in the life of a migrant, reflect on this statement: "If mobility in the past was pastoral and seasonal… mobility today is driven by the need for greener pastures of another kind" (Nyamnjoh, 2013:128). Does South Africa represent "greener pastures" for the Somali migrant? That quest for "greener pastures" may become permanent through "the reproduction of their way of life as crossers, contesters, and bridgers of borders" (Nyamnjoh, 2013:111). The truth lies in the mobility used to get there, thus displaying the mobility of the Somali language. Strong enough to withstand movement and border crossings. Is speaking Somali in a non-Somali majority place an active choice? A choice of resistance? Ngugi wa Thiong'o states, "the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment…" (2006:4). There is power in carrying your mother tongue with you to another land. Somalis in South Africa survive by combining the need for a mother tongue with the need to utilise the majority language in a new place. In a room full of your peers, the Adult English Class uses a community tied by

language to learn a different one, a language some deem as necessary to participate socially, politically, and economically – fully and successfully.

> *Ayaan and I are just chilling in the computer office. We start speaking about life's journeys. Ayaan told me that she left Muqdisho in 2009 and hasn't been back since. She has three kids. They can understand Somali but can't speak back in Somali. We shared some laughs as I shared with her how I'm the same way with Somali. She said that she wishes they can speak in moments when she wants to talk about someone in the room. My mom wishes that same thing. [...] Hamdi isn't here today, so Zeinab wants me to sit at reception and learn how it works. It's a little scary because this means I actually have to speak to people, but I guess this had to happen at some point. I help a few clients with Zeinab and Ayaan. Name, Date, Appointment, Country, Phone Number, Reason for Visit, Address. As clients walk in, I have the Advocacy appointment registry open on the computer in front of me. This one man started giving me his number in Somali. I was a little taken aback and trying to remember my 1-10 but then Ayaan came to my rescue and translated almost instantly. "What? This girl doesn't speak Somali?" He then gave the last few digits in English. [...] The English class ended around 3:30 and the students came filling into the hallway towards the door. Half smiles mixed with somewhat confused looks as people noticed I'm behind reception today. One guy was like "you're the one who speaks some Somali right? We were looking for you in class today."*
>
> *20 February 2023*

Kow. Laba. Sadex. Afar. Shan. Lix. Todoba. Sideed. Sagaal. Toban. I know my numbers. Had them down for as long as I can remember. In moments of doubt, at least I knew my numbers. Well 1-10 for sure, that is. Once we pass fifty, it gets a bit shaky. In a span of not even thirty minutes, I negotiated and re-negotiated my somaliness through language. My language skills were affirmed and stripped away. My time at SASA was filled with back and forths, discussions on how well I speak the language, why I don't speak the language, and how I must learn to speak the language. As a product of my Somali and American identities, my cultural hybridity is extremely evident in a Somali space like the SASA office (Bhabha, 1994). The same way my cultural liminality follows my every move – spewing Somaliness here and Americanness there depending on the situation, Somalis in South Africa are creating hubs of *Somalinimo* outside of Somalia. It is the *in-between* spaces of culture that those marginalized find power and community (Bhabha,

1994). Somalis in South Africa are "remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender, or race" (Bhabha, 1994:219). There is a multiplicity of cultures existing in South Africa. There is a multiplicity of identities existing inside the Somali person in South Africa.

Brudvig explores the meaning of an outsider and its manifestation in the South African context. Do feelings of otherness exacerbate the Somali's need for a community? Heightening the survival of the Somali language? Brudvig defines autochthony as "being born from the soil;" and for South Africa, "autochthony often manifests itself through the socially tenuous and isolated positioning of foreign migrants…" (Brudvig, 2019:8). Ayaan left Somalia in 2009 at the age of sixteen. It's been fourteen years since then. Do you think Ayaan would identify as partly South African? Or is she even allowed to ask herself that question? Foreign migrants are often seen as "outsiders" in South Africa and "are increasingly perceived as a threat to the possibilities for retribution after years of apartheid justice" (Brudvig, 2019:9). There is no living in South Africa for the Somali without any amount of fear. This fear is catalysed and cemented through "the closure of critically located refugee offices in South Africa, the detention, deportation and criminalization of nonnationals, and the propagation of public xenophobic perspectives through the media" (Brudvig, 2014:34). That fear forces Somalis to stick together and use the exclusions created by language to their benefit. That is where the power in marginality lies. The power in resistance and persistence of a culturally distinct, different language.

Marginality is far from fixed; in fact, its dynamic and fluid power is utilised by Somalis in the Diaspora, bringing awareness to the strength of the collective. Otherness in South Africa is almost an inevitability for the Somali migrant; aside from physical appearance and religion, much of that is due to language, first and foremost. During her time in South Africa, Abdi learned that "most Somalis' inability to converse in English, Afrikaans […] made communication difficult and rendered their otherness salient" (2015:130). This brings new meaning to the large numbers of people who have taken and continue to enroll in SASA's English classes. Packed classrooms of 20+ English learners streamlined into two to three groups depending on teacher availability is not merely blind assimilation. There is a clear goal – to not only survive but to succeed. Abdi observed the UAE as "the only place where […] non-Somali store owners and employees […] are fluent in Somali" (2015:61). Unless a viral YouTube video of a white man shocking people in the streets with Somali or a non-Somali visitor entering the Muqdisho or Borama airport (even then many

Somalis in airports have a substantial grasp on the English language), I have never witnessed what Abdi witnessed in the UAE. Could this be possible in a place like South Africa, where refugees are welcome *on paper*?

> *Taking very detailed notes of the points colleagues are bringing up in this Data Collective Meeting, my eyes are glued onto the screen while my ears can't help but wander to other parts of the room. Sabriin is at the computer next to me, typing away, working on the website. Zeinab is sitting in a chair somewhere behind me, drinking her cup of shah, looking off into the distance. I wonder what she's thinking about. [...] I think I want to take my Somali language learning more seriously. When people speak to me, if I don't understand every fourth word, it messes up their whole point in my head. Zeinab was like, the students understand Sarah's English better than mine because she speaks slower. She said I talk too fast. Funny thing is, I wish I could say that to my colleagues/bosses. Their Somali is too fast; it makes it harder for me to understand. A student asked Zeinab if I can understand Somali and she said, "no." Another student said, "yes she can." Zeinab was like "Okay, but veryyyyyy little."*
>
> *22 February 2023*

Sitting in that Data Collective Meeting, I observed how SASA is continuously working to improve and become an even better space for aiding the Somali community in South Africa. As an eager volunteer with no clear avenue to work under, I was happy to help wherever I was needed. Through this, by having a hand in many corners of the organisation, I saw how much pride and effort is required to provide resources that the government does not. Somalis are perceived and portray themselves as "fearless survivalists" (Abdi, 2015:130). Language is one of the tools enabling that survival – and not necessarily just the Somali language but making use of the dominant languages in their new or temporary home. When I was little and entering school for the first time, my parents placed me in ESL (English as a Second Language). To survive and successfully participate in American educational environments, I had to learn English and ultimately sacrificed my Somali skills as a result. Because of my environment and an increasing fear of speaking my mother tongue – and speaking it badly, I walked into a tight-knit Somali community in Bellville as not enough. As one who speaks "veryyyyyy little" Somali. I survived in America by learning English. The Somali survives in South Africa by doing the same but without losing a formidable tool in building and sustaining their community – showing that in a

world openly accepting of compositeness and incompleteness, there are no "zero-sum" winners or losers (Nyamnjoh, 2020).

When Zeinab first visited Bellville with her husband, she first noticed how many Somali women were on the street selling goods. Understandably, she was surprised by this – "ladies outside selling clothes?" she said. Her husband informed her that, "here, people came to hustle. To work." Watching her speak of this, I wondered how witnessing this "street trading contradicted [her] migration imaginings" (Abdi, 2015:130) – the dreams and expectations of a migrant's final destination. Spaza shops, while a stereotype of Somali business-making, are very much still a large part of Somali survival in South Africa, allowing Somalis to establish ports of business in central business districts (Gastrow, 2013). Because Somali businesses like the spaza shops "mostly depend on black South African clientele" (Abdi, 2015:137), it has been proven necessary for Somalis to engage with South African communities in their languages, hence the need for SASA's English classes. Husein also informed me once that SASA used to offer Afrikaans language assistance as part of the after-school program as well when there was funding available for it.

However, while some Somalis attempt to cross the language divide, linguistic differences are still a large part of entrance and participation into the South African market (Buyer, 2008), thus the apathy of community members and law enforcement towards xenophobic attacks on Somali shops and businesses. On the other hand, because many Somali shop owners have become proficient colloquially in some South African languages like English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, this has paved a pathway for a culture and space of conviviality (Brudvig, 2014). Bellville has become a conglomerate of multilingualism, displaying life through linguistic choices and performances. The story of the Somali refugee, the shopkeeper, is often one remaining "within a community of their own nationality…" (Buyer, 2008:231). That is not always the case. Somalis in the Diaspora negotiate parts of their identity, the linguistic and cultural layers, displaying the power in marginality, the power in a multiplicity of being – choosing to speak Somali in one case and perhaps Xhosa in the next.

> *I'm covering for Sabriin at reception, making copies for some teenage boys after the youth class finishes. They're whispering in Somali about me. Ayaan comes up to the desk and says, "Billan, you know what they're saying right?" Then in Somali, one shockingly states, "She can understand? Good." A couple hours later, I'm back in the computer office. Husein spins his chair to face me and says (in Somali), "have you adapted yet?" I give him*

a confused look, and he proceeds to teach me the word and shows me how to use it in a sentence. This is the first time it's happened where I don't feel embarrassed, or I'm not fully expected to just magically know what you're saying. It's interesting though having people assume I don't understand anything. It almost makes me feel like a spy. Overhearing people speak about me when I'm in the classroom. Is this being an irresponsible or harmful researcher though? [...] This morning in the children's class, Kaltuun snapped at me with her tiny fingers to say, "Ikram has a question for you." I look at Ikram and she shyly smiles and looks down at her worksheet. Kaltuun gets my attention. "Are you Somali? That's what she's asking." To Ikram, I'm probably one of the only Somalis she's interacted with who doesn't speak Somali. In the US, it's so common for first-generation Somali Americans to struggle with Somali. It seems to me that here, it comes as second nature. Bellville might as well have been plucked out of the Horn and implanted next to the Cape. I realize that most of my encounters involve a discussion around why I don't speak Somali. From observing and participating alone, language feels like the most important factor of Somali identity.

6 March 2023

The habitus, as it pertains to social fabrics and formations, is a space of "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" that "produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle" (Bourdieu, 1972:78). When I first read this my junior year, my brain needed a lot of help dissecting and understanding these French to English translated jargon-filled phrases. Luckily, through the help of my professor Dr. Olga González, the detangling of this theory altered the way I understand the way Somalis in the Diaspora identify, cultivate, and maintain communities. According to Bourdieu, social spheres contain conditions preset by societal institutions (1972). This notion can be applied to the separation of cultures, rigid colonial categorizations of identity, and bubbles of social settings.

Within the Somali habitus, there are unconscious conditions of *Somalinimo,* rites of passage automatically deemed necessary to acclaim status as a *complete* Somali. These unconscious conditions, including "thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions," manifest themselves through ethnic, linguistic, and religious entities (Bourdieu, 1972:95). It is the perceived

homogeneity of the Somali habitus that fosters easy community formation. It is also that perceived homogeneity that deeply divides and rifts the Somali sphere from the South African sphere.

The boys at reception saw me as an American, thus I couldn't possibly understand some Somali; Somali doesn't *exist* in the American habitus. In the boy's perspective, a Somali person is someone who speaks Somali and who has a deemed *worthy* amount of command of her mother tongue. When I entered school, my parents chose to prioritise my English language learning, a choice many parents in the Diaspora struggle with. Kouritzin asserts that many second-generation immigrant children will learn their mother tongue, the minority language, first, but upon entering an institution of the majority like schooling, a shift may occur to enter that habitus and unlock its privileges (1999). Students like Kaltuun and Ikram are in the youth class to bridge the gap that would therefore exist if they were to enter the South African school system right away. Still relatively new to the country, the youth class gives young Somalis a chance to catch up linguistically and academically. Students like Kaltuun and Ikram are yet to enter the habitus of a South African classroom. How will they adjust or perform their *Somalinimo* in that new space?

> *This afternoon, I walked into the office to smiling, conversing faces. Ahmed, Hamdi, and Zeinab were all chatting around reception. I settle myself in the computer office, waiting for students to walk in for after-school help. "Are you busy? I want to teach you some Somali." Husein says to me, spinning his swivel office chair towards me. I'm never too busy for a Somali lesson. [...] Two students (I recognize from youth class) come in for help understanding natural science topics. They open their books and sit with Husein at his desk, as he starts to explain the material in Somali. In slides, sneakers, hoodies, and button-down shirts, respectively, Mohamed and Burhaan listen intently to the lessons they had trouble learning from Mr. Wilson that morning. Translation seems to be half the job here at the office, which makes sense, the organization is helping incoming Somalis adjust to South African life. Assimilation, to some degree, guarantees survival. Thirty minutes pass by. Husein leaves to pray and asks me to take over for him for a few minutes. My heart drops to the floor, and my hands instantly and instinctively become clammy, as Mohamed and Burhaan look at me holding back nervous laughter, as we all know of the troubles and miscommunication struggles that are to come. I slowly read through the geography lesson in their textbooks, explaining to them what it means that we just read together. I try to use different words in English, less complex, utilizing the pictures on the pages. Mohamed*

turns to Burhaan and explains in Somali what I just explained in English. Burhaan realizes that I am understanding what they're saying. In Somali, he laughs and jokingly tells me to say something to them in Somali. We all share a laugh, their eyes and ears eager to witness the chaos that is about to come out of my mouth. But I'm shy and tell them next time. My go-to excuse nowadays.

14 March 2023

One day, while urging me to speak to him in Somali, Ahmed told me that soon I would be able to respond to him. He said, "I speak Xhosa, you know." Perfect clicks and all. He continued to encourage me that if it's possible for him to learn a "non-Somali language, even," it's possible for me to learn my own. However, can I even consider Somali as my language? A language I don't have a fluent grasp on? During moments growing up as a child of an immigrant, cultural multiplicity can be frowned upon and shunned, sharing parallels with Barre's imposition of standardisation to define *his* version of a Somali. Resistance lies in the persistence of cultural hybridity, despite unwavering pre-set conditions of the dominant culture of one's new home (Bhabha, 1999). Somalis in the Diaspora are constantly forging new ways to culturally express themselves in positions of marginality. Somali culture in the Diaspora is one "constructed and enacted through social relationships" (Brudvig, 2014:7), thus – a culture *in motion,* forming and taking shape through new encounters, yet holding still in cultural tradition to maintain those relationships. Mohamed and Burhaan utilise SASA's after-school program to fill in the gaps lost when being instructed by Mr. Wilson. Inclusions and exclusions created by language are clear here. While instructing the youth class in English is ultimately helpful for their eventual entrance into South African schools, it also excludes those who are struggling to keep up in this new language. Husein's extra help is offered in Somali, then displaying the outstretched hand necessary for Somalis to thrive here. A life blended in both languages. And it is one's choice where and when to use each language.

On the ninth of May, heading back home after a long day in Bellville, the South African Uber driver turned to me and said, "One thing I like about you people – you take care of your family business. You can see the unity. You are united in business." In this dark-coloured, older-looking sedan – driving on the highway with the sunset in the windshield, beautiful stretches of oranges and yellows, and Table Mountain outside the left window – there was a glowing halo forming around his hand as he gestured for a sign of strength. "You people stay together. It's very

important." And stay together they must, especially as stories of xenophobic attacks not even ten years prior stay in the back of minds. One of these horrific events in particular "acts as a cautionary tale for Somali women" (Abdi, 2015:155). In 2008, Saida Mohamed and her three children were attacked and murdered in their home, and the worst part: this event existed in a large pool of other events similar (Abdi, 2015:154). Somalis in Cape Town act in convivial ways out of "mutual need" (Brudvig, 2014:3), forging relationships through common cultural characteristics, namely through language. Right when one walks into the SASA office, posters in Somali drape the walls – even the mere presence of Somali words can immediately make a space feel like one's habitus. By holding space for the Somali language to thrive, communities can find a haven through ease of communication and living. Walking through Bellville, one will come across multiple languages across one street. Durban Street, with its rows of taxis and street hawkers and bustling individuals, represents life "in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present" (Bhabha, 1999:219-224). Bellville is not only convivial; it is cosmopolitan.

Sabriin's Story

In Sabriin, it felt like I had made a friend at SASA. I was so excited when Ahmed first introduced me to her – the Head of Communications and Media. Once alone in the office, we immediately started chatting. Through quick exchanges in between meetings to lengthy sit-downs after the workday, I learned about her life, and she learned about mine. Adjusting her stylish framed glasses between every laugh and every few minutes of typing away, she would tell me about the recent drama of her week, the coursework for her university classes, and tips and tricks for getting around the office and building. As a young Somali born and raised in South Africa, Sabriin's generational perspectives show how young Somali refugees imagine life in and outside the Diaspora.

Our interview occurred after my official fieldwork period at SASA on the 12 of July. Although conducting this interview over the phone wasn't ideal, with a few hiccups in connection just minutes in, the conversation was fruitful and engaging, nonetheless. Due to distance and time constraints, over the phone turned out to be the best option. With that, one loses face-to-face context. However, having gotten to know Sabriin beforehand, I felt like I could sense her on the other end of the phone – sitting at the same computer, cardigan on, probably with the SASA website builder or Canva open in front of her. Between university, SASA, and other

extracurriculars, Sabriin's schedule reflects that of a young person aiming to make a difference. Her journey at SASA started just a couple of years ago. "My first year, I was just trying to look for a place to volunteer. And then, my second year, I started to pay attention to the things they do. By the third year, I was quite interested. I was like, *what?* They're doing so much, and I wasn't aware of it. So, I started to get involved."

For Sabriin, volunteering at SASA and learning about ways to be a resource for young Somalis like herself was extremely important because she has experienced first-hand how straining the refugee status can be. "I didn't even know that I was considered different than another South African child until I reached the age of 18." She was born here yet holds refugee status like her parents. My assumption was a product of my background – my American perception of acquiring citizenship in a country by birth.

"I think it was in 2019. I was about to write my matric, and they told me I need my permit to write. […] So, I left for Pretoria to get my permit. And then there, I experienced what it means to be a refugee. The way you are treated at Home Affairs. They remind you that you are at their mercy. And then don't forget the corruption and the bribery. It was just… I was like… *what in the universe is happening?* I didn't even know this place existed. So, I grew up hidden from all those issues. I didn't know it would impact me. […] When I came back, and I'm like sitting for my matric, I was like, *you're telling me after I leave here, after I leave my high school, I'm gonna be stuck with those issues?* […] While everyone was celebrating, I was just sitting there contemplating my life."

When I asked her what home means to her, she took a minute to think. "A place can only be called a home if you have, if you feel safe enough in it. […] I don't feel safe in South Africa. I don't feel safe there. So, I can't call both of them home." The "there" she is referring to is Somalia. The homeland of her ancestors, yet a place she has never stepped foot in. Growing up, her mother told her and her siblings stories of her past, stories of peace. But what do those stories mean for Sabriin?

"She will tell us stories. And then, I'll listen and be like, it actually *does* sound nice, how it is. The thing is – it doesn't sound nice enough to go to that place. Because it's her memories, not my memories. I know one day, I'm bound to visit there, but insha'Allah, I'll wait for things to come one day." Nostalgia passed down from immigrant parents to their children often transforms

into romanticization of the past. I often feel the same way as Sabriin. My mother feels so much for her homeland and expects me to share in her memories. But they will never be *mine.*

"I'm not gonna lie, my *afSoomaali* is very bad." Just a few minutes before, someone walked into the office and asked her a question in Somali. "Can you excuse me for a moment, Billan?" She didn't mute the call, and I could have sworn she responded to that person in Somali. So, to my barometer of Somali language skills, she seems pretty good to me, a message I made sure to relay. Nervous laughter exploded from the WhatsApp call. "No, no, no, no, no. You have not seen me talking. Like there are people who I can't understand. In Somali, you know, people have different dialects, right?" The Somali language, one seemingly homogenous and shared by one people, is different for different people. A language of possibilities. Possible meanings, possible word choices, possible dialects, and possible futures. Possibilities birthed from belonging to generations in motion.

While Sabriin hasn't made a migration journey like Zeinab or her mother, she, too, is nimble. "I can switch between dialects. So, I have a Somali dialect. An Afrikaans dialect. And I also have an English dialect." Code-switching seems like a universal necessity for marginalised people all over the world. We've all probably heard of a story like this – common in American movies. The scene where the black person changes the sound of their voice, the cadence, the rhythm, the words when speaking to a white person. To make one more palatable, more digestible for the white ear. Depending on where she is or what she needs, Sabriin will change her voice to accompany her presence in South Africa.

What does it mean to be a Somali to you? Her response speaks to a generational difference. "What makes me me?" She proceeded to talk about anime and how the things she watches, does, and interacts with change the way she acts in the world. "It depends on the stuff I consume *koo kale*." But even with that, without answering the question directly or about Somali-specific things like Zeinab or Husein, she still displays her Somaliness through language. As a young Somali in the Diaspora, Sabriin combines the Somali and non-Somali cultural aspects of her life, displaying a life of multiplicities. A life of hybridity. A life of incompleteness in motion.

Conclusion

There is no beginning and end to *Somalinimo*. For me, Somali language learning has felt like "an unending journey of becoming" (Nyamnjoh, 2013:109). As an incomplete Somali, I am a

constantly evolving Somali, as the meaning of Somali shifts yet stays stagnant with every new dislocation and pin on the global map. There are congruencies and disjunctions if one were to compare the parts of Zeinab and Sabriin's stories. As two Somali women – connected through language, ethnicity, and religion, their experiences and meanings of *Somalinimo* vary through experience yet find sameness through setting. As a means for survival, a perceived oneness is exercised through the standardized Somali language, carried through the Diaspora to find home outside its historical borders. The Somali language was necessary to uphold for Somalis in South Africa. We have different experiences in the Diaspora. Context is essential to understanding what tools are necessary for success in the Somali's new home. This chapter explored the inclusions, exclusions, possibilities, and improvisations manifested and experienced through language and linguistic divides.

Conclusion: Claiming *Somalinimo* // *Miyaan Soomaali Ahay?*

This thesis aims to contribute knowledge to Somali studies, knowledge highlighting the innate mobility, hybridity, and nimble footedness of Somali identities. Through this dissertation, I argue that Somalis in the diaspora utilise certain cultural tools in order to survive in places strikingly different from ancestral homelands. In South Africa, I have observed those tools to be clan and language in particular, with religion also playing a large factor that entwines itself with clan. It is the ways in which mobile Somalis bend and mould these cultural tools to actively and intentionally create and sustain strongholds of community, often in opposition to the common narratives plaguing general South African and global perceptions of the Somali refugee. Somalis in the Diaspora present and prioritise their *Somalinimo* in different ways, depending on the context of one's environment and the individual and collective construction of the Somali identity. Somali people are viewed as a monolith, both from Somalis themselves and those outside of the culture. This clear essentialism, backed by historical and political effects of national standardisation, crosses borders as the Somali also does – using a perceived homogeneity to their advantage.

The Somali community is often seen as tight knit because of cultural barriers like appearances and clan, language, and Islam. From afar, the *Aqal Soomaali* can be seen as isolated – once inside, blocked off from the outside world. It may look isolated when viewed without its context. However, even the *aqal* is only used for sleep. Even a community seen as separate can use those very characteristics – those that make them different from others – to extend bonds ever important in a land not their own. The *aqal* is far from stagnant. Somalis are mobile and utilise this mobility to create new *aqals* wherever they go, whichever country they land in. In South Africa, SASA could be seen as one. Housing multiple storefronts, aspirations, and livelihoods, this *aqal* is the focal point of Somali life in Cape Town.

The stylistic choices made in this thesis were done so consciously and thoughtfully, with a decolonising tone in mind. Firstly, I struggled with the names of the ethnography sections. Finally settling on "[blank's] Story" was a short but rather thoughtful process of the importance of framing and decolonial scholarship. I didn't want it to sound like this is their *only* story or the *complete* story. This is merely one of the many stories each of the participants could have shared with me. And represents just a snapshot of Somali life in Cape Town and the broader diaspora. As spoken by Jess Auerbach, these are 'partial truths' and serve as one component of the vast, complex, and beautiful lives of those forming and sustaining communities (2020). Secondly, I used Somali

words and phrases throughout this thesis with or without the "direct" English translations. That is due to a couple of reasons: (1) completely "direct" translations between languages do not exist, and (2) this thesis is not only for the Western eye.

From using Somali spellings of cities to the titles of these chapters, I wanted to place *Somalinimo* and her language at the forefront. To muddy these ideas with English translations and Western names of Somali places and things would work against the decolonial approach of this thesis. While some readers may be met with confusion, that merely provides the opportunity for further research, for the reader to understand the inherently Somali idea first, the English second. However, I will roughly translate the title of this entire thesis as "Are you Somali?" Each of these titles mirrors this emotion, affirming specific ideas and characteristics that each Somali *should* be or have. Lastly, I employed the term "Somali lands" rather than "Somalia." The Somali people are not only inside Somalia but also lands historically belonging to Somalis that now exist inside neighbouring countries such as NFD in Northern Kenya, *Soomaali Galbeed* in Eastern Ethiopia, and many parts of Djibouti. Somaliness has existed and continues to exist in those regions naturally, regardless of political ownership. Even within Somalia, there are contested regions such as Somaliland. My goal is to avoid using politically charged language and remain inclusive of all Somali peoples as nimble-footedness and nimble-mindedness across various lands and encounters.

While I aimed to create a holistic and inclusive review of *Somalinimo,* there were a few limitations I would like to point to, leading to some gaps in this research. Firstly, word count proved to be an unexpected limitation. In the original version of this thesis, I devoted an entire chapter to Islam, but I had to sacrifice it in that way and incorporate some of the insights into the clan chapter as the two cultural tools are heavily linked. Next, there are historical limitations regarding literature. For one, I experienced a paucity of scholarship in areas of Somali history before the conquest of Islam. Other scholarship limitations exist where history and archives have been lost due to the conflicts in the region in the "modern" era. I was first exposed to this loss of history while interning for the Somali Museum of Minnesota in 2019, which I learned was the first of its kind in many years due to the destruction of museums along with the destruction of the capital during those initial years of warfare. The next limitation I experienced was linguistic. As first mentioned in the methodology chapter, I primarily interviewed people I worked with at SASA and only interviewed Somalis who spoke English. Conducting the interviews in English may, in theory, contrast the anti-Eurocentric and decolonial approach I tried to employ. However, this

merely allows for further Somali-centred research to be conducted in South Africa, a place where Somaliness is being transformed and performed in hybrid ways.

We tell ourselves to be rid of our insecurities. To feel confident in our identities and the ways they intersect or live in constant conflict. However, I can't help but feel appreciative for those insecurities – as they led me to this research. While there are many ways I may not feel like a Somali, there are many ways in which I do. Roon said she knew from my forehead. While I am granted recognition as a Somali due to my appearance, many Somalis are not given that recognition immediately due to their straying from those specific physical appearances deemed as inherently and *only* Somali.

The essentialism deep inside every corner of Somali identity can be revealed through ethnographic and historical findings – to highlight the diversity of Somali life that may have been brushed aside. Anthropology teaches us that culture is an embodied performance. Somaliness is embodied and performed every day, by everyday people. Somali embodiment and performance in the diaspora rely on a certain real or imagined homogeneity. A community is not just imagined, it is actively constructed, with the building blocks chosen as most valuable to carry. In the Somali case, I have witnessed these blocks to be clan, language, and Islam. I also recognize that this is simply my observation and understanding of Somali expression. An understanding that comes from the brain of an outsider or an intimate stranger. Somali culture exists outside of these three realms. Decolonial thinking is the acknowledgement that every person is complex and a product of incompleteness in motion. Every encounter between strangers leaves them with lessons learned and unlearned, of course, to varying degrees, but even the smallest with lasting importance. Somali community formation in the diaspora is a testament to the human condition – people so divided in a former life coming together in a new one. Things that serve as vehicles of separation become insignificant or transformed into capsules of unity. To be a Somali nationally is different from being a Somali ethnically, or even linguistically.

As I add the finishing touches to this thesis, attempting to piece together the end of this story, I struggle to find satisfaction. Currently, I'm in Muqdisho, in "*Somali Weyn*." And at this very moment, as I wipe the wind-swept sand from my keyboard, people are in distress as parts of Somali lands find themselves reliving the Scramble. Some believe this is for the betterment of their people, while others believe this signifies the end of theirs. Ripples of identity and solidarity mirror the ripples in manmade rivers lining the streets after heavy rain. Now, more than ever, sharing Somali

stories, whether ethnographically or in convivial conjunction with sister disciplines and fields, is integral for the further understanding and survival of Somali life. Regardless of the clan and regional differences of the past, Somalis everywhere fight for the lives and lands of Somalis anywhere.

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Appendix

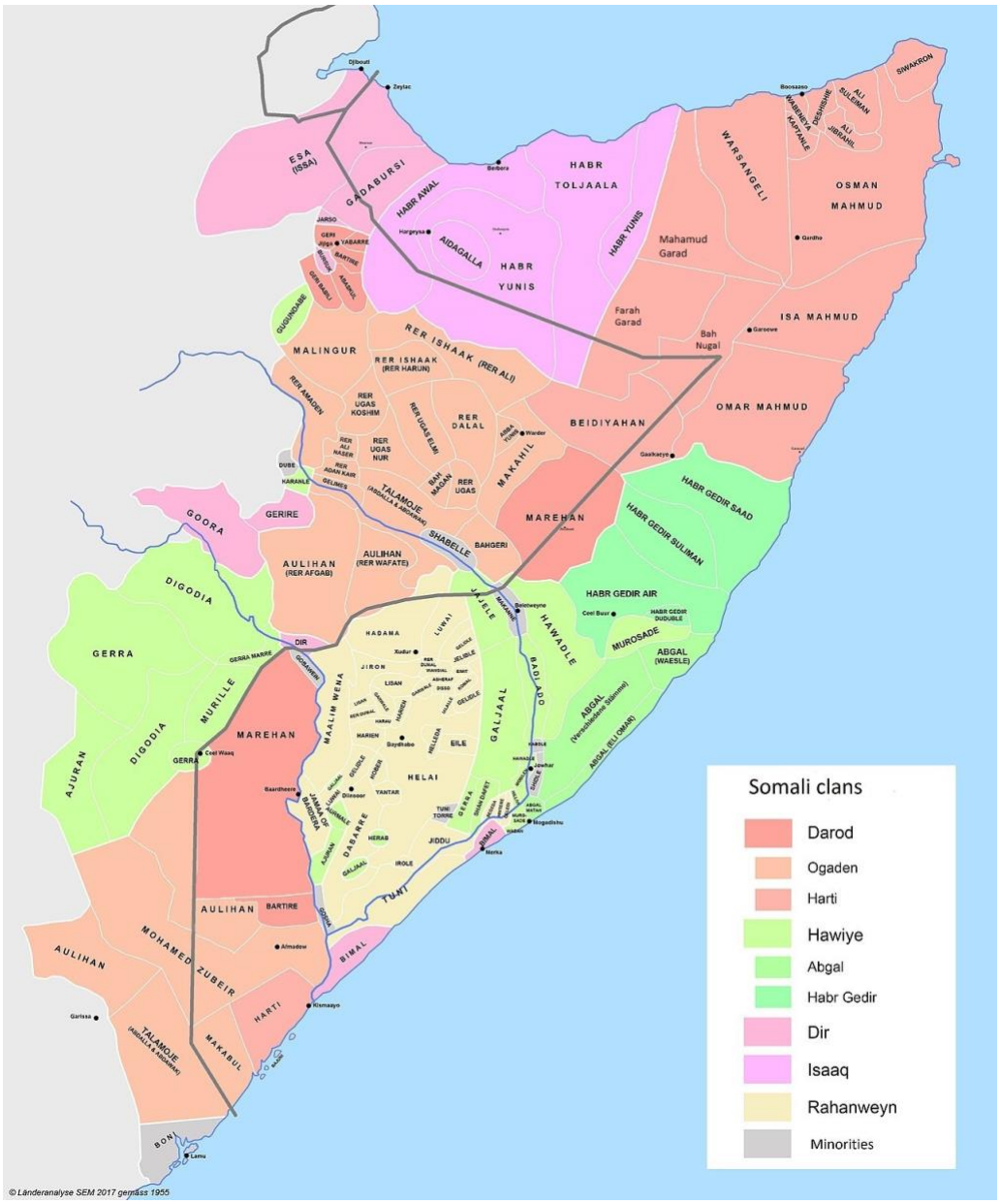

Figure 1: Somali Clan Regional Map

Note: This map is not entirely accurate with some clans given more land than reality, but still gives a general idea of where Somalis lie on the Horn, not only confined to the colonial lines drawn representing the countries of Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Somali_clan_map_1.jpg

Af-Maay/Maay language	Ab-gaal/Hawiye (southern dialect)	Woqooyi (northern dialect)	English
Maay fathaase?	Xaad rabtaa?	Maxaad dooneysaa?	What do you want?
Surungkuungaa ka neebsat-hooyne	Mahaanaan isaga ba-jeeynaa.	Halkan baan isaga na-saneynaa.	We're just resting here.
Meelaa iska roog. (Meelaa surunaaw)	Rabtaan iska joog. (Mahaaga iska rorog)	Halkan iska joog. (Halkaaga taagnoow)	Just stay here. (Be where you are)
Igaarti kooyteey?	Igaarti ma timid?	Wiilashi ma yimaadeen?	Have the boys come?
Ikorooy	Iikaadi	Isug	Wait for me.

Figure 2: Somali Languages/Dialects Breakdown and Comparisons

Source: *The Bantu-Jareer Somalis: Unearthing Apartheid in the Horn of Africa* – Mohamed Eno (2008)