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**Beyond the Refugee Label:
Identity and agency among Somali refugees**

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of
the degree of MA (Historical Studies)

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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As the world refugee population continues to rise, so the debate over how to best assist those who have been displaced intensifies. Humanitarian practices often have a disempowering effect on individuals instead of helping them to become self-sufficient. This problem is compounded by the gap between the realities on the ground and the overarching policies of both governments and organizations. In South Africa, the plethora of social issues, the lack of long-term solutions for refugee resettlement and the unsuccessful implementation of national policies relating to refugees contribute to the xenophobia that has become prevalent across the country. When the xenophobic sentiment turns violent, the Somali community has been targeted in the most extreme ways. Using the oral history methodology, this study draws on 17 life story interviews with Somali refugees residing in the Cape Town area. The interviews focus on the refugees' experience with humanitarian organizations and the government policy of their host country. By exploring their memories of Somalia and their relationship to their homeland, as well as their experiences in exile, it becomes evident that the Somalis' personal histories impact on how they negotiate the different forms of assistance that are available, or the lack thereof. Those who have had little control over their own lives in the past continue to have greater difficulty reaching their financial and educational goals, integrating onto South African society, and accessing the rights granted to them by law. Those who historically had some amount of agency continue to do so, despite the disempowering effects of mass assistance programs. In order for governments and organizations to be successful in their mission to assist and resettle refugees, they must

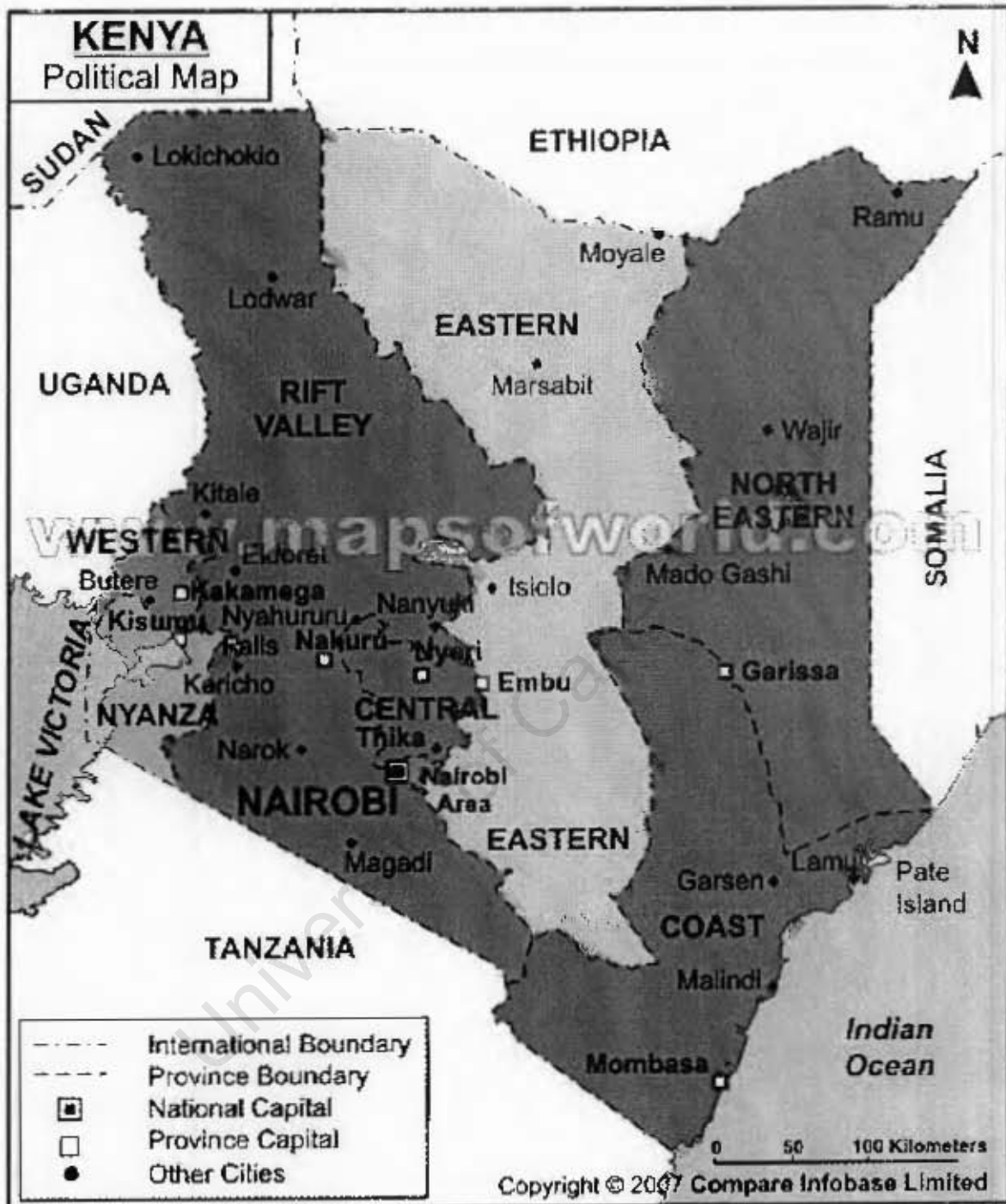
have a more complete understanding of the history and cultural norms of assistance of the communities with whom they are working, as well as the realities of the current circumstances. The oral history method, with its ability to account for personal subjectivity, narrative authority, and historical agency, allows for in-depth exploration into the impact of policies created by the external bodies of international aid organizations, national governments, and local organizations at the grassroots level.

University of Cape Town

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Chapter 1

Oral History Methodology in Development

Introduction

When Mohammed Hirsi fled Mogadishu at the age of 13, the only things he took with him were a pen and paper. He wanted to be able to write down all the places he would see so he could tell his friends when he returned. His family boarded a converted ambulance that took them to the Kenyan border and they have never been able to go back home.

“Refugees live in a divided world, between countries in which they cannot live, and countries which they cannot enter.” These words were spoken by Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, long after humanitarian intervention, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and development efforts first appeared on the world stage with the birth of the Red Cross movement in 1836.¹ However, it was not until after World War II, as a response to the atrocities of the Holocaust, that humanitarian concerns began to impact international relations agendas. The 1950 United Nations statute establishing the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the parallel legal instrument of the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 constitutes a defining moment in the response of the international community to the growing global population of displaced people. For the first time there was an internationally agreed upon definition of a refugee: “anyone owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality...is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it.”² These instruments set forth concrete philosophical and ethical challenges and an enduring humanitarian concern. By signing the 1951 Convention, each state agreed to adhere to specific responsibilities for this category of humanity. From these basic principles set out over half a century ago, a vast

¹ Moorehead, Caroline. *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees*. New York: Picador, 2006, pg. 32.

² The 1951 Geneva Convention Related to the Status of Refugees.

humanitarian industry has been established. At the end of 2006, there were 9.9 million refugees recorded internationally, the highest in five years. Somalia ranks as the fourth highest origin of major refugee populations in the world, with 464,253 people officially recognized. Another 21,800 Somalis reside outside their country as asylum seekers waiting to be granted refugee status.³

As this humanitarian industry continues to grow, the debate over its effectiveness intensifies with it.⁴ NGOs are often referred to as the new form of colonization. How much of the efforts of humanitarian organizations are a reaction to a belief in human rights and equality, but lacking knowledge of the specific context and causes of the crisis? How much is simply fulfilling the need of the first world to feel that it is helping in some way and how much of it is truly useful to the target population?

Humanitarian representational practices are often considered to produce anonymity and speechlessness⁵, thus disempowering the same people they are supposed to be helping and exacerbating the effects of prior traumatic experiences. Governments hosting large refugee populations and the administration of relief agencies tend to de-politicize those who fall into the refugee category and construct an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject. Standardized interventions displace and muffle individual voices and histories in the sense that the refugees understand them.⁶ Large population displacements become bereft of the history and politics of their specific circumstances and refugees tend not to be viewed as individuals and become a generic mass of victims in need of assistance from the outside world. The resulting universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for refugees to be approached as historical actors rather than helpless victims,

³ The United Nations Refugee Agency. www.unhcr.org. 3 February 2008.

⁴ There has been a lot of dialogue recently in the field of social science, specifically surrounding events in Africa, as to whether those being targeted by humanitarian effort would actually benefit more if left to their own devices. The mass importation of NGOs and foreign goods can have a severely detrimental effect on the local societal practices as a whole. For example, Abdifatah, one of the interviewees, tells how the typical rural agricultural practices of Northern Somaliland were destroyed after the aid agencies arrived because people flocked to the refugee camps to get food and deserted their animals. Now they have to do not have anything to return to and so remain in the overcrowded cities.

⁵ Malkki, Liisa H., "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization." In *Siting Culture: The shifting anthropological object*, Karen Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup, eds., London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 237.

⁶ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 237.

which in turn eliminates their authority to give a credible narrative, evidence or testimony about their own condition in political or institutional forums.⁷ In short, it can limit their agency and decision making in their own daily lives.

It is not necessarily that all aid workers do not know or understand the history and narratives of the groups they work with, but they tend not see it as relevant, or even as hindering the administration of projects.⁸ Refugees' memories are "just stories",⁹ while testimony tends to come from relief workers, government officials or experts rather than the people themselves. When planning humanitarian assistance the oral history method takes the opposite approach and "radically historicizes humanism," by acknowledging narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory of the displaced individuals.¹⁰

The oral history method allows for the sensitive exploration of life stories, thus creating the opportunity to re-establish the historical context of the conflict that created the refugee flow and the refugees' experiences of the implementation of policies once they are in exile. The personal narratives of refugees permit the researcher to understand their experiences in the way that they are remembered instead of refugees being approached through official rhetoric.

The Somali refugees who have settled in Cape Town have overcome tremendous challenges both in Somalia and South Africa. However, none of the 17 people interviewed in this study claim to have truly benefited from the work of a humanitarian organization. They have encountered a range of assistance efforts, from UNHCR refugee camps to local mosques. Each individual has a personal history that informs the way he or she relates to these structures. By invoking the oral history method and exploring their testimonies, these institutions can better assist refugee communities directly, as well as advocate for them at the government policy level. This study closely examines the personal histories of several Somali refugees in Cape Town within the context of

⁷ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 224.

⁸ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 231.

⁹ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 231.

¹⁰ Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 248.

Somalia's history and culture as well as South Africa's history and recent refugee policies, illustrating the connection between how refugees speak about their past and their relationships with governments and humanitarian organizations.

Over the course of 2006 and 2007, the Somalis became one of the most visible nationalities living in Cape Town mostly because of the xenophobic incidents in which they were targeted. Local organizations quickly stepped into assist and with the hope of preventing similar occurrences in the future. This sudden prominence created an excellent case study through which to examine the broader issues that refugees face in this country, their interactions with NGOs and the national government, and the ways in which their histories influence their current circumstances. The majority of the 17 interviews that I conducted were with individuals I met through my work with a local grassroots organization that focuses on human rights and refugee issues. I requested to interview people primarily due to their proficiency in English, but attempted to control for differences in gender, clan, and class. Many of the original group of people who I met through the NGO were then kind enough to introduce me to others whom they thought could be helpful to my research. The last interview that I conducted was with a group of six Somali men whom a South African woman working at the University of Cape Town had befriended. Access to the Somali community through the local NGO and others already familiar with the community was a crucial component of this project. As expanded upon in later chapters, this group of people encompasses four different clans and diverse social and economic backgrounds, and current situations. They have been in South Africa anywhere from 3 to 22 years and range in age from 22 to 54. Despite the obvious differences among the group, many of their experiences of being a refugee in South Africa remain the same.

The rest of this chapter explains the key theories of oral history methodology and its relationship to development work. It also explores the ways that this methodology can be particularly useful when working with victims of forced displacement or human rights violations.

Oral History Methodology

Although not commonly used in the refugee context, life histories and personal narratives offer a number of advantages including enabling outsiders to capture the complexity and richness of an individual refugee's experiences. They help to restore, both to the teller and to the audience a sense of the refugee's personal agency, however limited by events. Also, they can help to understand the impact of trauma on the individual.¹¹

Memories cannot be explained purely by politics or emotions or dismissed as 'false' by historians.¹² The oral history method recognizes this and finds value in the narrators' subjectivity.¹³ Ideally, oral history seeks to analyze the relationship between history and memory. "Like history, memory is inherently revisionist and never more chameleon than when it appears to stay the same."¹⁴ There are not any formal oral genres specifically meant to transmit historical factual information; historical, poetical, and legendary narratives all become intertwined. The result is narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns individuals and what concerns groups become more obscure than in established written records.¹⁵

Oral history has been frequently criticized for its lack of reliability and objectivity and its differentiation from established historical data. Yet in reality, there is much debate over the objectivity of history. According to oral historian, Alessandro Portelli, oral history tells us less about events than their meaning, but that makes it no less valuable as tool for understanding historical and current events. It is an individual's perceptions and beliefs

¹¹ Powles, J., "Life history and personal narrative: theoretical and methodological issues relevant to research and evaluation in refugee contexts." *New Issues in Refugee research*, Working Paper No. 106, UNHCR, 1.

¹² Hamilton, Carrie. "Memories of Violence in Interviews with Basque Nationalist Women," In *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory*, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pg. 130.

¹³ Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different", In *The Oral History Reader*, Pers, R. and Thompson, A., eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pg. 67.

¹⁴ Hamilton, "Memories of Violence," 130.

¹⁵ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different", 66.

that influence how he or she will act or react in certain situations, which may or may not align with the officially documented history. It is therefore equally as important to understand an individual's construction of history as it is to know the "textbook" version since it has a greater influence over the way people operate and react in daily situations. The information garnered from oral history may not give a clear chronology of facts, but the distinctive subjectivity of the narrator will help us to understand what has occurred in the past, people's agency or lack thereof, and the significance of popular memories in present day society.

Memory is not a passive depository of facts but an active process of creating meaning; the narrator's effort to make sense of his life.¹⁶ Stories become distinctive and necessary because of their plot, the way in which story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story, what is told and what is left out and with whom the narrator chooses to share his story. The organization of the narrative reveals a lot about the speaker's relationship with history as well as their present perspective and identity. Personal accounts are very different when played out against histories of known atrocities.¹⁷ The narrative must then be set within a historical context for the public to grasp its value.¹⁸

It is the application of oral testimony that gives the listening process its relevance in the development field. Effective development dialogue requires an understanding and appreciation of history and social change. Poverty, inequality, conflict and displacement have a pattern and a history and any view or strategy for the future must come from the strengths and weakness of the past and current situation, much of which can best be learned from the people who have directly experienced it.¹⁹ Personal narratives allow aid workers to hear first hand the refugees' most serious concerns and discover unexpected gaps in the professional's knowledge, as well as challenge them to address those

¹⁶ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different", 69.

¹⁷ Cohen, S. *States of Denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001, pg. 124.

¹⁸ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 67.

¹⁹ Slim, Hugo and Paul Thompson. *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995, pg. 21.

problems in new creative ways.²⁰ In order to be effective, relief and development should be a participatory process allowing people to have agency over the change in their lives, especially as this loss of control can contribute to the trauma of being a refugee.²¹

Aid workers may have a very different idea of the history, causes, and realities of a situation than those whom they are trying to help. There is a common assumption among humanitarian agencies that refugees always require relief and it must come from an external body, followed by which the refugee population needs to be taught how to be self-sufficient by this same organization.²² In reality, assistance should be carried out on the terms of the receiver instead of a package deal being imposed upon them. Robert Chambers, of the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex England, refers to “professional reversals,” meaning development workers become the listeners and learners and those they are supposed to help become the teachers and experts.²³ The first step in planning an assistance program should include an enquiry into the communities, allowing them to recount and identify the nature of their situation, which should include an analysis of the past.²⁴ As they are personal narratives, there will be a certain amount of subjectivity to the analysis, but that makes them no less relevant.

This strategy is equally useful in the case of displaced people. Listening to individual voices gives relief agencies and government bodies more options for ways to help, as opposed to providing standardized care packages (such as refugee camps) in diverse situations. Most refugees know what they need to make their survival easier and are best placed to participate in the design of their own relief programs as well as carry out ground-level implementation. More can be done to support the displaced within their societal norms if they are listened to from the beginning.²⁵

²⁰ Powles, “Life history and personal narrative,” 1.

²¹ Slim and Thompson, *Listening for a Change*, 21.

²² Harrell-Bond, Barbara, “The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid”, In *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Alastair Ager, ed., New York: Continuum, 1999, pg. 147.

²³ Slim and Thompson, *Listening for a Change*, 19.

²⁴ Slim and Thompson, *Listening for a Change* 21.

²⁵ Slim and Thompson, *Listening for a Change*, 32.

Trauma and Memory

Spatial dislocation includes widespread change and disruption of social structures that are often accompanied by changes in the environment; previous norms of life are lost as well as status, wealth, place and power.²⁶ Events leading up to displacement and the flight event itself impress upon people the inadequacy of their own power.²⁷ The normal order has broken down, old rules no longer apply and social groups no longer exist.²⁸ Refugees usually need to learn a new language, skills and behavioral norms. Once in exile, they are increasingly de-socialized almost to the level of a child and are challenged to re-establish their social identity.²⁹ They strive to maintain whatever power they can, but this desire is often not understood or appreciated by NGOs and host governments. Assistance programs undercut the already weakened power of the displaced. The concept of aid must be expanded to allow for personal agency as well as simply the distribution of material goods.³⁰

The experience of displacement adds further complexities to the relationship between history, narrative and memory. Life histories are not a random collection of memories but are part of an organized memory of an individual's life. These narratives are constructed to project a certain image of the narrator; therefore, reminiscence is essential to constructing personality and identity. As the individual chooses which memories to share, he or she is choosing what image to transmit to others.³¹ However, traumatic events create complex reactions that may even be contradictory. Displacement is not always a trauma, but trauma is a response not so much to an event as to the meaning given to the event,³² which makes oral history an excellent methodology for working with those who

²⁶ Hansen, A. "Self-Settled Rural Refugees in Africa: The Case of Angolans in Zambia Villages" In *Involuntary Migration and Resettlement: The Problems and Responses of Dislocated People*, Art Hansen and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds., Colorado: Westview Press, 1982, pg. 13

²⁷ Hansen, "Self-Settled Rural Refugees in Africa", 14.

²⁸ Rose, P., "Tempest-tost: Exile, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Rescue" in *Sociological Forum*, Vol 8, No. 1, (March 1993), 9.

²⁹ Hansen, "Self-Settled Rural Refugees in Africa", 32.

³⁰ Hansen, "Self-Settled Rural Refugees in Africa", 32.

³¹ Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Currey, 1985, pg. 8.

³² Hodgkin, K. and S. Radstone, eds. *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pg. 97.

have been displaced, as it also focuses on the meaning each person's experiences and enables the contradictions to be legitimately included in the story.³³

Traumatic experience combines the sensory inputs of the external event(s) with the way the individual's mind processes the experience. In other words, an experience that one person interprets as traumatic may not cause the same reaction in another. Stanley Cohen refers to a specific aspect of this as "interpretive denial": the historical facts are not denied, but given a different meaning.³⁴ Therefore, traumatic memory may not bear specific relations to an event but can serve to characterize the workings of memory and the subjective experience of the individual.³⁵ In oral history interviews, the accuracy of the facts matters less than validating the victim's subjective experience.³⁶ One must examine the ways that traumatic experiences impact how people construct their narratives, filter and interpret their memories, and the meanings they give to the factual events. Such an examination requires an understanding of different ways in which the individual functions in his or her society and culture prior to the trauma, another instance where oral history methodology can be useful.³⁷

Because traumatic events are a combination of the actual occurrence and the subjective interpretation by the victim, they are frequently narrated in a different way from the rest of the narrative. While traumatic experiences are not worked through, victims will probably have difficulty constructing a story that includes the event. Often a traumatized person will re-experience such events as re-current and intrusive recollections of the event in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, etc. While telling their narratives, people will likely give certain signals that alert the interviewer to the fact that they have interpreted the event as traumatic, either by their change in body language or voice, long silences, loss of emotional control, detachment, or their inability to tell the story at all. Also, the traumatic event may not be included in the main story, but instead come out

³³ BenEzer, Gadi, "Trauma Signals in Life Stories", In *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*. Lacy-Rogers, Leydesdorff and Dawson, eds. London: Routledge, 1999, pg. 29.

³⁴ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 7.

³⁵ Hodgkin and Radstone, *Contested Pasts*, 97.

³⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 123.

³⁷ Field, S. "The 1994 Rwandan genocide: Remembering and imagining through the limits of time space and words," in *The Journal of Social Studies*, Vol 115. No. 2, 2007, pg. 6.

later after probing from the interviewer.³⁸ A person who has been traumatized tends to experience time as durational as well as sequential, in other words, time is experienced continuously, not in a sequence of memories with a beginning and an end.³⁹ Although imagined scenes of prior violence take place in the mind, they are evoked by specific events within a historical context. For many reasons, people may choose, either consciously or unconsciously to block out these memories. The result is a disjointed and fractured narrative. In the case of most refugees, negotiating one's identity and integrating traumatic memories are inextricably linked. A large component of incorporating "refugee" into one's identity is the process of managing those memories in the present, both of which will influence the way a story is narrated. Therefore, refugee experiences, identity, and the narrative they choose to share are all intertwined.

In some cases, refugees (or any victims of trauma) are afraid that their memories may be denied or misinterpreted by others, again influencing which parts of their histories they choose to share. Many people (bystanders) will look the other way or distance themselves when confronted with stories of trauma.⁴⁰ Traumatic events often take place outside the socially validated reality. They are viewed by outsiders as stories of victimhood, beyond the realm of most peoples' experience and therefore somehow separate from the public, without a historical context. Rejection by the public or an individual listener can cause the victim to further bury these stories of trauma. That rejection can be very painful, thus to risk it is a large step for those that are already so vulnerable. This fear of rejection and mistrust of outsiders plays a large role in the narrative, and therefore identity, that the displaced person presents. When strangers become involved with a refugee, he or she appropriates a suitable identity through a process of negotiation and strategic self-preservation. Narratives are not passive stories of victimhood, but are actively constructed by and communicated between the displaced themselves as part of the process of re-organizing their identity.⁴¹ The individual may selectively disregard events that do not fit into the life history they wish to present. One trauma survivor states, "I

³⁸ BenEzer, "Trauma Signals in Life Stories," 34.

³⁹ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 123.

⁴⁰ Herman, J. *Trauma and Recovery: from domestic abuse to political terror*. London: Pandora, 1994, pg. 8.

⁴¹ Knudsen, John Chr. "When Trust is on Trial: Negotiating Refugee Narratives" in *Mistrusting Refugees*. Daniel and Knudsen (eds.), California: University of California Press, 1995, pg. 18.

always told the truth...for the person I was.”⁴² Often the significance of the story lies in what is missing, as the most personal or troubling aspects are the ones the narrator is least likely to share. Most people feel the need to compose a past that is publicly acceptable. “Subjective composure fundamentally depends upon social recognition, with its power to confirm that the versions of self and world figured in a narrative correspond to those of other people.”⁴³

Memories of violence form part of an individual’s life story but are also a piece of the wider collective memory of the conflict that informs community identity and a shared history.⁴⁴ To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim.⁴⁵ Refugees who lack this support from the host society at large primarily seek support from each other, which serves to both strengthen and insulate this community identity.

Because of the complexity of the content of the narrative and the larger issues it reflects, there are many external factors that influence the way a story is related. The relationship between the interviewer and the narrator directly affects the quality of the testimony. The role of the interviewer is crucial in providing validation that the individual is worth listening to, especially when that person has undergone some sort of trauma that makes telling his story perhaps more difficult. The presence of a listener who records words for a story of the past gives the process a sense of depth and significance.⁴⁶ At the same time the identity of the interviewer will also influence the way the person’s story is told. Differences in race, gender, religion, class, etc, will all play a role in what and how much the interviewee chooses to share. In the case of aid workers and the displaced, these differences are often drastic.

⁴² Walker, Janet. “The Traumatic Paradox: Autobiographical documentary and the psychology of memory”. In *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory*. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pg. 105.

⁴³ Green, Anna. “Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates” in *Oral History*, Vol. 32 No. 2, 2004, pg. 39.

⁴⁴ Hamilton, “Memories of Violence,” 120.

⁴⁵ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 9.

⁴⁶ Yow, Valerie R., *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. London: Sage, 1994, pg. 119.

Extensive evidence exists to illustrate that refugees conceive their identity to be very different from those working with them and those who construct the definition of a refugee.⁴⁷ As Barbara Harrell-Bond theorizes, in the case of refugees and relief workers this need to conform the narrative to the identity of the person who is listening leads the narrator to ask for assistance continually from anyone who is an outsider. "Helping," in the usual method of providing material goods, may actually undermine the personal coping resources of the individuals, compounding the trauma of the experience.⁴⁸ "Dignity is the vital ingredient missing when basic physical needs are delivered in a mechanistic and impersonal way."⁴⁹ Aid itself does not create dependency, the problem lies in the manner in which it is given and the role that the displaced are forced to assume to get it.⁵⁰ Assistance is often de-personalizing, or even referred to as degrading and humiliating, as it is planned with the assumption that the affected populations are homogenous masses.⁵¹ The perception remains that refugees are problematic group of people placing a burden of dependency on the international community.⁵² While there is rhetoric of participation, for the most part control is maintained by the institutions.⁵³ Field staff are usually overworked and lack the training to cope with the problems of individuals or to listen to their life stories. Stereotyping of refugees as passive and powerless victims influence both the way in which humanitarian aid is organized and interpersonal relations between those who come to help. The concept of sanctuary combined with a loss of economic and social support systems combine to construct a powerful image of dependency.⁵⁴ The result is that refugees are humiliated and treated as helpless. "Becoming a refugee means lowering one's social and economic status...It is

⁴⁷ Zetter, R., "Labeling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity" in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991, 40.

⁴⁸ Harrell-Bond, "The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid", 136.

⁴⁹ Harrell-Bond, "The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid", 141.

⁵⁰ Sorenson, J., "An Overview: Refugees and Development," In *African Refugees: Development and Repatriation*, Howard Adelman and John Sorenson, eds., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, pg. 187.

⁵¹ Harrell-Bond, "The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid", 142.

⁵² Zetter, R., "International Perspectives on Refugee Assistance," In *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Alastair Ager, ed., New York: Continuum, 1999, pg. 73.

⁵³ Sorenson, "An Overview: Refugees and Development," 186.

⁵⁴ Zetter, "International Perspectives on Refugee Assistance," 74.

synonymous with losing self esteem and self confidence.”⁵⁵ Instead of being an individual, one is viewed as an object of philanthropy.⁵⁶ Recasting refugees in a non-dependent image is not only a question of redefining the interests of service providers and reconstructing the portrayal of refugees but external actors need to perceive refugees as a resource.⁵⁷

There is a distinct relationship between the portrayal of refugees as a generic mass without a history, the way aid organizations function, and a person’s tendency to experience displacement as traumatic. “Dehistoricization” both produces and perpetuates the concept of the refugee as a universal victim, allowing assistance to be distributed within that construct. The lack of historical and political information utilized in the planning and implementation of relief programs makes the intended assistance much less effective or even hurtful. The resulting helplessness and loss of agency in one’s own life in these types of programs contributes to the likelihood that experience of displacement will be interpreted as traumatic or at the very least will exacerbate refugee suffering. By taking the historical context into account, the oral history method seeks to allow the complexities of different populations to be incorporated back into humanitarian work.

The central question that has guided my research and the construction of this thesis is: Given that development policies tend to ignore personal histories and questions of agency and oral history methodology’s strengths are the recording and analysis of life history agency and identity: how can oral history methodology contribute to improving the application of these policies? Subsequently, how can the specific combination of these strengths and weaknesses apply to the experiences of the Somali refugees of Cape Town?

The following chapters seek to apply the theories and methodologies outlined above to the specific case of the Somali refugees residing in Cape Town. Chapter Two begins with an historical overview of the recent conflict in Somalia, followed by a description of the South African context and the nation’s refugee policy. Individual profiles of stories of the

⁵⁵ Harrell-Bond, “The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid”, 143.

⁵⁶ Harrell-Bond, “The Experience of Refugees as Recipients of Aid”, 143.

⁵⁷ Zetter, “International Perspectives on Refugee Assistance,” 75.

interviewees make up Chapter Three in an attempt to relate the complex narratives of each individual. Chapter Four describes the Somali's perceptions of South Africa, both before and after their arrival and the challenges that they now face in their new country. "Becoming a Refugee," Chapter Five, traces the ways in which memories of home and the war, and complex process involved in the managing of one's memories lead to the different identities each refugee presents in their new society. This chapter also explores the connotation and impact of the constructed refugee label. Chapter Six looks at the ways in which both international and local NGOs, as well as the South African government interacts with refugees and how by ignoring the issues discussed in the previous chapter, their efforts at assistance may be ineffective.

The interpretation of past events and the strategic identities that follow have a very real effect on the ways in which refugees are able to negotiate their situation in exile. Those who historically viewed themselves as having some agency over their own lives will tend to continue to do so. But those who have perceived themselves as having limited control in the past will likely do so in the future, therefore being more vulnerable to becoming dependent and other negative effects of humanitarian intervention. By taking into consideration the historical context of each displaced population, instead of relying on the common label, institutions can better alleviate the negative side effects that now accompany refugee assistance efforts.

Chapter 2

Historical Context

Most refugees from Somalia arrived in South Africa nearly 10 years ago as a result of ongoing warfare in the region. Due to South Africa's position of relative economic prosperity and stability on the continent, it has become an appealing destination for refugees since its transition to democracy in 1994. However, partly because of the current widespread poverty and gross economic disparity, refugees have become a target of xenophobia, perhaps none more so than the Somalis, with their strong business skills and drive to succeed, as well as being easily distinguishable in appearance, language, and religion from the majority of South Africans. As a result, over 40 Somalis were killed in the townships surrounding Cape Town in 2006-2007.¹

An Overview of the Conflict in Somalia

The present day conflict in Somalia has roots stretching back to colonialism, the Somali Revolution of 1969, the Cold War, and series of civil wars that tore apart the nation from 1977 to 1988. In 1969, Siyad Barre assumed power in a coup, which marked the beginning of his 22-year dictatorship. Barre's leadership strategy was that of divide and rule, which included dispensing weapons to his current allies to fight his current enemies.² This led to the spread of modern weapons, originally supplied by Russia, the West, and Arab countries, throughout the country. Barre created a hegemony for his own clan, the Darods. In 1991, he was expelled from the capital, Mogadishu, by forces of the United Somali Congress, comprised of members of the Hawiye clan and led by Muhammad Farah Aideed and Ali Mahdi Mohamed. However, the USC leaders could not agree how to share power. The city split into two armed camps along clan lines

¹ Ndenza, B. "Cape Somali community living in fear." Cape Times, 6 July 2007, published on web by www.iol.com.

² Lewis, I.M., *A Modern History of the Somali: nation and state in the Horn of Africa*. Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. pg. 263.

resulting in 14,000 deaths and wounding three times that.³ By the time of Siyad Barre's flight, Somalia had fallen into traditional clan and lineage divisions, the clans alone provided some degree of security in the midst of the war. "Clan cleansing" began in Mogadishu and the South.⁴ Just as Barre had appealed to the Darod, now the Hawiye USC attacked any member of the Darod clan. The defeated Darod regrouped along the Juba River destroying the agricultural region, which led to widespread famine. Heavily armed militias based on the traditional clan lines, mobilized by the still powerful figure of Siyad Barre and economically sustained by the spoils of war fought for control of Southern Somalia. The United Nations estimates that 300,000 people died and one million fled.⁵

International response to the crisis in Somalia was slow. In March of 1992, a ceasefire enabled UNICEF and other relief agencies to return to Somalia, having left with Barre's overthrow. However, service delivery was poor due to looting, fighting, heavy taxes on incoming aid and the cost of hiring armed escorts.⁶ A month later the United Nations Security Council authorized the deployment of observers to monitor the ceasefire. In December 1992, the UN authorized a humanitarian operation led by an American force. Later that year 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed while doing a weapons inspection. The UN attacks Aideed's bases, killing thousands of Somalis but failing to locate the warlord. In October 1993, a US helicopter was shot down and one person was taken prisoner, others were wounded and the rescue attempt was unsuccessful. Following this famous incident, the United States withdrew its troops from Somalia at the end of March 1994. The progressive decline of international support led to further destabilization.⁷

In March 1994, Ali Mahdi Mohamed and Muhammad Farah Aideed signed a new agreement on behalf of their allies, but nothing came of it. As of March 1995, the UN operation to Somalia was terminated and the violence continued as before. Aideed was killed in 1996, one year after he managed to be elected as interim president. A series of

³ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 264.

⁴ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 263.

⁵ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 265.

⁶ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 267.

⁷ Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 274.

feeble governments, failed peace efforts and cycles of war and famine have characterized Somalia for the last 10 years.

A key aspect of the Somali society is the role of the clan system. In pre-colonial Somalia, a clan family system based on paternal descent was necessary in the absence of a centralized nation state, producing a high degree of mutuality in a harsh environment.⁸ In addition, individuals were protected by their kin if they committed a crime, but then vengeance was taken on the entire family. In traditional Somali society, a more powerful cultural force within the family group avoided harmful consequences of this clan insurance. Elders were meant to control violence and other crimes utilizing the collective power of the family. A strong sense of obligation existed on the part of the individual to the general welfare of the community.⁹

However, the clan system had the negative consequence of making national unity in the modern nation state very difficult. In the early years of Somalia's independence, the nationalist agenda rejected communal identity in terms of the clan. The state and emerging middle class began to manipulate clan identity and solidarity to disguise its own political and economic privileges and access to the state.¹⁰ During the 1960's, the re-imagining of a Somali communal identity based on clans was an attempt by the middle class to control the state: in the absence of major philosophical or ideological differences, clan background was marketed as the distinguishing factor.¹¹

This is precisely the situation of which Siyad Barre took advantage.¹² The cultural controls of the old system were manipulated in the political realm until they became unrecognizable. Siyad Barre developed a system of clientage based on the divisive manipulation of clan identity. By the time the dictator was expelled, the new communal

⁸ Afrax, M., "The Mirror of Culture: Somali Dissolution Seen Through Oral Expression," In *The Somali Challenge: from catastrophe to renewal?* Ahmed I. Samatar, ed., Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994, pg. 235.

⁹ Afrax, "The Mirror of Culture," 249.

¹⁰ Kapteijns, L., "Women and the Crisis of Communal Identity," In *The Somali Challenge: from catastrophe to renewal?* Ahmed I. Samatar, ed., Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994, pg. 226.

¹¹ Kapteijns, "Women and the Crisis of Communal Identity," 228.

¹² Afrax, "The Mirror of Culture," 236.

identity of clan-ism, in whose name people had been tortured, exiled, and killed, had become inescapable for most Somalis. Most Somalis now seem unable even to acknowledge that clan-ism was not an identity to which Somalis were genetically predisposed, but have been shaped by political actors and historical circumstances.¹³ The violence that they have experienced based only on their family background has given the clan all that much more personal significance. Thus many Somalis fell victim to the latest type of “clan leaders”: warlords who amassed wealth and power during Siyad Barre’s rule continued to derive political power from the manipulation of clan identity which they falsely refer to as “traditional”.¹⁴

To be clear, the dissolution of the Somali state is not a conflict of traditional hatreds, but question of power, inequality, race dynamics and class formation, played out on an idiom of kinship.¹⁵

South African Policy and Historical Context

South Africa’s refugee population had been steadily growing since the nation’s transition from apartheid 13 years ago. As South Africa was coming out of its isolation, most first-world countries were tightening their refugee quotas, making South Africa, with its relatively better infrastructure and economy, an appealing destination for those who were being displaced around the African continent. By 2006, there were 140,000 asylum seekers and 30,000 legally recognized refugees in South Africa with 100,000 applications still to be processed and these numbers are only increasing.¹⁶ Most come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Angola, Burundi, Congo Brazzaville, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. As a necessary piece of the transition from apartheid, all of South Africa’s policies had to be re-evaluated and most re-written. It was in this context

¹³ Kapteijns, “Women and the Crisis of Communal Identity”, 228.

¹⁴ Kapteijns, “Women and the Crisis of Communal Identity,” 229.

¹⁵ Besteman, C., “Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: “The Dissolution of the Somali Nation-State,” in *Americna Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 3, (Aug 1996), 579.

¹⁶ Crush, Jonathan, ed. *Beyond Control: Immigration and Human Rights in a Democratic South Africa*. Cape Town: South African Migration Project, 1998, pg. 127.

of the post-apartheid society, massive policy changes, and the influx of refugees that a new policy for managing and protecting refugees was deemed necessary. The 1998 South African Refugees Act grants the rights to education, employment, health care and security, etc, but in reality, most refugees struggle to access them. They instead face discrimination when seeking trying access the banking and health care systems. They are routinely harassed by the police and have difficulty finding work. Refugees are disproportionately the victims of crime.¹⁷ While the content of the Act is on par with international standards, the rights it guarantees, including education, health care, employment, and security, remain inaccessible to most refugees and asylum seekers.

The South African Refugees Act was passed in 1998 and implemented in 2000. It was written within a very specific context of South African history. For several years during its transition period, 1990-1994, South Africa was host to one of the world's largest refugee populations without acknowledging it. The lack of any form of protection meant that people could be forcibly returned or have their rights violated with impunity.¹⁸

The prior piece of legislation, the Aliens Control Act of 1991, was designed to “provide for the control of the admission of persons to their residence in and their departure from the Republic.”¹⁹ However, extensive powers were given to the top officials and the act was criticized for being poorly implemented and administered in a racially discriminatory way. Under the Aliens Control Act, the asylum seeker was not granted audience with the Standing Committee that was deciding whether or not to grant him or her permission to remain in the country, nor was he/she given reasons for a negative decision. For these and several other reasons, the Act was inconsistent with minimum standards for international law.²⁰

¹⁷ Landau, L., K. Ramjathan-Keogh and G. Singh, “Xenophobia in South Africa and problems related to it” Forced Migration Working Paper Series #13, Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, January 2005, pg. 10.

¹⁸ Crush, *Beyond Control*, 123.

¹⁹ Crush, *Beyond Control*, 127.

²⁰ Crush, *Beyond Control*, 139.

Pressure to change began the same year the Aliens Control Act was passed, as South Africa moved into its transition period and started coming out of isolation. In this year, the nation signed an agreement with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to cooperate regarding the repatriation of exiles from apartheid back to South Africa. This was followed by a tripartite agreement with the UNHCR and the Mozambican government as part of the largest repatriation program undertaken by the United Nations.

In 1993, South Africa signed a second agreement with the UNHCR agreeing to apply the definitions contained in the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the 1969 Organization for African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. They then established an Office of the High Commission in South Africa and granted it diplomatic privileges. South Africa began to establish procedures for determining refugee status and granting asylum. In 1994, the year the new democratic government was elected, South Africa joined the OAU and over the next two years signed its 1969 Convention, the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol.²¹

In 1997, a Green Paper on International Migration, as commissioned by the Minister of Home Affairs, recognized that the Aliens Control Act was an unsuitable instrument for refugee protection.²² Efforts to form a task team for a new refugee policy began soon after. The Refugees Act was written in the period following large-scale development of White Papers in South Africa (1995-1997), the new challenge was turning that policy into practice.

The goal of the Refugees Act was to reflect and enable the fulfillment of the international constitutional obligations but also relate to state and national interests and priorities involving migration control, law and order, aspects of national and state security, and

²¹ Crush, *Beyond Control*, 126.

²² De la Hunt, Lee Anne. "Tracking Progress: initial experiences with the Refugees Act, 130 of 1998." Cape Town: Legal Aid Clinic, University of Cape Town, 2002, pg. 3.

social and economic interests, as well as bilateral, regional and international relations.²³

The government saw granting asylum and protection in South Africa as a matter of securing human rights for those who have fled from their country of origin and are forced to remain in South Africa for reasons recognized by international refugee and human rights law. The act is not supposed to be a conduit for permanent immigration to South Africa and does not consider persons fleeing for reasons of poverty, social, economic, or environmental hardships to be refugees.²⁴

Having signed both the UN and OAU conventions, the South African act adheres to the definitions of “refugee” found in these documents.

“The UN definition should be understood to include any person genuinely at risk of serious human rights violations in his or her country of origin, who both needs and deserves protection. There must be a heightened risk to human rights on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. The latter residual category of civil or political status is interpreted in relation to prevailing norms of non-discrimination including for example, persons at risk on account of gender, sexual orientation, disability, class or caste. It must moreover be determined that the government in the country of origin either cannot or will not effectively counter the risk to fundamental human rights, in consequence of which there is a need for surrogate protection in South Africa.”²⁵

The many people who were forcibly displaced in Africa during the anti-colonial struggles were not considered refugees under the United Nations definition. The OAU sought to correct this.

“The OAU definition of refugee status also includes those compelled to leave their country for reasons of external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order either in part or the whole of the country of origin. This should be interpreted to include those who have come to South Africa because their lives, safety or freedom are threatened by external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, generalized violence, internal conflict, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order either in part of the whole of their country of origin.”²⁶

The act states the refugee status determination should be independent from the government, not centered on suitability for residence in South Africa or foreign policy. Status determination thus demands familiarity with legal and empirical realities of human

²³ The Refugee White Paper, South African Department of Home Affairs (Gazette 18988, Notice 1122), 19 June 1998.

²⁴ The Refugee White Paper.

²⁵ The Refugee White Paper.

²⁶ The Refugee White Paper.

rights. An independent entity was therefore created within Home Affairs, separate from immigration, to determine refugee status. The procedure, involving a three tier structure of preliminary interviews, initial determination and appeal, is not supposed to take longer than six months. Asylum seeker permits must be renewed every three months and refugees' identity documents expire after two years. After five years, refugees can apply for permanent residency.²⁷

Through the Refugees Act, the South African government has committed itself to legal protection for all refugees under international law and the country's Bill of Rights. This includes adherence to the principle of non-refoulement, and that asylum seekers cannot be prosecuted for illegal entry into the country if they present themselves to authorities immediately. Once they have entered, they are guaranteed security rights, human dignity and the right to self-sufficiency. The South African government also believes voluntary repatriation to be the most durable solution once an individual's country of origin becomes safe and upholds international principles concerning such. The Act also acknowledges the need for self-sufficiency and local integration.²⁸

Civil society (including NGOs, the Regional Refugee Forums, the National Consortium of Refugee Affairs, UNHCR, and research institutes) plays an important role in providing humanitarian assistance, promoting awareness, and facilitating self-sufficiency and local integration. This is of even greater magnitude considering the limited resources available to nationals. The Act recommends a focus on income generating activities, vocational training and language classes, instead of relief.²⁹

To make all of this possible the Director General was given the power to establish as many Refugee Reception Offices as needed with the consultation of the Standing Committee. At this time, there are still only five, one in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town,

²⁷ The Refugee White Paper.

²⁸ The Refugee White Paper.

²⁹ The Refugee White Paper.

Pretoria, Durban and Johannesburg. Each office must have at least one Refugee Reception Officer and one Refugee Status Determination Officer.³⁰

A refugee who enters South Africa and does not submit an asylum application is breaking the law. A temporary permit, which expires after 14 days, is issued at the office where they intend to apply for asylum; they then can approach the Refugee Reception Office to complete their application. Asylum seekers must complete a nine page Eligibility Determination Form in person at the reception office.³¹ It is extremely difficult to access the reception offices. People sometimes queue from 8 in the morning until 11 at night, or even sleep in line outside the office. Many say bribery is their only answer.³² Each office seems to have a different system. Home Affairs has also failed to adhere to court decisions and to apply those decisions to multiple offices.³³ Once inside, applicants may still not be granted an interview. Some are turned away because they lack certain documents or just told to return after a given period. New people are dealt with on different days. Repeated visits force people to miss work or school and they must pay for transport, which adds up. During the months they may have to wait to be entered into the Home Affairs computer system, asylum seekers are in danger of being detained or arrested.³⁴

Most asylum seekers do not understand the application process or the law from which it is derived. They are unsure how to prepare and do not understand the official vocabulary. According to the law, the Refugee Status Determination Officer must ensure that the applicant fully understands the procedures, his rights, responsibilities, and the evidence presented.³⁵ However, it is difficult for individuals to get an appointment with the officer and when they do, he or she is often unprepared, doesn't know about conditions in the applicant's country of origin and is unable to ask relevant questions. It is questionable whether officers are qualified, properly trained and supervised and understand the

³⁰ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 9.

³¹ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 12.

³² De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 13.

³³ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 36.

³⁴ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 14.

³⁵ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 20.

principles of administrative justice. However, the Appeal Board does say that the quality of the decisions are improving.³⁶

Problems of interpretation have been one of the major blockages in implementing the act. At the border, asylum seekers do not have access to a UNHCR representative or an interpreter.³⁷ All forms and screening processes throughout the application procedure are conducted in English. Previously the Department of Home Affairs provided interpreters.³⁸ Now that they do not, and most people have no way accessing one on their own, the system is increasingly difficult to navigate for anyone who does not speak English.

By the time the act was implemented, a huge backlog of refugee status applications had built up. The UNHCR funded a project to deal with the backlog and facilitate implementation of the new policy. The project involved the UNHCR, the Department of Home Affairs and Lawyers for Human Rights and dealt primarily with the initial applications for asylum. Initially, with the new act, applications were processed quickly, but this is not longer true. Another backlog has built up. Applications are entered incorrectly or not at all and officials are insufficiently trained to deal with the work. The excessive backlog results in the system being more vulnerable to abuse by economic migrants, as well as infringing on refugees ability to establish themselves in the country.³⁹

Despite the well-intended policies of the new South Africa, refugees in general, and the Somalis in particular, encounter extreme difficulties in resettlement. It often takes months longer than it is supposed to for them to receive their permits and status documents, which then must be renewed regularly. They are not given the same identification documents as citizens making it very difficult for them to open bank accounts, secure housing, or get a job. They are not allowed to travel outside of the country.

³⁶ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 20

³⁷ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 15.

³⁸ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 35.

³⁹ De la Hunt "Tracking Progress," 35.

South Africa has become a highly xenophobic society, which, out of fear of foreigners, does not naturally value the human rights of non-nationals.⁴⁰ There remains legitimacy (in many places, not just South Africa) in denying non-citizens and non-nationals the same rights to residence, employment and social services.⁴¹ Neither the government nor citizens imagine refugees to be members of their society.⁴² Foreigners are perceived by the majority of South Africans, 75% according to some studies, as linked with cross-border crime and corruption, acquiring fraudulent documents, and accessing undeserved rights.⁴³ As xenophobia becomes increasingly prevalent, the Somalis seem to have been targeted in the most extreme ways. As well as shop owners being killed, Somalis were the victims during a riot in the township of Masiphumelele in August 2006, in which all the Somali-owned shops were burned and looted. Foreigners are perceived by local township residents to intensify competition for already scarce resources. Many South Africans view immigrants as a serious burden to social services and a threat to citizens' livelihoods and socio-economic rights.⁴⁴ Somalis tend to live in the townships, a minority in a community of locals, while other nationalities create communities of their own in suburbs closer to the city. The Somalis' successful shops take business away from the South African owned shops. They work hard, ban together to buy in bulk, form larger shops and increase their profits and they know the value of customer service.⁴⁵ Many of the local South Africans believe that Somalis come to this country with many business skills, having learned them in their own country. While this is occasionally true, most Somalis only learned to run a business upon their arrival out of necessity.⁴⁶ Because of the war in their home country, they are sadly lacking in education and life skills. Instead, they have learned significant survival skills, and their ability to run a business for profit is

⁴⁰ Landau, "Xenophobia in South Africa," 2.

⁴¹ Landau, L., "Myth and Rationality in Southern African responses to migration, displacement and humanitarianism" in *Views on Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cross, Gelderblom, Roux, and Mafukidze (eds.) Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006, pg. 227.

⁴² Kibreab, G., "Revisiting the Debate on People, Place, Identity and Displacement," in the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1999, pg. 400.

⁴³ Nyamnjoh, F., *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*, Dakar: Codesria Book, 2006, pg. 42.

⁴⁴ Landau, "Myth and Rationality," 230.

⁴⁵ Cape Argus, "Fierce Competition Blamed for Deadly Attacks", Myolisi Gophe 2 September 2006.

⁴⁶ Cape Argus, "Fierce Competition Blamed for Deadly Attacks".

derived primarily from this will power. Refugees tend to be the quintessential survivors.⁴⁷ While South Africans receive grants from the government and have been promised such amenities like housing, the Somalis have never had a government to depend on and expect nothing. In addition, Somalis are easily distinguishable because of their language and appearance. Finally, because of refugees' difficulty in opening a bank account, they often have large quantities of cash in their stores, making them prime targets for theft. (However, in the majority of the Somali murders, nothing was taken from the shop, so one can assume that the attacks were not part of a robbery, but cases of violent xenophobia.)⁴⁸

Apartheid assigned everyone an inflexible racial/ethnic identity and socially isolated groups, granting exclusive rights to each geographic area with limited and highly regulated access. Historically rights have been linked to territorial origins or homelands, not based on humanity.⁴⁹ Because of this, territorial-based identity is jealously protected by those who perceive themselves as standing to lose by an influx of refugees from other countries.⁵⁰ The legacy of apartheid is also apparent in the continuing isolation and lack of education in the townships, which are powerful contributing factors to the growing xenophobia among South Africans. The majority of those living in the townships are poorly educated due to the apartheid system. They do not know what it means to be a refugee or that there is a war in Somalia, but instead believe that the Somalis have come here specifically to make a profit at their expense, steal their women and inhabit their already insufficient housing. Foreigners are often used as a political scapegoat. Fear often arises at times of political instability, after a major upheaval in which former certainties no longer exist, but new ones are not in place.⁵¹ These insecurities can be more easily accommodated if traced to an identifiable cause. In short, the feeling of victimhood leads

⁴⁷ Rose, P., "Tempest-tost: Exile, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Rescue" in *Sociological Forum*, Vol 8, No. 1, (March 1993), pg. 14.

⁴⁸ Ismail, Abdifatah. "Stop Denial about Somali Killings." www.hiiraan.com. First appeared in the Cape Times, 27 September 2006.

⁴⁹ Landau, "Xenophobia in South Africa," 8.

⁵⁰ Kibreab, "Revisiting the Debate," 400

⁵¹ Murray, M. "Alien Strangers in Our Midst: The Dreaded Foreign Invasion and 'Fortress South Africa'" in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2/3, 2003, pg. 440.

to an urge to identify the culprit.⁵² Therefore, as the South African government continues to fail to fulfill its commitments to provide social and economic services, the public claims that the money and effort is being spent assisting foreigners instead.⁵³ According to Human Rights Watch, democratization has ironically hindered the political will to tackle this refugee issue, as in the current xenophobic climate politicians are afraid of losing votes if they voice their support of foreigners.⁵⁴ This combination of history, ignorance and politics, along with the struggles of poverty and the high crime rates in the townships, creates a highly dangerous environment for the Somalis.

Conclusion

The social history and clan structure of Somalia contributes to the ways in which the Somalis adapt and integrate into their new society. Due to the many years of war and lack of government, they have become incredibly resourceful, hence their successful businesses. However, the divisions among their community in Cape Town are still drawn along clan lines and this lack of unity makes them more vulnerable to attacks from the South Africans. As the violence and subsequent refugee flow from Somalia continues, the South African government must adapt to the influx of foreigners. The former victims of apartheid have become victimizers of those who come to South Africa in search of protection and livelihood.⁵⁵

⁵² Murray, "Alien Strangers in Our Midst," 441.

⁵³ Landau, "Xenophobia in South Africa," 9.

⁵⁴ Kibreab, "Revisiting the Debate," 401.

⁵⁵ Kibreab, "Revisiting the Debate," 401.

Chapter 3

Profiles

The following eight people represent the diversity among Cape Town's Somali refugee community. They come from different clans and classes, have different family backgrounds, some are illiterate while others are post-graduate students. They all have a range of notions about their identities as Somali nationals, members of their clans, and as refugees. Their goals and hopes for the future differ. They have different ways of managing their histories and adjusting to a new society. Several have spent time in refugee camps while others assert that they have never received any sort of aid. While some take a strong initiative over their lives, others assert less control and are more likely to wait for assistance. However, most have little knowledge of their rights as refugees or any idea where they can seek out help. All of the Somalis struggle with their status and identity as refugees and deeply desire to have the same documents and privileges as the South Africans around them. These eight stories are a sample of the seventeen people interviewed for this project.

Abdulaahi Hussein, a 24 year old Somali, left his home in 2004 and has been living in South Africa ever since. He has a one-year-old daughter and his wife is pregnant with their second child. A small shop in the township of Masiphumelele is their only source of income and he sends money back to his family in Mogadishu. He was previously married in Somalia and has two children there, whom he must support, as well as his parents and siblings. He belongs to a small clan that has nothing to do with the war and feels this identity is irrelevant. He barely remembers his country before the war. He was never able to attend school and his family had to regularly flee from one part of the city to another as the fighting broke out. Abdulaahi's family was always poor, but with the war, they became increasingly desperate. He left Somalia in order to be able to financially support his family at home. His brother was already living in Cape Town. Abdulaahi tells the story of his journey to Cape Town in a lighthearted manner with a sense of humor, but when he asked about his present circumstances and hope for the future, he becomes

solemn. He does not know how he will be able to support his growing family and continue to send money back to Somalia. He says he is afraid all the time and “fighting got his life,” life is too hard, “you don’t know what your future will be and you don’t know where to go for help.” “Sometimes you cannot tell if you are sick or you are not sick because you are so tired.” Abdulaahi desperately wants to go to the United States or Europe. He thought that when he came to South Africa that he would be able to find employment with a company where he could work for a few hours and be paid a good salary, even though he recognizes that he does not have any job skills. He believes that the governments of first world countries will provide him with everything he needs (health care, citizenship, employment) so he can better support his family in Somalia. He has no desire to return to his country.

Mohammed Hirsi's father worked for the state, which meant the family led an upper-middle class lifestyle until 1991, when his mother and three siblings were forced to flee. Mohammed's family not only belongs to the Darod clan, but also is closely related to Siyad Barre. When the war began and Barre was losing control, Mohammed's family was in particular danger. His father was held hostage for three years and the rest of the family fled to a town on the Kenyan border where Mohammed's parents had grown up. As the oldest of the four children, Mohammed took a lot of responsibility for the welfare of his family, including earning money by selling ice cream at the border post. Beginning in 1991, Mohammed, along with his mother and siblings, lived in refugee camps and then in Nairobi for several years. He speaks well of the refugee camp in general despite that he describes the overcrowding, the illness, lack of food, and unsanitary conditions. He felt the staff tried their best to be helpful but he never interacted with them on an individual level. At one point, he went back to Mogadishu for two years to study Islam and Arabic, but found the danger and necessary secrecy surrounding his identity unbearable. In 1996, Mohammed returned to Kenya, where he moved to Nairobi with his mother and siblings. There, he had the opportunity to study on and off. He came to South Africa in 1998 because he saw it as a better vantage point to get to Malaysia where he wanted to go to study international relations. Upon arriving in Cape Town, he found his father here

running a business. Mohammed continues to run that same business and has successfully expanded it. His father has since gone back to Kenya where the rest of the family resides. Mohammed is active in trying to form a Somali organization that will be able to speak for and protect his community. He lives in Mitchell's Plain with his wife and two young daughters. Although he enjoys running a business, he still holds the same goal of attending university to study international relations. He wants education and stability for his children, but feels that goal will be better reached elsewhere, until they can return home. He is 29 years old.

At the age of 29, *Ayah Mohammed Ali* has been in South Africa for 10 years. She is far more anxious to talk about the difficulties she faces living in this country than her memories of Somali. She is a member of the Darod clan, which is very important to her. She only attended school through grade two. She spent two months in Kenya before arriving in South Africa. Ayah has lived in several places around the country including Beaufort West and East London. She and her husband have opened a shop in Masiphumelele, where they recently moved with their four-year-old daughter. From the moment she entered the country, Ayah has faced many challenges. She was jailed for 15 days at the South African border, experienced random acts of xenophobia, and been stabbed twice during robberies. Although she believes she made the right decision to come here, she claims she cannot think of anything good about South Africa. She has never received any assistance while in South Africa, but was given money and supplies by a mosque in Kenya to help her get here. Ayah worries mostly for the future of her daughter, who has difficulty getting proper medical care and is ill-treated at the creche. She wants to go live with her sister in Sweden, saying she could not return to Somali because of so many bad memories. She was extremely grateful for the chance to talk about her struggles in South Africa and spoke at length about the daily problems she faces, but had little interest in sharing any information about her family in Somalia or her experiences of the war.

Abdulkahder Hussein Ali (Ali) remembers a peaceful Mogadishu, a "home for everyone". His father was a sheik and he had a very comfortable childhood. Ali is the youngest of 26

siblings. He belongs to the Isaq clan from the north of Somalia, an identity that he feels strongly about, but he qualifies it, in the old traditional sense of clans, before they were corrupted by the war. Born in Hargeysa in Northern Somaliland, he spent several years of his childhood living Mogadishu, but returned to his hometown just before the secession war broke out in the late 1980s. When the fighting came to Hargeysa, Ali fled to Ethiopia with his older sister. They spent some time in a refugee camp, which Ali remembers as very difficult, before moving to Jijiga and then Addis Ababa. Ali was able to complete high school in Ethiopia. Ali and his sister returned to Hargeysa for a time where he held a teaching job. When his sister had to travel to Kenya to apply for a visa to go to the US, it was decided that Ali would accompany her. Ali ended up staying in Nairobi for one year studying English and computer science. His cousins in Holland sent him money to return home, but instead he used it to come to South Africa. He arrived in Cape Town five years ago after several months of traveling and a one month stay in Johannesburg. He got a job teaching Arabic in the Cape Flats and continues to work there. Ali has become very active in the local Somali community and is head of the Somali Youth Organization of the Western Cape. Now at the age of 30, Ali is currently finishing his honors degree in environmental and water science at the University of the Western Cape and applying to masters programs internationally. He has worked his way through university, paying his own tuition. He would like to complete his PhD and open his own consulting firm. Ali's mother is in Somalia as is most of his family, but he does have some siblings and cousins overseas. He hopes to go back to Somalia so he can use what he has learned to benefit his country.

Deka Abd Noor was born in Kisamaayo in 1977. She was able to attend school until the age of 14. Deka is reluctant to talk about her childhood in Somalia or her memories of the war, but is very articulate when it comes to her current situation. The fighting started in her hometown when she was 16 years old and she fled, running through the streets behind crowds of people. She speaks of the hardships of her flight: drinking dirty water, getting malaria and wild animals. Upon entering a refugee camp in Kenya, relief workers were able to reunite her with her family. She describes the camp as purely boring, but is grateful for the food and medicine that was provided. After three years in the refugee

camp, she came to South Africa where she has lived for the last 10 years. Deka was jailed along with her six-month-old baby at the South African-Mozambique border for two weeks without being given a reason. Before coming to Cape Town, she lived in Kimberly where she experienced a lot of harassment from the police. At the time of the interview, Deka had been living in Masiphumelele with her husband and four boys for four to five months. They do not have a shop, but Deka manages to support them by selling things for credit and her husband is able to find occasional work. She describes in detail the discrimination her children face both in the crèche and on the streets of the township and the difficulties she faces getting them proper medical care. Her hope for her children is simply survival. A member of the Darod clan, she primarily socializes with other members of her tribe, but recognizes that this identity is important because of the Siyad Barre's manipulations. Deka has family in the United States whom she wishes to join. She believes the US government will provide much more support.

Zubaida Mohammed Mohammed was orphaned when she was very young, so she and her younger sister were raised by their uncles in a suburb of Mogadishu. Although her family belongs to the Hawiye clan, it matters little to her; instead she feels a strong connection with other Muslims. She has pleasant memories of attending a madrassa and being well cared for as child, although she was rarely allowed to play outside because of the war. As the fighting got worse, a group of people from Zubaida's neighborhood decided to flee to South Africa. Her uncle decided that Zubaida would go with them, at the age of 18, the only member of her family chosen to be safe. The youngest of the whole traveling group, but without anyone to care for her in particular, she did not even know where she was going until she arrived. She says she just tried to believe that the place she was going was worth the hardship. Upon arriving in Cape Town, Zubaida stayed in the suburb of Claremont where she took English classes for six months. Since she left Somalia in 2003, none of her family has been able to join her. Although she has friends from many different backgrounds, she still spends as much time with other Somalis as possible. Other Somali women seek her out to tell her their problems, especially regarding medical issues, but she feels there is little she can do to help them. Articulate and intelligent, she resents the stereotypes attached to Muslim women who wear the veil. She speaks

assertively about the difficulties Somalis, especially women, face in South Africa. At 22, Zubaida is in her third year of studying dentistry at the University of the Western Cape. Although she now receives a bursary from the United Nations, it was originally the Somali community that paid her fees and she worked over the holiday to supplement their generosity. She studied very hard to ensure that the community's sacrifice was worthwhile. Although Zubaida would like to get a job in South Africa, when it is possible she wishes to return to Somalia when there is peace and use her skills to rebuild her country.

Although *Shukri Abdulkadir* is not technically a refugee in South Africa, she identifies as such simply because as much as she would like to, she cannot return home. Her large family fled Mogadishu in 1990, when Shukri was five. She remembers little of the country other than her home. Since leaving Somalia her family has since lived all over the world, including Kenya, Uganda, and Pakistan, as her father, a United Nations diplomat, was posted to different countries. They managed to leave Somalia just before the war broke out, but much of her extended family still lives there. Shukri rejects the notion of clans (her mother is Darod and her father Hawiye) to the extent that she avoids interaction with other Somalis simply because of the inevitable discussions of her background. She speaks of the difficulties of traveling on a Somali passport and the harassment one is vulnerable to from airline and immigration officials. Shukri is in South Africa on study permit. At 22, she is in her third year at the University of Cape Town, studying religion, public policy and administration, and politics. The rest of her family is in Malaysia. Although she has some South African friends, she mainly identifies with other foreign students. Because Shukri has moved around so much, she says she does not even know what a real home feels like, but belongs with her family. Despite the fact that she barely remembers Somalia, she desperately wants to return. She wishes to work in the development sector in Rwanda after she graduates and believes that Somalia has much to learn from the way that Rwanda has resolved their conflict.

Abdifatah Ismail grew up in Hargeysa, the capital of what is now Somaliland. He is the eldest of five children, a position for which he takes great responsibility. His father traded

livestock, so his family was poor, but able to sustain itself. A member of the Isaq tribe, he feels that there is too much emphasis put on clans in his country and does not care much for that identity. He attended school through standard seven while still in Somalia. Abdifatah tells of the civil war that tore apart the city when he was a boy in the late 1980s. He remembers climbing trees so he could look into the fighter planes as they flew low enough to bomb the city. His family fled to a refugee camp in Ethiopia for three years and then attempted to return to their home, but they were forced to leave again because the whole city had been mined. Abdifatah's family then traveled to Kenya, where he spent ten years doing various jobs including working with an HIV/AIDS education initiative that targeted Muslim communities. He came to Cape Town in 2001 with the specific purpose of studying. At the age of 33, he has completed a BA in social science and a certificate in architecture, is now finishing his masters in urban planning at the University of Cape Town and writing his proposal for his Ph.D.. Abdifatah is an extremely vocal member of the Somali community: he is one of the leaders of the Somali Youth Organization of the Western Cape, when Somalis started being killed he met with several members of the local and provincial government, and his articles on Somalia are published regularly by several newspapers. He does not feel comfortable on the UCT campus, but instead spends all his time with the larger Somali community in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. He does not necessarily relate to other foreigners, but feels a stronger connection with other Muslims. Abdifatah has not been able to return to Kenya in the last six years but hopes to go next year and bring his two younger sisters to South Africa so they can also study. He is planning for his mother to return to Hargeysa within the next few years. He also hopes to return to Somalia in five to six years and use his education to bring about transformation. "I would love to see a Somalia that is different from the way it is," he states.

At the end of Abdulaahi's interview, he began asking me about organizations that would help him resettle in North America. I made a few suggestions as to people he might speak with, when none were to his satisfaction, he asked, "Do you know Oprah?" To my surprise, out of all the people I had interviewed, the one who had the least contact with aid organizations was the person who still sought the greatest amount of help. His life has

been shaped by poverty and war, and he has worked for everything he and his family has, but still he seems to feel completely disempowered to shape his future. Instead going to a legal aid clinic that can explain his rights to him, Abdulaahi hopes for large amounts of charity. This man is a sharp contrast to those who spent years in refugee camps yet have still managed to better their lives in South Africa, either through business or putting themselves through school. It may not be necessarily true that relief work contributes to helplessness and victimhood. It may be that the people who arrive in refugee camps or on the doorsteps of NGOs have rarely had agency over their lives. They are not a random sample. Mostly they are there because they are impoverished and displaced, they have lack the means to take the necessarily control over their future, but when they are presented with these resources, they do not know what to do.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 4

“We have got a lot a lot of problems.” The Somalis’ Experience of South Africa

At the end of 2006, there were about 6,313 Somali refugees in South Africa and 17,196 asylum seekers.¹ There were 3,024 new Somalis applying for asylum permits, the sixth highest national group.² 77% of non-nationals in South Africa are male, which is consistent with the high ratio of males to females among Somalis.³ The average age of refugees is 31, though Somalis tend to be older. However, the sample in this project is contradictory to that statistic. The local population of Somali refugees is very diverse in terms of clan, class, and nearly every other characteristic. They reside all over the greater Cape Town area, but are concentrated in the Bellville area to the north of the city, Wynberg in the southern suburbs and the township of Masiphumelele. Most run small *spaza* (groceries and dry goods) shops in the townships, but some are hawkers on street or taxi drivers, a precious few have managed to gain formal employment or attend the local universities.

Everyone who has come to South Africa has done so in search of a better life. Although their expectations differed to some extent, for either great wealth, support from the government, or free education, they all amount to the same thing. And because most expectations were unrealistic, they have not been met. Instead, reality has been the opposite. They do not receive any support from the government and are barely able to access the rights guaranteed to them by law. For the majority, life is a daily struggle with poverty. They complain of being called “Makwerekwere”⁴ and being discriminated against by the police, local shop owners, the justice system, and the public. However,

¹ Mail and Guardian, “Somalis live in fear in South Africa,” Sumayya Ismail, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 October 2006, www.mg.co.za.

² “Protecting Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Africa”, Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, Johannesburg: Kutlwanong Democracy Center, 2007, pg. 13.

³ “Protecting Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Africa”, 4.

⁴ Makwerekwere refers to a black person who does not speak the local South African language and who comes from a culturally and economically backward country. From Nyamnjoh, F., *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*, Dakar: Codesria Book, 2006, pg. 41.

some are still pleased with their decision, despite that their expectations differ so from reality.

“I had two different assumptions, number one in terms of financial, I thought I was going to get bursaries, that is what I heard, if I study, I will be financially better, but it wasn't totally true.” (Ali)

“The only thing we used to hear...life was much better in South Africa than in Somalia. According to the living, it was [is] different, totally much different, but the only things that started early this year was the risk that came to Somalians.” (Muqtaar)

“In fact, when I was coming I thought if I come to South Africa, I will get rich and I will be this and I will be that. However, it was better than Kenya. It was, and it is much better.” (Mohammed H.)

Others have been so severely disappointed by life in South Africa that they regret coming, but now lack the means to travel and do not have anywhere else to go.

“Yeah, because, you know, I was, everybody, what he is thinking, I was thinking, our, like like, my family now, the way they are thinking I am in South Africa, like they are thinking that I am working with, you know, with a company or, you know, feeding them. But they don't know how I am living. They don't know I'm living a bad, or living, you know, because they think I am working with a companies, ah, you know, I have a better life, you know. But this is not. The way myself, I was thinking, was that I would work for like, you know, few hours and get paid, something like that, but it is difference. It is too hard.” (Abdulaahi)

“For me, first I was a student in another university. I was doing medical. Then I could not continue because of national conflict. Then another guy, this guy that I met, then he told me that he passed South Africa. He told me education is free, life is good, and he gave me advice to come here and you know, I had to take it...And when I came here, honestly, I am not lying, when I came out of the train, it took me I think 21 days to come here, when I come out of the train I saw people sleeping on the train [in the station]. I was shocked, you know. The next thing I do, I started also sleeping on the train. Life is not the way I was expecting. I thought maybe I'm going to get a free education. I thought maybe today I'd be having Masters, understand? But I end up becoming a taxi driver. I thought maybe life was so good.” (Hassan)

The Somalis face major obstacles in nearly every key aspect of life; banking, health care, finding accommodation, the justice system and education, not to mention the crime.

Although free health care is available, it often remains inaccessible for refugees. They are often denied access to basic health care or charged fees intended for foreign nationals, not refugees or asylum seekers. They are often made to wait longer than South Africans.

Deka and Ayah describe the problems they face getting their children seen at the local

clinics. They are repeatedly told to come back the following day, even when the child is clearly ill. They claim that when the student nurses want to practice a procedure they choose the foreigners, even if they are not next in line. Ayah's daughter has large scar on her hip, which is from a vaccination that was performed poorly. Zubaida, as a dentistry student spends a lot of time in the hospitals and has become an ear for other women who are struggling with the health care system. Because most of the Somali women don't speak English, men must act as translators for them and their doctors, sometimes a man other than their husband if he also does not speak English. This is extremely awkward in the patriarchal Muslim culture. The women become afraid to go to the doctor because they can't explain their own problems and are uncomfortable having the men translate. According to Zubaida, the medical staff is less than helpful, blaming the Somalis for their inability to speak English and making them feel like they do not have a right to be there. The situation is particularly bad when it comes to having children and delivery as the circumstances are so personal. Zubaida referenced one woman who refused to have any more children in this country. A report from Wits University describes a refugee woman giving birth on the pavement outside the hospital because her being in labor was not considered an emergency. The baby died a week later.⁵ The realities of health care system only serve to justify the fears of the Somali women.

Interestingly, when asked about the health care system in South Africa, all the Somali men answered simply that it was free and easy to access. None of them had any complaints. Perhaps because the women are the ones that generally have the responsibility for taking the children to the clinic that they experience more difficulties. Also, men do not face the same cultural limitations that the women do when it comes to their bodies. They can easily speak with a male doctor without social and religious constraints.

⁵ Landau, L., K. Ramjathan-Keogh and G. Singh, "Xenophobia in South Africa and problems related to it" Forced Migration Working Paper Series #13, Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, January 2005, pg. 28.

Many Somalis came to South Africa with the hopes of being able to study, but very few have actually succeeded.⁶ Not only does the government not grant them bursaries, but also they must work simply to feed themselves, with nothing left over for schooling. Ali and Abdifatah were lucky enough to be able to find work to put themselves through school, but both are often unable to pay their tuition on time. Neither of them have families to support. The Somali community pooled money together to help with Zubaida's fees but she also worked during the holidays. Now she receives a bursary from the United Nations. Shukri's parents are able to pay for her to attend the university. These four are in the definite minority. But even at on the university campuses, they do not necessarily feel comfortable.

“Um, on campus, I believe the first day I walked into a class and everybody turned around, I was like ‘ok, what is going on here?’ And I definitely got the impression of ‘what is she doing here?’ you know, ‘is she lost or something?’ But I knew I was there for a reason and I had to prove them wrong.” (Zubaida)

Many refugee families cannot even afford to send their children to school, continuing the cycle of poverty and lack of education. By law, no child may be excluded from schooling because of their inability to pay fees, but this rule is regularly ignored by schools and refugees have no knowledge of the fact they are being exploited.⁷ In the National Baseline Refugee survey, only one third of the refugees interviewed knew about the system of school fee exemptions and the same fraction had been refused entry to a school because they can't pay or the school is full or doesn't accept refugee status documents.⁸ Even if the school adheres to legal standards, the parents are often unable to cover the costs of books, transport and uniforms and the children still stay home. 70% percent of Somali children living in Johannesburg do not attend school.⁹

Many people cite being harassed by the police. Police often refuse to recognize the rights of foreigners or accept their refugee identity documents. There have even been reports of police officials confiscating or destroying papers to justify arrest. Knowing the refugees

⁶ Information obtained from interviews.

⁷ “Protecting Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Africa”, 40.

⁸ National Refugee Baseline Survey, Community Agency for Social Enquiry, November 2003, 12.

⁹ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 27.

often carry a lot of cash, they are apt to elicit bribes from the person apprehended.¹⁰

Those that drive taxis claim that they are ticketed unfairly and with higher fines than the local drivers. Hassan has a friend who was given a R5000 traffic ticket, when he could not pay it he was imprisoned with bail set at R16000. He is still in jail. Deka tells of being stopped on the street and made to lie down on the side of the road. She was made to stay there for no apparent reason and when other policemen came along the original group claimed that they had found her sleeping there and then they left her alone. Beyond the active harassment, there is the problem of neglect, when crimes are reported the police will take hours to arrive.¹¹

Partially due to South Africa's extraordinarily high unemployment rate, refugees experience extreme difficulties finding formal, secure employment. Abdifatah defines being a refugee as

“a blockage from accessing opportunities. The minute you are labeled as a refugee, your potential for accessing open opportunities is absolutely zero. Companies are more likely to hire anyone else over a refugee.”

This, coming from someone about to begin his PhD at a highly respected university. Besides the national unemployment rate, refugee identity documents are not widely accepted by employers. They do not believe that refugees have the right to work.¹² Also, as refugees are unable to open bank accounts the usual formal payment system of direct deposit becomes impossible. Although two thirds of asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa have completed matric or a higher level of education, they do not often have proof of such accomplishments as recognized by South African companies.¹³ Discrimination and xenophobia succeed in exacerbating these other obstacles.

Perhaps the largest issue the Somalis face is that of crime and the fear that comes with it. Criminals, it seems, as well as the police have learned to exploit foreigners' vulnerabilities. 72% of foreigners report being victims of crime as opposed to 56% of

¹⁰ Nyamnjoh, F., *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*, Dakar: Codesria Book, 2006, pg. 52.

¹¹ As told by interviewees.

¹² Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 21.

¹³ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 21.

South Africans.¹⁴ All except two individuals in this series of interviews told of their experiences of being robbed and feel in constant danger in the places they stay. A few minutes into her interview, Ayah pulled down the neck of her dress to show me the scars on her shoulder from being stabbed. The first time I visited Deka, her shop was broken into while she was out speaking with me. Just after Nasir moved from Wynberg to open a shop in the township, three men broke into his shop and held his testicles between pliers until he told them where to find the money. He then moved back to the suburbs. However, even there, crime is still a problem. Another man was held at gunpoint in his Wynberg flat while having dinner, “they even took the bread and milk,” he exclaimed.

Although the Somalis certainly have a reason to be fearful, the fact remains that life in the townships is very hard and often dangerous. South Africa’s crime rate is exceptionally high. So without de-legitimizing the Somali’s fears, one must question how much of their complaints about township life are shared by the locals as well. Ayah complains about the cold at night, the lack of electricity, the people walking in the streets, and the crime, but these are issues that define life in township and the majority of its residence battle with them. When asked if he feels safe, Mohammed H. takes a very practical view:

“No. But not because I am, uh, when I’m, when you say ‘are you safe’, in my business areas, when I am in specific areas I feel safer than in other specific areas. Especially when I am in the townships I don’t feel safe. I know other South Africans share this with me, but I get more tense because I am more vulnerable than them. It is not good for other people to come, um, but, now where we are sitting now, I won’t be more, uh, frightened, than they are now. It depends on where you are.”

But he is in the minority. Ali is the other exception. Although he lives in a dangerous area in the Cape Flats, his established position as a teacher in his community and his close relationship with his students provides a level comfort and even protection. Even Abdifatah does not feel comfortable at UCT. Most people claim to feel in danger at all times and prefer to be around other Somalis. Ali and Mohammed H. are different perhaps because they have made an effort to invest in the community that they live in, which South Africans have recognized and responded to in a positive manner. While Somalis

¹⁴ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 10.

are generally viewed by other South Africans trying to make a living in the township as purely competition, Ali and Mohammed H. have become visibly contributing members of their communities, Ali as a teacher and Mohammed as leading businessman who works with people from all different backgrounds. In reciprocation they have been accepted and gain some measure of protection as a result. Ali strongly believes that if Somalis make more of an effort to assimilate into South African society, their lives will improve. The isolated communal identity that so many seek, though understandable, does perhaps not serve the Somali's cause for safety and fair treatment.

When asked what the good things are about South Africa, people's responses vary. Ayah and Deka both state that they cannot think of anything good about South Africa. Those that are being educated here are very grateful for that opportunity.

“The biggest thing I appreciate is the education system which is very nice. I mean, if you are lucky enough to get a chance to go into it, that I appreciate. And life in general, it's a very nice life to live in, if only you can afford to live in it, its quite expensive though.”
(Zubaida)

Mohammed H. talks about the hospitality of the South Africans, but he is an exception. Mohammed L. recognizes the value of the South African constitution, but also feels that it does not really pertain to him.

But for the most part, Somalis cannot access the benefits of the “nice life” to which Zubaida refers. Instead, they feel trapped, helpless to better their current circumstances. They are still suffering the loss of their homeland, but have not been able to improve their lives drastically in South Africa.

“Still they are fighting also. If I stay here also I don't have right life. I don't know even if I'm going to die tomorrow, what, I don't know. Still I don't have right life. I got a problem there. I got it here also. I don't know where I am going to go.”

“The police don't want to see us, the Home Affairs is a mess, the public... understand? The justice system. So we don't know what we going to do. I think all the Somalians must go commit suicide. (laughs)”

Perhaps the most distressing part of the Somalis' present situation in South Africa is the contrast between their hopes and reality and the similarities between the past and present.

Refugees do not just spontaneously decide to leave their homes, but flee out of fear. They run in search of security, both physical and financial. They go in search of work in order to provide for their families both in their countries of refuge and those that remain behind. Because the 'resolution' of displacement takes longer than anticipated by the original drafters of the refugee regime, the displaced find themselves in a place of extended limbo.¹⁵ Unfortunately, in present day Cape Town they still live in fear and are unable to make a sufficient living. As Zubaida points out those who get shot here "may as well have stayed home."

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¹⁵ Van Hear, N., "From 'Durable Solutions' to 'Transnational Relations': Home and exile Among Refugee Diasporas," in *Beyond Home and Exile: Making Sense of Lives on the Move*. Occasional Paper No. 23, Frederiksen and Sorensen (eds.) International Development Studies, Roskilde University, 2002, pg. 234.

Chapter 5

Becoming a Refugee

The Process of Remembering

Culture supplies inner guidelines, a basis by which we live our lives. However, culture is as dynamic as history: people constantly reconstruct their cultures as they formulate their memories, creating a reciprocal relationship. Individuals interpret and remember life experiences within the context of their culture, yet their very definition of that culture is defined by these same memories.¹ Each new experience is interpreted using memories of previous events and remembered through dialogue with others within social groups². Of course this is a generalization as not everyone within a group remembers the same events of with the same intensity and there is always some conflict or dissent. However, the need for an 'affective community' frequently ensures that individuals publicly remember primarily those memories that are in harmony with others.³ Memories of individuals become merged within group or collective memory. Shared memory thus functions as a mechanism that unites groups and cements identity.⁴

As the Somalis live in a clan structured society, their culture is based more on the collective than the individual. Although original clan functions and boundaries may have been lost, many people still strongly identify with their clan.⁵ This high degree of mutuality within the Somali culture results in a stronger likelihood that the Somalis interviewed here will tell their stories as part of this collective memory, with their stories tailored to conform to their social norms, rather than simply their individual histories.

¹ Green, Anna. "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates" in *Oral History*, vol. 32 no. 2, 2004, pg. 36.

² Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory,'" 38.

³ Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory,'" 38.

⁴ Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory,'" 38.

⁵ Afrax, M., "The Mirror of Culture: Somali Dissolution Seen Through Oral Expression," In Ahmed I. Samatar, ed., *The Somali Challenge: from catastrophe to renewal?* Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994, pg. 235

The voicing of a critical view of one's own experience against the prevailing interpretation of history runs against both internal and external boundaries. It requires a greater emotional investment to admit to oneself that things are wrong than it takes to go along with conventional truths.⁶ Therefore the more widely accepted history may not be true for each individual, but people may seek to conform to it in spite of their objections. Personal experience both reinforces and limits the collective view of history. It can affirm the usefulness and success of one's life if the given story is a positive one, but can also force them to come to terms with unfulfilled goals, discontent and seeming lack of meaning.⁷ But the collective nature of the accepted history keeps this contradiction from being discussed in the open. The experiences of the Somalis result in prioritizing one aspect of their identity over another; that of the nation, clan, and refugee. As they continue to process their memories in the context of their culture, the dialogue between collective memory and identity continues. Each memory is interpreted within that context and thus strengthens an individual's ties to a collective memory and group identity. In turn, this need to fit into the collective then censors the content of the interviews. People will be likely to leave out stories that relate to issues that are taboo within Somali culture norms, issues that are gender specific for example.

The process of remembering is equally as important to what is being shared. How one remembers speaks to the individual's current situation and struggles, but also to the amount of trust they feel towards the audience. It is the silences, the gaps in their stories that they choose not share, which often tell the most. Much of the current refugee literature⁸ describes the difficulties both UNHCR and other immigrations authorities face when it comes to conducting interviews to grant status or resettlement. Their job is to record the facts, to look for inconsistencies that may be covering up lies and to determine who actually has "a well-founded fear of persecution" extreme enough that they cannot return. In the bureaucratic interview, a distinction is made between a 'case' and a 'story'.⁹

⁶ Portelli, A. "Uchronic Dreams." In *The Myths We Live By*, R. Samuel and P. Thompson, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1990, pg. 151.

⁷ Portelli, "Uchronic Dreams," 155.

⁸ Moorehead, Caroline. *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees*. New York: Picador, 2006.

⁹ Zetter, R., "Labeling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity" in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991, pg. 44.

Holes in refugee testimonies supposedly indicate a lack of credibility, signs that the person is perhaps an economic migrant as opposed to an asylum-seeker, and will result in the denial of the sought after status. In reality, it is not that the person is lying, but their very story, and therefore identity, becomes a survival strategy and they must choose which aspect to present at that point in time. They are still trying to process the traumatic experiences that they have undergone, to come to terms with their memories of war, the loss of their families. Sometimes the grief and loss, even shame, is too much to describe to a stranger, and is then made even harder because of the language barrier.

The oral history method, as opposed to bureaucratic interviews, attempts to make interviews as personal as possible, to create a sense of trust from the beginning. The interviewer should make every effort to empathize with the individual as opposed to passing judgment. Even with these efforts, there are always silences and inconsistencies; the goal is then to validate and evaluate them as part of the research process. In this series of interviews, there were many instances of confusing names of countries one had stayed in; family members being killed or not, overseas or still in Somalia; starting to speak and then quickly retracting; or simply avoiding certain subjects.

The women especially were very reluctant to speak about Somalia. They were anxious to describe in detail the struggles they face in South Africa, but clearly avoided the topic of their past. They were always very grateful to have a chance to talk about their present. While the men would respond to questions about their past and their memories of the war in Somalia, even include some detail, for the most part they remained detached from what they were saying. Abdifatah for example, told several graphic stories about the war in Hargeysa, but always framed them in a very intellectual way, describing the history behind the conflict and military details, even as he shared his personal history.

Ali is the most startling example of these gaps, inconsistencies, and the issues of trust. I had met Ali several times before I interviewed him. During the interview he spoke at length about his family, his home and his studies, and maintained a very open demeanor. At one point he began speaking about the time he had spent in Ethiopia and corrected

himself, saying he had meant Kenya. He said little about his experiences of the war itself, except when I asked specifically at the end. Even then he claimed it had not affected his family in a very meaningful way. About a month later I went back and did a second interview with Ali. This time he told me about being in the midst of Somaliland's secessionist war in the late 1980's, being separated from his family and the time he spent in the refugee camps in Ethiopia, all of which were terrifying and absent from his first interview. Clearly, by the second interview, Ali felt comfortable enough to share the more traumatic stories of his past and illustrates the ways in which the audience has a direct impact on the narrative that an individual chooses to present.

Memories are maintained and processed in complex ways with equally complex results. Each individual's history plays a specific role in their present and future, and how they function in the world. Memories of home and the war impact how they are able to negotiate their present in South Africa and how they view their future. It is also these past experiences that influence an individual's sense of agency over their circumstances. The past is always present, perhaps more for those in exile than for others. Refugees' memories are not simply stories but the process of incorporating those memories is part of negotiating the many layers of their identity. And what they choose to share as well as how their audience decides to listen determines which aspect they will present.¹⁰ Without an understanding a group's history, cultural norms and inner-group dialogue, external actors will be hard pressed to provide a meaningful, encompassing form of assistance.

Memories of Home

Refugees commonly speak of an ideal childhood and happy home in their country of origin. The Somalis of Cape Town are no exception. Every interviewee expresses some sort of longing for life before the war and describes a happy childhood in a beautiful peaceful country. "Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with one's native place. What is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that

¹⁰ Herman, J. *Trauma and Recovery: from domestic abuse to political terror*. London: Pandora, 1994, pg. 8.

loss is inherent in the very existence of both.”¹¹ “Home” then, becomes a point of reference or contrast to the present. It is a familiar environment in which the person has developed a sense of integrity and identity and therefore comes to assume the role of an idealized past which has been lost and now only exists in memory.¹² In these narratives, the individual’s purpose is not to describe the past as it was or even as it was experienced, but to confer to the past experience a certain meaning, which will contribute to the meaning of the challenging, and at times, incomprehensible present.¹³

Ali describes the former Mogadishu as a “peaceful home for everyone.” He tells of a happy childhood. His father was a sheik, a religious position that demands great respect and incurs large amounts of wealth. He was “like a king” says Ali.

Although Shukri left Somalia at the age of five, her vague memories of her home and the beach are filled with nostalgia. She has grown up hearing so many stories about what a wonderful place Mogadishu was, she has essentially inherited this sense of loss for a place she feels she belongs to, although she can barely remember it. “It’s home. It’s that whole thing of ‘home sweet home’; home is always going to be great.” And because everything she has ever heard about her home, this has come to be true.

“What I remember was life was so easy and nice, um, you know, normal life. I used to live a normal life. I go to school, I mean things that people take for granted wherever they are, well granted for some people. Going to school, see cousins, uncles, you know normal work, people that are old enough, you go to work, you know, different life. Yah, I remember that very well.” (Mohammed H.)

“It was, was good, and it was a beautiful city. Like that, it was not the way it is at the the moment. Ah, ah, a big difference between when it was, the city was very good and very beauty and very population of people living in the city and just now it is, it is not like a city now.” (Abdulaahi)

“Mogadishu was the most peaceful city in the world. It had the least crime in the world in 1972... You could rarely see a policeman carrying a gun for God sakes, they didn’t even need

¹¹ Stewart, K. “Nostalgia – A Polemic.” in *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*. George E. Marcus (ed.) Durham: Duke University Press, 1992, pg. 261.

¹² Sorensen, B. R. “The Experience of Displacement: Reconstructing Places and Identities in Sri Lanka” in Olwig and Hastrup eds, *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object* London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 145.

¹³ Field, S., “The Peaceful Past to the Violent Present” in *South Africa in transition: new theoretical perspectives*. David R. Howarth and Aletta J. Norval (eds.), New York: St. Martin’s Press Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998, pg. 76.

it. If he wasn't to arrest you he comes and tells you you are needed in the police station. Somebody who lived in a Somalia like that wouldn't want really to live in the present Somalia or couldn't even explain the difference between that time and now." (Abdifatah)

One can see from the above quotes the themes of Mogadishu as a beautiful, peaceful city, comfortable homes, and secure family lives; a stark contrast to the refugee experience and challenges that Somalis face in South Africa. As desires and hope for a sense of community and security are further eliminated and buried deeper, they emerge later as fantastic ideals of the past. The construction of a mythical homeland is not a fallacy or even entirely a case of imperfect recollection, but rather a creative imagining of a different personal life and collective history in order to make the present more bearable.¹⁴ Mythmaking helps to express and understand the emotions of a traumatic past and present by assigning language and constructing stories in sequential time the fragments of emotional experiences that constitute the refugees memory.¹⁵ By contrasting the desired and longed for world with the existing one, the narrator is allowed to transcend reality and refuse to be satisfied with the present situation.¹⁶ Their most desirable outcome, home, is permitted to remain a possibility.

As long as refugees hold on their identity as displaced people, they maintain the possibility of going home, or if not going home, for a better future with their families.¹⁷ To identify as a foreigner means they have a connection to the place from which they came. Once a person begins to see himself as belonging to a new place and the refugee identity begins to fade, it is a sign that they have lost hope in the chance to return home. Nostalgia not only serves to provide something good to hold on to, but the hope that it could be that good again. Nostalgia and the maintaining of memories help people to live with their current difficulties. Remembrance in essence points to the incompleteness of the present, of the unfilled desires that the individual has lived with in his struggle to

¹⁴ Portelli, "Uchronic Dreams," 145.

¹⁵ Field, "The Peaceful Past to the Violent Present," 79.

¹⁶ Portelli, "Uchronic Dreams," 150.

¹⁷ Malkki, Liisa H., *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pg. 228.

survive. The active process of remembering in the present reflects an unfulfilled desire for community and a shared sense of communal identity.¹⁸

The refugee identity is also in part a survival strategy. As long as the refugee label applies, people are eligible for assistance from organizations or governments. If they present themselves as refugees and all that implies, they can claim residence in a camp, food aid, refugee status, etc. Host governments and refugee assistance programs thus perpetuate the concept of the mythical homeland by prioritizing policies of repatriation. Their goal is to send asylum seekers back to their countries of origin, even if refugees do not wish to return. Despite what has occurred in the interim, they will hold up ‘home’ as the ideal place.¹⁹ Clinging to memories of home and maintaining this sense of displacement, thus serves two purposes; a reminder for a better future and creating an image that is conducive to successful interactions with relief workers and staff. Refugees may choose to present a more vulnerable image as they know it may result in material gain, thus contributing to cycle of the portrayal of the refugee as a helpless victim.

Growing up in the War

These memories of home and family create a drastic contrast with the stories that follow. The majority of the Somalis interviewed in this study, ages 27 to 33, are only just old enough to remember the peaceful version of their nation, meaning that they are old enough that their memories of the war are all the more vivid, yet were still really just children. Mohammed Hirsi’s story bridges the time between peace and the beginnings of the war. This was the turning point for him between the relative safety and security of his childhood and the instability of war and becoming a refugee.

“But I remember one night. I never forget that night. My father was sick and um, he was called to the presidential palace. And he went there, so. In that kind of regime if you say no to whatever you have you get killed for that. So he went in and because of that we share the same name family he was released again, come back home. And he was sick so we worried about his health. And we came out, from the house we lived in had a big yard and the first time I see my father in a military uniform, even though he wasn’t working for the government.

¹⁸ Field, “The Peaceful Past to the Violent Present,” 86.

¹⁹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 242.

And he went in and returned. He came outside, you know. He didn't want to sit with a chair or anything. He sat on the ground, on the floor, and he says...and I remember this, I come running to him, you know playing with him, he said you know, one day this house won't be existing anymore. You won't get, this won't help you. The bricks won't help you. But maybe if you are lucky enough, this plot will, you will find this plot. Just maybe this plot will be useful to you guys when you grow up. You will come...but I don't think there will be existence of this, you know. So at the time we were thinking maybe he was getting crazy or something, but I realized what he meant, you know." (Mohammed H.)

Shortly after Mohammed's father would have made this speech to his family, Somalia split along clan lines. Beginning in 1991, the warlords fought to control Mogadishu, turning the city into a battleground.

"I remember sometimes when the fighting was going on in our country I was just with my mother and my father when, you know, if you fear, ah, it was fighting, you have to run away to other side to not ah, where it is not going, ah, fighting in other side. I was remember, I was following my mother and father, all of my family, going that side, it was peace not fighting. When we get there also there was a fight broken again this and we run again on this side, you know." (Abdulaahi)

Deka echoes this theme of blindly running away from the war, fleeing the fighting. There is nothing but fear in her story.

"But the time they start fighting we run. We just run and follow the people who are walking to the street. Even you can't wait for your relative or your father or your mother, no... You can't be afraid. Because you see you are walking, the people walking running, there is a lot of yelling. And a lot of the animals, the animals who eat the people, they eat a lot of people who are running to the street. Just God make us a survive our life." (Deka)

Abdifatah illustrates the dichotomy between being in the midst of a war and still being a child. He was about 14 when the secessionist war began in Somaliland in 1988. The typical childhood activity of climbing trees became intermixed with the violence of the war. He comments later on how the war forced him to become an adult very early, a concept that came up in several interviews, and it is easy to see how.

"We used to go on top of trees and see who actually is behind the wheel in this plane because it comes so low. So when we hear that we used to go on top of the trees, and in fact it was the real, that's when I realized it was the safest site because the explosions take place on the ground and there in Hargeysa there are very tall trees, so if you go on top of the tree you are safer than the person who is down here and in terms of sight as well. The pilot cannot see you because...he cannot imagine there is someone on top of that place. And I still remember one of those days the jet fighter blew up a car just so near by me, and there were people killed and they were all over the place, there was blood and and and dead bodies and things like that, some of them children, some of them...The other day we were getting water from a dam then they realized there were people in that dam and artilleries come like rain. I was also there.

Bodies all over the area. The whole water in that dam could not be used because of the blood all over the place.” (Abdifatah)

Ali was also very young, about 11, when the war came to Hargeysa. He paints a vivid picture of the direct impact the war had on his family at the time. He tells his story calmly adding the last sentence almost as an afterthought. After this event Ali and his family fled to the refugee camps in Ethiopia.

“As we were walking in the streets bullets were going around. My sister and I we missed each other. There was a bullet and we ran in different directions. So I was missing five, from five to seven days. I went with, I was a kid at that time, I went with other people. They actually took good care of me. But my sister went crazy because she was the one who took care here. She was actually, she told me she was even going closer to where the bullets were coming from because she didn’t know which way she was going to, she was looking for me. And also for her daughter, her daughter was with me. She was very very small. So after five to seven days she found us...As we were going out of the city, cause the city that time was under war, actually the airplanes were bombarding people with bombs. They were not discriminating anybody. Everything that moves they were just bombarding. So I was almost killed at that time.” (Ali)

The fact that these individuals can relate these incidents as part of their narratives signifies that they have at least begun to integrate these memories into their identity. They are managing their more traumatic experiences within their present contexts. They are willing to risk the fact that their audience may not respond in the way they wish with the proper validation. The very idea that these experiences have become part of their whole narratives indicates that the concept of ‘refugee’ has become part of their identity. They are able to incorporate their traumatic experiences into their memory. They have given language to the memories and are clearly not trying to block them out. As discussed in Chapter 1, a large component of incorporating refugee identity into one’s personhood is the process of managing those traumatic memories in the present.

The specific combinations of the stable peaceful childhood and the experiences of violence and warfare clearly have a large impact on each individual’s functioning throughout his life. They continue to influence how he or she interacts with the world and renegotiates his or her identity in South Africa, both of which impact the amount of empowerment and agency they feel in their lives and the way each individual responds to humanitarian assistance. These issues will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

Multiple Identities

Without exception, spatial dislocation includes widespread change and disruption of social structures and environment, lack of access to resources and information. People who surrounded and supported an individual at home are no longer present. Their previous social status and identity is gone. Those who have undergone forced displacement must re-negotiate their identity as a refugee in a new country, the losses they have suffered and find away to incorporate this new aspect into their personhood as well as attempt to integrate into the new society. How each person attempts to accomplish this is influenced by their personal life histories beginning from birth. Each individual constructs an identity or 'life strategy' beginning from childhood which will inform how they negotiate each decision, structure, and situation they encounter throughout their lives.²⁰ Life strategies and identities do not develop evenly over time but are shaped by class, family background, education, and in the case of the Somalis, also the clan system and encounters with violence. These life strategies are dependent upon the possibilities open to the individual as determined by the material world.²¹ Choices and opportunities are limited according to the basics of each person's identity such as gender and the rules of Islam.

For the Somalis of Cape Town, their collective identity can be characterized into three dimensions; that of the Somali national, their clan, and refugee identity. Which aspect of his or her identity an individual chooses to present to whom, or relates to most strongly depends on how their life strategy has developed, as well as their current situation in South Africa. The combination of clan, national, and refugee is infinitely complex, especially when combined with the additional component of how (and if) one attempts to integrate into South African society. While some hold strongly to their clan, others deny it completely, while still embracing their national identity. However, the meaning of being a Somali also differs between those who still feel ties to the country itself and others who simply remain attached to the culture and its people. For many Somalis there

²⁰ Bozzoli, B., *Women of Phokeng*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991, pg. 236.

²¹ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, 236.

is a constant tension between loyalty to their clan and to their nation, as well as between holding on to where they came from and integrating into their country of refuge. In terms of the refugee identity, there is no variation from the negative.

Personal identity is a complex sense of being or belonging, not derived from one local structure, but actively and strategically constructed in relation to multiple spaces for multiple purposes.²² With the current conditions of xenophobia in South Africa, many refugees must constantly defend their right to be here. This defensive position influences the way in which one tells his narrative and to whom he tells it. A refugee, especially in South Africa, cannot help but immediately become vulnerable to certain labels, certain prejudices, which largely do not agree with their self- ascribed identity. The refugee's story and identity is in danger of being publicly rejected or questioned, or at the very least, ignored. However, the isolation that comes with being the object of public ignorance can also be traumatizing. As a result, many refugees remain within a community of their own nationality, making little effort to integrate into society at large. In the case of the Somalis, the clan linkages continue to hold some historical significance, but it is complicated, and often diluted, by the diaspora experience and the trauma of war, which nurture a heightened sense of group identity and political consciousness.

Integration vs. National Identity

Integration is not necessarily the responsibility of one group or the other (the locals or refugees), as foreigners typically remain close to their own community if possible. Relationships with local people remain superficial, based on limited contact and mutual stereotypes. Both sides normally have low expectations as to the benefits of forming a relationship.²³ If the refugees remain cut off from the native South Africans and surrounded by each other, they will be less vulnerable to their criticism and the risk of violence. All of this division is apparent in the refugee identity.

²² Sorensen, *The Experience of Displacement*, 146.

²³ Knudsen, John Chr. "When Trust is on Trial: Negotiating Refugee Narratives" in *Mistrusting Refugees*, Daniel and Knudsen eds., California: University of California Press, 1995, pg. 24.

Memories of violence form part of an individual's life story but also are a piece of the wider collective memory of the conflict which informs community identity and a shared history.²⁴ To hold traumatic reactions in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim.²⁵ Refugees lack this support from society at large, they primarily seek support from each other, which serves to both grow and insulate this community identity. Resistance to integrating into South African society is central to a collective identity based on a lost homeland.²⁶

For those who are actively interested in integration, there is a more flexible approach to identity, fraught with contradictions, in an attempt to counteract the labels and stereotypes that come with their situation. For fear of attracting negative attention, they adopt a more cosmopolitan view, focused on the future instead of their history.²⁷ The identity that they first put forward is not necessarily that of a foreigner or a refugee, instead the flexible ethnic identity acts as a camouflage in an attempt to become a member of a more cosmopolitan culture.²⁸ Upon speaking with several members of the local Somali community, they agree that one of the best aspects of living in South Africa is the diversity of the national population. The variance in race and religion makes it a bit easier for them to blend it and cultivate this concept of a "citizen of the world". At the same time, in terms of social relationships, they remain closely linked to rest of the Somali community in Cape Town. Their inescapable refugee identity and experience of exile is a constant underlying theme in their narrative and undermines this attempt to integrate into their new society.

"That is where you are born and where your family, your blood, but in this time I don't feel so. You are Ethiopian, you are what, you must accept that you are from the world, not in something, your country where you come from, because these people, because these people also your brothers, this nation are also other one's nation, so I don't believe

²⁴ Hamilton, Carrie. "Memories of Violence in Interviews with Basque Nationalist Women," In *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory*, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pg. 120.

²⁵ Herman, J. *Trauma and Recovery: from domestic abuse to political terror*. London: Pandora, 1994, 9.

²⁶ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 230.

²⁷ Brinkman, Inge. "Violence, Exile and Ethnicity: Nyemba Refugees in Kaisosi and Kehemu (Rundu, Namibia)", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25, 3 (Sept. 1999), 421.

²⁸ Brinkman, "Violence, Exile and Ethnicity", 422.

that...means nothing for me really. I believe myself that to live with different nations like a family, can call this land my place.” (Mohammed L.)

“I am one of these people who believe Africa, the regardless of the, the border is my country.”(Mohammed H.)

“I don’t have borders. I go with everyone. I don’t segregate people.”(Ali)

A focus on the future, taking care of one’s family, and creating better opportunities for oneself take precedence in the interviews of those who take on this more cosmopolitan identity. However, it is not that they deny their national identity. “Even if we are in South Africa, whatever, America, whatever, we still have that identity,” states Mohammed H. But because of their current circumstances, it may not be the one they wish to primarily present.

Despite these efforts and internal negotiations, the Somalis are bound by their self-identification as foreigners. They do not have all the opportunities of a local for work, housing, and a sense of belonging and security, which comes up repeatedly in the interviews, as does a sense of uncertainty about the future. Even if it is never stated directly, it becomes evident in numerous references to insecurities, challenges and a desire to be on equal terms with the local South Africans. Even as they attempt to shed a strict national identity, they all know that they, and most likely their children, will always be foreigners in South Africa.

Somali National vs. Clan Identity

Refugees tend to amend and re-interpret their ethnic identity as they respond to a new sociopolitical environment.²⁹ Groups of those having been displaced come to perceive themselves as social groups with collective identities that are creations mediated by their prior history and their current situation. They creatively apply their old social identity

²⁹ Markowitz, Fran. “Responding to Events from Afar: Soviet Jewish Refugees Reassess their Identity” in *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*, L. Camino and R. Krulfeld, eds., Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1994, pg. 57.

rules to new circumstances.³⁰ They determine ways to integrate past ethnic relations and recent, often traumatic experiences of fleeing their homeland, as well as coping with forces that impinge upon ways to reconstitute identity.³¹

Among the local Somali population, there are two distinct trends in the way that they negotiate between their clan and nationality. The first group all belong to the Darod or the Somali Bantu clans and remain deeply attached to that aspect of their identity. The nature of the conflict and the social circumstances of this group result in a strong attachment to this smaller social unit as opposed to the country as a whole. Ayah states, “they kill us our tribes. They don’t want to even see us. Even now we are very scared of this government, they don’t give us even one piece.” Although they still identify as Somalis, the national identity has lost significance because they cannot go back. Their identity lies more with the Somali culture and the people than the country itself. All of those in this category that belong to the Darod clan are living in the townships. The Somali Bantu tend to congregate in Wynburg working as street hawkers or taxi drivers. Both groups live in poverty and their daily lives remain incredibly difficult.

The second group belongs to either the Hawiye or Isaq (of northern Somalia) clan. They have distanced themselves from the concept of their clan, some going as far as rejecting it completely.

“Yes, it is important to me to be part of my clan, or actually my tribe, not because they are...They are important to me in that I belong to them and I’m a member of them, but most of the times I don’t agree with the bad things they undertake. I don’t discriminate also against other tribes. I believe everybody should live together in harmony and peace.”

Although Ali does place some value on belonging to his tribe it is not his primary identity. Like the others in this group he remains strongly attached to his national identity as a Somali and wishes to return to his country. The focus for all of those in this category lies with their nationality as the most important part of their identity. “Wherever I go, I’ll still

³⁰ Earle, Duncan M. “Constructions of Refugee Ethnic Identity: Guatemalan Mayas in Mexico and South Florida” in *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*, L. Camino and R. Krulfeld, eds., Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1994, pg. 207.

³¹ Earle, “Constructions of Refugee Ethnic Identity”, 210.

be Somali,” is repeated in several different forms throughout the interviews. The people in this category are all university students.

There are a number of factors that contribute the different ways in which the two groups negotiate their identity. To begin with, both the Darods and Somalis Bantus have been under the greatest threat in the last two decades. In fact, the Bantu clan is considered a minority group and has been marginalized throughout history. Under Barre they were frequently forced into military rule, although they have never had any national political voice, because of their presence in the military they were often associated with the government, which only drew more hatred.³² Their farms are taken by force and they are pushed off their land. Bantus are excluded from schools beyond the primary level.³³ However, this ethnic group remains loyal to their heritage and proud to be Bantu. For many Somalis, the collective structure of the clan based society produced a sense of agency during the war for people who would otherwise have felt powerless. Being a part of the clan allowed them to feel part of an institution with some measure of control.

On a similar note, although the war placed everyone in danger and the other clans were in more danger under Barre’s regime, it is the Darods that have faced the most recent persecution. After Barre was ousted from power in 1991, the other powerful clans took revenge for Barre’s cruel dictatorship on anyone who carried the Darod name. Muqtaar explains,

“The two tribes were hunting each other. At night there was people coming to the house and knocking and asking if there was a man in the house or they kill the man and the rape the womans. They don’t care if she is pregnant, even if she is underage, they don’t care they just come and rape you because of the tribe that you are from.”

These memories are much more recent and therefore less likely to have been processed and incorporated into their life stories. In the same way, their lives continue to be a daily struggle. They face xenophobia from the local South Africans that often takes on a violent form. They are always afraid of being robbed. Supporting and caring for their

³² Besteman, C., “Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: “The Dissolution of the Somali Nation-State,” in *Americna Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 3, (Aug 1996), pg. 584.

³³ Group interview

families within the constraints of poverty and their refugee status is extremely difficult. Their spaza shops or street stalls are open from six in the morning until ten at night and only bring in a limited amount of money, but they have no other means of making a living. Nearly everyone in this group has young children to support, not to mention that they all continue to send money back to their families in Somalia and Kenya. Their trauma hasn't necessarily subsided, giving them space to process what has happened. Also, they continue to seek support primarily from others in their clans, creating a cycle of insulation and continuing to solidify this strong clan identity.

A continuing sense of perceived discrimination promotes a strong sense of ethnic identity and common fate.³⁴ Their narrow ethnic identity may be a coping mechanism in that commitment to ethnic relationships and having a salient ethnic identity buffers the stresses of discrimination, poverty and exile by preventing negative stereotypes from contaminating one's concept of self.³⁵ By prioritizing their tribal identity, this group of Somalis creates a stronger sense of belonging that serves as protection from the difficulties they face in the Cape Town townships. However, it also intensifies their isolation by emphasizing their differences and minority status.

Their clan identity takes obvious precedence over their national identity. Although they describe being Somali as important, or even being proud of it, their nationality does not elicit the same sort of emotion that their clan does. Ayah states, "It is the way I am born, I don't want to change it. It is my country, my people."

The second group of people take an inverse view; placing their nationality above their clan, even going as far as rejecting their clan. There are many different reasons this may be the case, but because Barre fell from power in 1991, the absolute control of the Darod clan, and with it the amount of danger to the other clans decreased. It has been over a decade since the other clans were in danger specifically because of their name. Also, they

³⁴ Sears, D., M. Fu, P. J. Henry, and K. Bui, "The Origins and Persistence of Ethnic Identity among the 'New Immigrant' Groups," in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (December 2003) pg. 419.

³⁵ Mossakowski, K. N., "Coping with Perceived Discrimination: Does Ethnic Identity Protect Mental Health?", *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 44, 3 (Sept. 2003), pg. 319.

all are in the university environment, giving them access to people from a large variety of backgrounds and broader view of society. Their financial issues are less as are their family responsibilities. More importantly, they do not encounter xenophobia and the threat of violence to the extent that those in the township do. Their trauma is not ongoing, perhaps allowing them to relax the stringent boundaries of the clan identity and reach out to others, which again, influences the narrative that they present. They are able to distance themselves from their memories of the war in Somalia and integrate them in a constructive manner. Abdifatah dismisses the importance of clan-ism in general as a manipulation by those in charge used to promote their own interest, saying the clan system has much less to do with the wars than most scholars argue. Shukri, whose parents come from the opposing Hawiye and Darod tribes, has an obvious reason to discard clan boundaries, but her parentage is not her given rationale.

“I hate, I’m really sensitive about the whole tribal issue, like I don’t like being asked what tribe I am and since that is one of the norms of conversation with them and they just won’t let go and then they’ll base, most of them, I’m not saying everybody, but the ones I have come across, its not just Cape Town, it’s everywhere else, but they just decide whether or not to be nice to you because of what tribe you are. And I never, I really want to avoid that”

And also:

“It’s the fact that I know a lot of people died, my uncle died as a result, killed by his own neighbors whose house he was looking after, and its really unnecessary...thousands of people died since 1990 and even beyond that, just because of your identity and I find that very disgusting to be honest.”

Zubaida, a third year student at the University of the Western Cape is indifferent to her Hawiye background. “It doesn’t matter to me. I believe, first of all, I am Muslim, so every other Muslim is a brother and a sister to me. Secondly, really really, if there is a necessity for somebody knowing where I come from, I am a Somalian and that will be it for me, full stop.”

Both Shukri and Zubaida, as well as Ali and Abdifatah, two other university students, strongly identify as Somalis. “Somalis are Somali wherever they are,” states Ali.

“Even though I never lived at home and I never really grew up in the community,” says Shukri who left Mogadishu at the age of five, “I will always be Somali.” Zubaida’s thoughts are similar.

“I couldn’t help being a Somalian, in a way I am very much blessed to be a Somalian. So in general I think I am thankful that I am Somalian in whatever thing is happening now there is a reason for it and yeah, one day, one time, the world might be a better place for every Somalian.”

Abdifatah, who spends all his spare time among the Somali community of Bellville, the area with the largest Somali population and about half an hour’s drive from his residence, explains his view:

“You’ve got to be. They say you don’t choose your neighbors, but more pragmatic way of saying you don’t choose something is maybe you don’t choose your identity. You will always remain Somali.”

As the first group chooses to focus on their clan as the main component of their identity, they give greater importance to the people of Somalia instead of valuing the country as its own entity, a nation and a space. They tend to socialize mostly with others from their own clan. Their sense of belonging often lies more with family overseas, a sister in Sweden or brothers in Los Angeles, than it does in Somalia. Finding both social and financial security with their relatives holds more appeal than returning to Somalia.

The second group places much higher value on Somalia as a nation. The country is still their home. They have already achieved a higher level of security and financial stability. They still have family in Somalia or plan to reunite with them there. They maintain a sense of nationalism that the first group lacks because of the priority they give to their clan.

The Refugee Identity

Despite their different interpretations of their clan and national identity, all those interviewed express the same negative feelings towards their exile. A sense of loss and grief runs through their stories. The refugee label is a difficult one to escape. “For an

exile, the habitual place and status of a person is lost. The fortunate ones are looked upon with suspicion, and envy becomes the profession of those who have no profession except watching others... The calm of the place of exile and its wished-for safety is never completely realized.”³⁶ The ideal country that the Somalis envisioned South Africa to be, clearly does not exist and they remain stuck between their real homes and this place in which they have settled.

“A refugee is to me is someone who just can’t go home because of the conflict there and because of persecution and such things and I feel like I can’t go home, I’m not able to go home and I really want to go home.” (Shukri)

“Here I am facing a problem. I don’t have security. You don’t have everything that matters to you close by. You are far from your family. It is very lonely to be a refugee.” (Ali)

“I’m not in my country and I can’t be free.” (Ayah)

“A blockage from accessing opportunities. The minute you are labeled as a refugee, your potential for accessing open opportunities is absolutely zero.” (Abdifatah)

“It is not something that people choose to be. It is a fate. Fate takes people wherever it is. It’s not an easy thing. It is bad luck to be a refugee, but, it depends how you make it out. If you feel down and you cry and you say you are a refugee and this and that, then you will be dead. If you take your head up and you look at the positive sides that you still have maybe, you know, maybe that you are in a good place now, that your child can study maybe, you have a roof over your head maybe, you are healthy and you are young maybe, you are, you know, its typical you in that country, at that time maybe, yeah. But to be a refugee...” (Mohammed H.)

Without exception, dislocation includes widespread change and disruption of social structures and environment, lack of access to resources and information. People who surrounded and supported an individual at home are no longer present. Their previous social status and identity is gone. According to Rose, an American academic specializing in refugee studies, the most frequently voiced emotion among refugees is that of loneliness.³⁷ “People have forgotten a very simple truth: no one wants to be a refugee.

³⁶ Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 256.

³⁷ Rose, P., “Tempest-tost: Exile, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Rescue” in *Sociological Forum*, Vol 8, No. 1, (March 1993), pg. 9.

Exile is a terrifying, lonely, confusing experience.”³⁸ And for Somalis especially, the possibility of their exile ending and returning to their homes remains very distant.

Groups of those who have been displaced come to perceive themselves as social groups with collective identities that are creations mediated by their prior history and their current situation. They creatively apply their old social identity rules to new circumstances.³⁹ They determine ways to integrate past ethnic relations and recent, often traumatic experiences of fleeing their homeland, as well as coping with forces that impinge upon ways to reconstitute identity.⁴⁰ Due to their life experiences and current positions in society, Cape Town’s Somali community embraces different aspects of their identity, some feel more attached to their clan, others to their nationality. However they are united by their experience of being refugees, living away from their homeland and family in a strange country, without access to the opportunities granted to local citizens.

Displacement adds a myriad of complications to one’s identity and the ways in which a narrative is constructed. Forced displacement and the violence and fear that is behind it often leads to disruption of one’s sense of home and belonging, the loss of family or family structures, and a change in lifestyle, all of which are central to one’s construction of identity. In South Africa today, as the fear and lack of stability continues, the Somalis manage their memories and narratives in a way that reflects their individual histories, but perhaps to a larger extent is indicative of their collective identity, as well as being acceptable to their current social circumstances to society at large. However the amount of agency these individuals view themselves as having, both in the present and over their futures, is dependent on the possibilities that have been granted to them since childhood. Their life strategies as informed by their past will continue to impact the amount of initiative they are willing to take to control their lives. But no matter which strategy they utilize to avoid the refugee label and the grief that comes with displacement, it is inescapable.

³⁸ Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, 260.

³⁹ Earle, “Constructions of Refugee Ethnic Identity,” 207.

⁴⁰ Earle, “Constructions of Refugee Ethnic Identity,” 210.

Views of the Future

“I am hopeless.” (Ruqiyo)

“What future? We don’t have a future.” (Hassan)

“Just I survive with them because I don’t have nothing sometimes.” (Deka)

These are the distressing outlooks of the Somali refugees living in Cape Town’s townships. For many, they are “just surviving.” None of them envision a future for themselves or their families in Cape Town. But for the moment, they do not have travel documents, there is little hope of resettlement in a first world country, and they cannot return home.

Furthermore, anthropologist, Liisa Malkki asks, “Can the places these people fled, still serve as their homes?”⁴¹ Many of them had horrific experiences during the war and their flight. Their families are spread all over the world. Even if there is peace, they feel there is little to go back to but terrible memories. Ayah poignantly comments, “To go back to Somalia is risking my life, no one is there for me, no one look after me if I go there...I remember what is going on, in front of me they kill my family.” Deka shares a similar sentiment, “Yah it [to be Somali] is important to us, but there is no peace, even if they tell us they are going to make peace we don’t trust them because the way we run there is too difficult for us...I can’t run again.” Nor do they wish to remain in South Africa. Instead, most look to a more prosperous future elsewhere, in Canada, Europe, or the United States, even Asia.

There are some however, who expressed a desire to return to Somalia if there was peace, including all of those attending university. “I wish to return to Somalia. I wish everything definitely to be better, then I will definitely go back home,” says Zubaida and is echoed by the others. Abdifatah even has plans to move his mother back to Hargeysa (a city in the north, more peaceful than Mogadishu) in the next two years. He is thinking of going himself in three to five years, after he finishes his PhD.

⁴¹ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 242.

“I would very much like to work for something that can bring about a change...contribute to the political transformation as well as a new approach to development...but I would really love to see a Somalia that is different from the way it is.”

Ali seeks to apply all that he learns in his classes on environmental and water science to the development of Somalia. Shukri is planning to spend time in Rwanda, hoping that she can learn about the peace and reconciliation process there as a way to better help Somalia in the future, and besides, “it is close to home”. Those with an education are less dependent on the state and have been empowered so that they see themselves as capable of contributing to their country.

The Somali Bantus also would like the return to Somalia if there is peace, but none of them were optimistic that this would happen. They lie somewhere between the two extremes, willing to go home, but hoping to go overseas. They lack the more empowered idealistic outlook of the university students.

Conclusion

Memory is not a passive historical account but an active process of creating meaning for the present and future. As individuals process their memories within a certain social context they contribute to a larger collective memory, creating a reciprocal relationship between memory and identity. Their histories and former identities in Somalia contribute to the way they manage their memories in the present which in turn contribute to the strategic identities they are constructing for themselves in South Africa. These identities are in a constant state of change as the Somalis move, adopt and reassert their identities according to the historical moment and current space.⁴² The social groups that the Somalis form within South Africa are crucial to understanding the ways in which the community functions as a whole. These conflicting identities are not abstract constructs

⁴² Daley, P., “Population Displacement and the Humanitarian Aid Regime: The experience of refugees in East Africa,” in *Mobile Africa: Changing patterns of movement in Africa and beyond*. De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken (eds.) Leiden: Brill, 2001, pg. 207.

but play out in very real ways as the Somalis try to negotiate their country of refuge and often conflict with the commonly held construction of what it is to be a refugee.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 6

Policies and Organizations as They Relate to Refugees

Whatever experiences they have fled, refugee demeanor and presentation will be shaped by the context in which they find themselves.¹ Those Somalis who have arrived in Cape Town have come from a variety of places and backgrounds, with diverse histories and experiences, all of which influence the ways in which they relate to humanitarian assistance organizations and negotiate the South African government's bureaucracy. The local Somali community has had very different experiences with NGOs. While some were recipients of large scale interventions, others have received no more than a one-time donation of food and clothes. All express gratitude for what they have received, but for many their lives are still desperate and would benefit greatly from more support in South Africa.

As seen in the previous chapter the interactions of the Somali community are quite complicated. The ways in which the Somalis construct their identity for their current social circumstances reflect their histories and also determine the ways they conduct themselves in their new country. There are major differences in how individuals relate to each other, how they are able to build new lives in South Africa, and how they foresee the future. These histories, both individual and collective are a key component of how the Somali refugees conduct themselves in the present and therefore affect how they relate to aid organizations. One must understand how the Somalis assist each other, their culture and religion, the clan system and conflicting identities, as well as the political situation that brought them to South Africa, as they all contribute to the way Somalis interact with external actors.

Refugee's interact with an institutional world of NGOs and governments in which a highly developed framework exists to provide them with assistance. As bureaucratic

¹ Summerfield, D., "Socio-cultural Dimensions of War , Conflict and Displacement," In *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Alastair Ager, ed., New York: Continuum, 1999, pg. 125.

interests are articulated and procedures written, they both are rooted in and support the refugee label.² As refugee populations become objects of policies they are conceived as a client group and defined in ways convenient to that policy, which often includes removing them from their context.³

International Organizations and Conditions in Refugee Camps

Between 1990 and 1991, 400,000 Somalis arrived simultaneously in Kenya, a country that had never had to manage such an influx of refugees.⁴ As Kenya borders on Somalia to the south, it was an obvious first destination for those fleeing Mogadishu. A system of refugee camps was set up in cooperation with the UNHCR and the Kenyan government. Three of the interviewees, Mohammed Hirsi, Deka, and one other man⁵ spent a period of years in these camps. Ali and Abdifatah lived in similar camps just over the Ethiopian border in the late 1980s. Muqtaar spent five years in an internally displaced persons' camp in Kismaayo run by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Their experiences are powerful testimonies to the successes and weaknesses of international agencies. The interviewees speak of the lack of sanitation, overcrowding, inadequate medical care, food shortages and boredom.

These standardized methods of intervention and assistance bring lifesaving supplies of food, water and medical care, but they also promote the perception that refugees are a problematic category of people constituting a burden of dependency. The standard camp system contributes to perception of refugees as a generic mass of people in need of

² Zetter, R., "Labeling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity" in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991, pg. 41.

³ Zetter, "Labeling Refugees," 44.

⁴ Horst, C., *Transnational Nomads: how Somalis cope with refugee life in Dadaab camps of Kenya*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2006, pg. 19.

⁵ This person participated in group interview. From the recording I cannot be sure exactly who was speaking.

assistance. The interest of all involved (the UNHCR, the host government), except the refugees themselves is best served by containing and controlling the refugees.⁶

“There is no bullet [violence] but the life also it was hard... You stay there, you don't go out, you are just like cows. They bring you there in grass. Toilet, everything is there... You want to go to school, you want to study, you can't.”

“It was very difficult because we never experienced such things before. Yah, your family members were not together. Um, the life was harsh. We had been through a lot of problems, such as we didn't have any shelter at that time, it was raining heavily at that time, yeah. I remember one night, um, it was raining very heavily actually. There is this woman, she had a small baby and it was very cold also and I heard the baby passed away during the night time because of the harsh weather. But there was no one who could help anyone. Everybody was struggling with their own... We were lucky actually, later on we get a tent. One of my brothers was quite famous actually and he got it from his friends and we were very happy.” (Ali)

Ali's story speaks to the overall inadequacy of these massive interventions. They were barely given the basic necessities. His comment, “there was no one who could help anyone,” portrays his family, and the woman with the baby, as very isolated and also expresses a feeling of helplessness. The label placed on refugees as generic and helpless that is used in camp scenarios serves to confine people's agency by placing constraints on their attempts to utilize their own strengths.⁷ But for the refugees themselves, their designation as such is instrumental in gaining access to the resources offered.⁸ Policies based on such labels that regard refugees as passive recipients rather than active agents able to make their own decisions and help themselves will greatly reduce the efficiency of any development policy.⁹

The camps are situated in an unsafe area that does not provide an available livelihood.¹⁰ Assistance is insufficient and decreases the longer a person remains in the camp.¹¹ The Somalis are viewed as temporary residents by the Kenyan government and therefore their freedom of movement is severely restricted. As they lack a clear legal status and identity

⁶ Zetter, R., “International Perspectives on Refugee Assistance” In *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Alastair Ager, ed., New York: Continuum, 1999, pg. 74.

⁷ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 16.

⁸ Zetter, “Labeling Refugees,” 53.

⁹ Sorenson, “An Overview: Refugees and Development,” In *African Refugees: Development and Repatriation*, Howard Adelman and John Sorenson, eds., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, pg. 187.

¹⁰ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 80.

¹¹ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 80.

documents, there is not a real legal basis for protecting the refugees¹². The interests of all actors (political, logistical, diplomatic) except the refugees, are best served by containing and controlling refugees.¹³ While there may be discussion by camp administrators of a greater amount of refugee participation, in reality there are few attempts to involve refugees in decision making. Control is maintained by the aid agencies who determine what sort of assistance is needed.¹⁴

Refugees are dependent on rations provided by the international community, but relevant organizations are unable to ensure the distribution of sufficient food. The standard diet is generally lacking in terms of the number of calories and nutrients and there is little variety. Nor does the food reflect the norms of the Somalis' diet. Full rations are only given during the first two years in order to encourage self-sufficiency, a concept that does not correspond with the realities of the camp.¹⁵

“It was really horrible life. Really difficult to remember and think about how it was it. Because there was many days you couldn't get the food and even sometimes even if you get the food you can't even eat it properly because the neighbors are very hungry and you cannot eat a lot in front of them. It was really a lot of difficults.” (Muqtaar)

“They would give you 500 ml, 750 ml oils for a family of six or seven people. Maybe the flour would be 10 kgs but the oil would be less. Um they would give you split peas so you would have to sell some of the flour to maintain the oil and to get the meat and things to have proper you would have to do on your own. No never, no. I wanted to, you know, um, part of why I'm here, what I wanted to, what I wanted to do, is to find who made the decisions for this administration hat the food, who, who, give them the idea that 10 people can live on 750 ml of oil, because it is stupid. Um, but I think maybe that is what they could have, maybe that is what they had to give and they were trying to share with the people, maybe. But if the policy was that 750 was enough I'm sure the person who was doing that for them, was jumped to the wrong conclusions.” (M. Hirsi)

“And food we used to get from the United Nations. But that food was not like the one we used to have, so it was very difficult to adapt that type of food. We had all sorts of diseases and problems. There were no actually sanitation facilities available. No toilets sometimes no beds. Can you imagine how difficult that is?” (Ali)

¹² Horst, *Transnational Nomads* 86.

¹³ Zetter, “International Perspectives,” 74.

¹⁴ Sorenson, “An Overview: Refugees and Development,” 186.

¹⁵ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 82.

The staff in the camps that came in direct contact with the people was largely Somali. The UNHCR and its partner organizations employ refugees in a wide variety of jobs; besides granting some form of employment, it helps to overcome the language barrier. The refugee staff members are paid only a small stipend as an incentive because they do not have work permits.¹⁶ But most families do not have even this to supplement the rations. However, their common language and nationality, as well as their situation as refugees, did not necessarily make the Somali workers sympathetic to everyone else in the camps. Clan loyalties still influenced who got the most food in the internally displaced peoples' camp where Muqtaar stayed. There remains a high level of suspicion between staff and refugees. The method of direct aid delivery in the camps necessitates a hierarchical system of control. In combination with the scarce resources, this generates an atmosphere of distrust.¹⁷

“Sometimes you find good people, sometimes you find bad people, but mostly the food that they distribute, most of the time, they didn't used to distribute it fairly, so it mostly goes to who you know and who your tribe is, and but then how according to the organization they did their best to serve us.” (Muqtaar)

“The staff actually mostly they were not well educated because the were just picked up from the Somalis themselves because the United Nations they don't understand, sometimes they don't have the understanding of the local language, so they picked up those they think that can do something. They were not bad they were doing the best they could, but the problem was the people themselves, people were too much and the food was not enough sometimes then. The queues were very long. People were cheating again also to get more food. They were trying, you know, when you are in the line you get something on you wrist. You're out, then they take off and then come back again.” (Ali)

“The staff was mainly whites and I haven't seen anyone complaining about them to be really realistic. But of course there were communication problems, mainly people in Somaliland don't speak English so one of the problems that they had was mainly white NGOs and United Nations staff had was that they never used to understand each other...there were no conflicts to my knowledge between the workers and...” (Abdifatah)

For the most part, the interviewees accept the assistance that was available and are grateful for it despite the challenges they faced.

“But good thing we got from there, we realized how harsh life can be and we learnt lessons also from there. Actually it gave me, it opened my mind because I was still a kid

¹⁶ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 83.

¹⁷ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 97.

and I was thinking in different ways. I came out of my country and I learned how to survive. I learned how to deal with different people.” (Ali)

“I have learnt all the years to be very grateful to anyone who does something good, regardless of how small it is. Yah, they were trying their best under the circumstances in that area they were try. Maybe it would have been, would have been better ways to do it. Maybe, um, I don’t know what was their mandate or what they were to do but they were trying their best. I think they were trying their best.” (M. Hirsi)

The labeling of refugees by political bodies tends to contribute to identity construction as refugees imagine or perform prescriptive identities at certain moments.¹⁸ In other words, refugees may try and achieve their own objectives by acting out a certain role, i.e., one must appear to be helpless and impoverished to avoid losing out on rations.¹⁹ However, adaptation is determined not solely by survival functions but also by cultural values and history. There is not an automatic change from a culture of independence to dependence, especially when one looks at the number of refugees who survive without any form of assistance.²⁰

“[Humanitarian aid] is based on the principle of providing relief to human suffering: people deserve to be assisted because they are conceptualized as the ‘vulnerable victims’ to extreme circumstances. In the process this type of aid de-historicizes and de-politicizes the situation it addresses as much as development aid does. Relief aid to refugees purports to be based on a moral kind of ‘doing good’ that denies the fact that refugee creation and assistance is always determined by international historical and politico-economic factors.”²¹

The growth in the Somali refugee population and the intractability of the conflict leaves many refugees in a transitional space where, without proper resettlement structures and integration, aspects of life may be suspended indefinitely. Throughout this process new communities and identities are formed. “It should, therefore, be of concern that the workings of the international humanitarian regime serve, inadvertently, to deny human agency to African refugee communities and contribute to an intensification and perpetuation of the refugee condition.”²²

¹⁸ Daley, P., “Population Displacement and the Humanitarian Aid Regime: The experience of refugees in East Africa,” in *Mobile Africa: Changing patterns of movement in Africa and beyond*. De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken (eds.) Leiden: Brill, 2001, pg. 207.

¹⁹ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 93.

²⁰ Zetter, “International Perspectives,” 74.

²¹ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 112.

²² Daley, “Population Displacement,” 210

The National Government's Relationship with Refugees

As discussed in Chapter 3, South Africa's 1998 Refugee Act upholds the principles set forth under international law and guarantees substantial rights to asylum seekers and refugees. Ideally, displacement is temporary, either the refugee should become a resident or be able to return home, however neither of these scenarios are expedient, so policies must also address local integration and resettlement.²³ South African policy is premised on the idea that refugees should have as much freedom as possible, contrary to the camp systems as described previously. Contrary to the written ideals, it is evident from the time a person seeking asylum enters the country that these policies are not being implemented on the ground and hence these freedoms guaranteed by law are not accessible in practice. The bureaucratic label that is used in the cases of mass humanitarian intervention is applicable in this case as well due to the inability of the government to efficiently assist asylum seekers and promote integration. None of the interviewees were remotely satisfied with the Department of Home Affairs or the documentation they receive as refugees.

While some Somalis managed to cross the borders illegally using a smuggler or finding a way through the fence on their own, others went through the official border post. Asylum seekers are not to be prosecuted for illegal entry into the country if they present themselves to the authorities without delay, so entering the country at the official post should not be a problem. However, this method also proved to be highly problematic as the Somalis did not understand their right to claim asylum and were therefore vulnerable to the abuse from the immigration authorities. Border officials are not sufficiently trained in refugee laws and procedures to ensure that migrants are given the opportunity to indicate their intent to claim asylum. Many of them do not realize that the Refugee Act contemplates and permits illegal entry into the country by asylum seekers.²⁴

²³ Van Hear, N., "From 'Durable Solutions' to 'Transnational Relations': Home and Exile Among Refugee Diasporas," in *Beyond Home and Exile: Making Sense of Lives on the Move*. Occasional Paper No. 23, Frederiksen and Sorensen (eds.) International Development Studies, Roskilde University, 2002, pg. 234.

²⁴ Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, "Protection Refugees and Asylum Seekers, 2007." Johannesburg, 19 June 2007, pg. 26.

“I could see there was a lot of hostility from them [border guards]. I mean, people really did not understand that it meant to be a refugee or what it meant to be on the run looking for a safe area...I think they had no sense of hospitality to these people who are foreigners...It’s terrible. I think it is even getting worse now the policeman or whoever at the boundaries, they kind of used to Somalis now. I don’t that is making things easier, it is actually complicating things, you know, and I’m wondering why is it that. I mean, I guess, if those days people really didn’t know anything about Somalia, they wondered why these Somalis traveling all the way and gave you hardships, by now everybody should know that these people are traveling because of the hardships that are back in Somalia, but if the people, the Somalis who are traveling from Somalia to come to this side still experience same problem then I think there is no change in the minds of the way the policemen relate to the Somalis.” (Zubiada)

Sometimes the consequence of this ignorance is more drastic. Ayah was jailed at the Mozambique border for 15 days along with 20 other Somalis. She was told the officials were going to give her papers and there was a delay, but was never given an official reason for her harsh detainment. Ayah was ill with malaria and was subsequently sent to the hospital. A doctor assisted her in obtaining papers and gave her some money and she entered South Africa from there. Deka was also detained at the border for two weeks. She was told it was because she didn’t have a passport, not knowing any better there was nothing she could do. After two weeks she was released and given the necessary papers to bring to Home Affairs in Cape Town. In reality asylum seekers should be allowed to declare their intentions at the border, they are then granted entry, but must appear at a Refugee Reception office within 14 days.

The Department of Home Affairs is likely the bane of every refugee’s existence in South Africa. The long queues, unresponsive staff, complicated paperwork, and lack of a positive end result (i.e. proper documentation) has drastic consequences for refugees’ security and their ability to sustain themselves. In 2006, 53,361 new asylum applications were registered with the Department of Home Affairs. About 5,000 (10%) were effectively processed during the year and only 796 were initially accepted for refugee status.²⁵ The backlog of applicants for refugee status is over 128,000.²⁶ This is the largest backlog in the world.²⁷ Abdifatah counts himself lucky for being granted refugee status

²⁵ Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, 4.

²⁶ Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, 4.

²⁷ Sustained Advocacy for Empowered Refugees Rights Manual, University of Cape Town Law Clinic, pg. 12.

after only a year, a success he credits to his familiarity with government institutions from prior work experience. Most interviewees had to wait at least two years for status papers, a process that is meant to take no more than six months. Problems with the refugee status determination process are among the greatest barriers to meeting the country's legal and humanitarian obligations.²⁸

Zubaida was in South Africa for two years before she even learned about the possibility of gaining refugee status. She had been renewing her asylum seekers permit every three months, unaware that there was anything beyond that. It was not until she was applying for UN bursaries that someone explained the system to her. When Zubaida applied for her status, she also took the opportunity to apply for a refugee identity book, the more official document that allows refugees easier access to bank accounts and other official entities. Unfortunately, it took so long for the identity document to be issued, that by the time she received it, it expired three months later. Identity documents cannot be renewed, one must re-apply, so Zubaida basically must start from the beginning. In 2003 the National Refugee Baseline Survey found that only 11% of applicants had been granted the maroon-colored refugee identity documents, the rest still used the simple sheet of paper that tends to disintegrate over the two years course of its validity.²⁹

Those waiting outside of the Refugee Reception Centers are subject to ill treatment by security guards. Applicants must sometimes even pay to access the building.³⁰ There have been reports of guards using whips to keep people in line.³¹

“The security themselves, I mean, I really don't know what they are thinking. One of the things is those people are people who really don't understand the plights which are facing the refugee people, you know, they are people who have slept with their families or who are living with their families and they are there in order to earn a salary, you know.”
(Zubaida)

²⁸ Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, 4.

²⁹ National Refugee Baseline Survey: Final Report, The Community Agency for Social Enquiry, November 2003, pg. 6.

³⁰ Landau, L., K. Ramjathan-Keogh and G. Singh, “Xenophobia in South Africa and problems related to it,” Forced Migration Working Paper Series #13, Forced Migration Studies Programme, University of the Witwatersrand, January 2005, pg. 25.

³¹ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 25.

Zubaida explains that it is even more difficult for Somali women as they are supposed to defer to men, they cannot fight with men for a place in line and the men take advantage, thus the women spend even longer waiting in the queues. In theory, the staff inside Home Affairs should be more helpful and professional than the security guards, but this is not the case. Refugees are subject to ill treatment by civil servants as well and the way the Somalis and other refugees are treated throughout the process is a large part of problem. It is not just a matter of bureaucracy and administrative delays, but also a question of the attitudes of individual staff towards refugees and their understanding of what it means to be a refugee.

“Very unprofessional, low skilled, very unresponsive really. They are, just imagine, because there is a policy up there which they cannot do anything about which says you have to receive a refugee when he comes to you was the only reason they were receiving people. But they were no impetus and professionalism in the way they engage with the people. Because me, I was expecting because South Africa is so advanced when it comes to the rest of Africa, service delivery was a fundamental difference from the one I used to see in the rest of Africa, only to find it’s the same anywhere in Africa.” (Abdifatah)

“Last time I was there I had an conflict with a lady because we were in the queue and somebody wanted to jump to the queue and she said she wouldn’t help anyone until we made ourselves right. I said, you see the people who are jumping the queue, why don’t you tell an official? Then she tell me to keep quiet and I tell her no, I won’t. So here, if you speak loud and maybe you are at the right place at the right time it can work out yeah. But then there no, at all. Maybe they are overworked, maybe if you want to find an excuse, there you might find an excuse for them also.” (M. Hirsi)

Immigrant related activities at Home Affairs go beyond administrative incompetence to practices that create networks of corruption and extortion.³² Refugees must be willing to pay bribes or unofficial fees or they may be denied the right to even file an asylum claim. People end up not even attempting to file an application and opening themselves up to arrest and deportation, simply because they do not have the money. In a study conducted by the University of Witswaterstrand’s Forced Migration Unit, 29% of those surveyed were asked to pay for submitting an application for refugee status.³³

“And also the refugees people are corrupted themselves. They want to go through the back doors. Some of the workers are spoiled also, they got money, so they don’t do more. They work for others.” (Ali)

³² Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 25.

³³ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 26.

“They don’t welcome you. They treat you like you are nothing...the only way is, if you got money you pay, then you get you papers...2000 rand just to get an extension.”

So in this case, it is a problem on both sides. Officials demand the bribes, but refugees comply. As Somalis come from a country without a government or civil service, etc, this unofficial “back door” system is somewhat familiar to them. Also, in their desperation for papers, they are willing to do, or pay, whatever it takes.

When asked what would be one thing that could make their life easier, every single interviewee in this project asked for better documentation. They want identity documents that will allow them to open bank accounts, travel outside of the country, make them more employable, and basically put them on more equal footing with South African citizens. Many of them still have family in Kenya that they haven’t seen in years because of their inability to leave the country legally. Better documentation will definitely not solve all of the challenges facing the Somalis in South Africa but by assisting the holder in finding work and avoiding threats of arbitrary arrest and deportation, identity documents can promote social integration and provide a sense of belonging and commitment to the refugee’s new found space and community.³⁴

Local Organizations

Cape Town hosts a wide variety of NGOs that focus on refugee issues. For the most part, they are much less active with the Somali community than they are with other nationalities. However, after several Somalis had been killed and the riots occurred in Masiphumelele in 2006, the Somali community attracted a lot of attention from the local Cape Town NGOs, including Islamic Relief, Africa Unite and the University of Cape Town’s Law Clinic. However, the Somalis have not been actively reaching out to external bodies. Instead, they seem to be most successful when they utilize the resources available within the community.

³⁴ Landau, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 25.

Islamic Relief and Africa Unite took the lead in mediating the conflict in Masiphumelele. While a larger network of organization were accessed and contributed to the process, these two were most involved at the ground level. While there has not been another incident similar to the riots of August 2006, it is questionable whether Islamic Relief and Africa Unite really succeeded in assisting the Somali community. Africa Unite took the lead during the negotiation process, but Islamic Relief has remained active in the Masiphumelele community. Although Africa Unite put great effort into the mediations and their immediate aftermath, the Somali community in general did not agree with the way the process was handled.

“According to what I have gathered from Africa Unite, I think they are not very much interested in the Somali issues really. They misrepresented the Somali issues several times as people who don’t want to do anything as people who are difficult to understand, as difficult people who don’t keep promises and things like that. And to me that is fundamentally flawed thing. You don’t represent people as a whole. People are composed of individuals...He [the director of Africa Unite] attacks the Somalis outright. For me it is often difficult to attack a whole group and present them as one...So for me it was difficult to understand an NGO that was trying to help but was misrepresenting the same community it is trying to help. That doesn’t make sense to me at all...The view I have gathered from people around here is not positive towards Africa Unite...With a community one thing you always avoid is you make an enemy with the community. You don’t tell them, ‘you are wrong’, even if they are wrong, because now then it is me against you. You have to always remain within the us circle, not me and you.”

There were obvious differences between the Africa Unite and the Somali leaderships. Many of the Somalis interviewed felt that the conflict was portrayed as their fault. It did not appear that Africa Unite was able to work within the Somali culture, but instead attempted to impose their own standards onto the community, clearly with negative results. This was obvious not only in the statements of the Somalis but in the workings of the negotiation process as well. The early negotiations took place during Ramadan, a period of fasting practiced by the Muslim faith. The Somalis, all of whom were Muslim, had prayer around 4 o’clock every day and broke their fast at sundown. The meal had to be specially prepared by the women ahead of time. Despite the religious significance of these events, they were not allowed to influence the meeting time, which was generally 16:00 and ran until at least 19:00. Instead, the meeting was scheduled according to the wishes of the South African business leaders, later in the day so as not to interfere with

their business hours. The head of Africa Unite would not even consider suggestions to take the Somalis' religious rituals into consideration when scheduling meetings as he did not want to offend the majority and make his work in the community more difficult.

Islamic Relief was perhaps better received because of the religious connection. Well after the mediation process had ended, Islamic Relief remained active in Masiphumelele and continues to do so until the present. They negotiated for those child-headed homes and orphans in the township to benefit from the lower prices offered by the Somali businesses.³⁵ However, according to Zubaida, they have not been very successful in reaching out to the Somali community at large.

One of the proposed solutions to the lack of security experienced by the Somali was to assist them in forming their own organization. In theory, a functioning community organization that could tie the Somalis together would make them slightly less vulnerable to discrimination. It would give them a solid front, a way to better manage their business dealings and to better respond in crisis situations such as the riots in Masiphumelele. Despite several attempts facilitated by two local NGOs, Africa Unite and Islamic Relief, this organization has never materialized. The diversity within in Somalis themselves and the fact that they are spread over such a large geographic area have made it difficult for them to organize themselves in any effective manner. There are divisions among the community that have prevented a unified motion to start such a body. There is also talk that it is due to clan loyalties, though some deny it as well.

“Ohh, the the the, it is not something big. It is not about now it is not about Hawiye or Darods. Ah, I tell you, this tribalism is in our blood. However you use it, if you use it the right way it is the right way, if you use it the wrong side it is going to be wrong. Um, it is the approach of the people who are kind of leaders, how they act, the fact that people don't have faith in themselves, among themselves, ah, it is a problem but it is not about the tribalism or lack of this and that. Its just they need a leader and the right gathers, compromising... (Mohammed H.)

It is very difficult to say whether the divisions and poor structure are due to the issue of clan-ism. Either way, the organization has never succeeded. Instead, some of the younger men, including Abdifatah and Ali, founded the Somali Youth Organization of the Western Cape based in Bellville. The organization was created with the intent to

³⁵ Khan, Cassiem. “Faith, funding and the poor.” Mail and Guardian, 16 October 2007.

“integrate the community with the rest of South African society as well as integrate the community within itself, showing that you can do something for yourself rather than waiting for someone to do something for you. The starting point was basically that help must come from within us. That help is going to be directed out and go into action with the rest of the people living in the cape metropolitan area or whether that help is going to be directed against promoting social well being within out community.”

The founders wanted to focus on the youth “and forget about the elderly people because normally the elderly people they involved in different thing. They still talk about tribalism and things and they stuck in their minds and they can’t come to conclusions and agreement.”³⁶ They also want to create a platform for Somali youth talents and a space where they can deal with social issues such as drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

The Somali Youth organization has been a great success. Many youth joined very quickly and there were regular meetings from the start. There have recently been some problems with funding, but members remain very active. Over Ramadan the organization was very active in the mosque. They served people food and drinks every day throughout the month. “So people are happy, now even the elderly people are coming to the conclusion that this organization is doing something and they’re working and they’re full of energy.”³⁷

It is a crucial point that the youth organization was created and is run completely by Somalis at their own initiative. Efforts by external players with their own ideas and agendas failed. The Somalis saw what the needs were within their community and were best placed to address them.

In the National Refugee Baseline Survey, less than half of those questioned knew about refugee assistance organizations in their area.³⁸ South African institutions lack any formal referral mechanisms for NGOs. Some Refugee Reception Offices provide information but not in any standardized way. Cape Town Refugee office has some information posted

³⁶ Interview with Abdifatah

³⁷ Interview with Abdifatah

³⁸ National Refugee Baseline Survey, 13.

and they refer as needed to certain organizations.³⁹ This data is consistent with experiences of the interviewees. For the Somalis particularly, local NGOs seem to be somewhat of a new concept.

“Um, I’m glad that they is trying to help in a sense, um...I, um, I want to see other organizations, maybe we can decide on something to do for us, Somalis who are not organized well. Maybe we are not well and good as other Africans communities, maybe. We are left behind, we are behind the, uh, you know, the contacting with the NGOs, our focus is only doing business and working for our own selves. But other Africans they try to have connections with the NGOs, you know, so to help. But for us it is a new thing. I’m learning, I’m trying to learn now how to, how to work it out, yeah. It is positive thing when you have somebody who have more access than you, when you have somebody who maybe have more experience than you, uh, people who listen and uh maybe people who want to address your problems, yeah, yeah, it is positive.”

None of those interviewed had attempted to access the services of Cape Town’s larger refugee assistance organizations. The Somalis repeatedly claim to have no idea where to go for help. They have had little success with the UNHCR office in Wynberg. This program has limited funds which go to those deemed most needy at the time, which is dependent on how recently the recipient has arrived and how desperate their situation is judged to be.⁴⁰ The men are told that the office only caters to women and children and the women are told that they have been in South Africa for too long. Usually the Somalis take this quite personally and see the program as unwilling to help them. However, one man was given a month’s school fees for his children. Others have received some basic items from Islamic Relief or the Muslim Judicial Counsel.

Several people have utilized the resources at the University of Cape Town Law Clinic. The clinic provided legal guidance for refugees as well as running a SAFER (Sustained Advocacy for Empowered Refugees) workshops. The aim of the workshops is to educated asylum seekers, refugees, and community leaders in refugee rights assertion as well as refugee history, issues and policy, with an emphasis on helping leaders utilize practical resources available to refugees.⁴¹ The program consists of a series of 14 workshops that cover the rights granted to refugees by law, including employment,

³⁹ National Refugee Baseline Survey, 194.

⁴⁰ National Refugee Baseline Survey, 200.

⁴¹ Sustained Advocacy for Empowered Refugees Rights Manual, 2.

security and health care. There are also sessions on how to apply for proper documentation, xenophobia, gender and domestic violence, and conflict resolution. Participants contributed to the curriculum design. Members of SAFER independently founded three new community based organizations within a six month period,⁴² clear evidence as to how refugee and asylum seekers can help themselves.

There is also a Johannesburg based institution known as the Somali-Bantu Maku Organization. Due to the physical features of the Somali Bantu that are more commonly associated with East Africans further south, members of this minority clan are often questioned about their very nationality. Once Home Affairs doubts that they are truly Somali, they have little chance in obtaining refugee status. Somali-Bantus seeking asylum in South Africa can register with this organization and it will then assist them in getting the status papers. According to those interviewed the organization is quite successful. Although not very powerful, it has the means to hire lawyers who can negotiate the system and provides a semblance of proof that the Somali-Bantus are indeed Somali.

According to the Somalis interviewed, the types of services provided by the UCT Law Clinic are the most valuable. Several people have accessed their services for help with applying for refugee status and repatriation. They would like to see more of this kind of work being done; programs that will educate them on what is available and assist them with their individual goals. Also, as many of the Somalis had hoped to study in South Africa, they would like assistance in accessing courses and educational institutions.

Besides the general widespread legal and educational needs, there are gender based problems. One of the women interviewed spoke at length about her abusive marriage, but she does not know where to go for help. In the patriarchal Somali culture, women are often isolated. Here in Cape Town, the problem multiplies exponentially as they are marginalized because of their gender, religion, nationality, refugee status and the

⁴² Sustained Advocacy for Empowered Refugees Final Report, University of Cape Town Law Clinic, pg. 2.

language barrier. However, in order to address this isolation and empower Somali women, one must respect the boundaries of their culture.

“I think as people the challenge that the human rights people in the country that the Somalis are facing, um, if the NGOs can help to educate more women, empower them. Not to empower them to be isolated from their communities, but to empower them to be more helpful to their communities. Uh, when I say not to empower them to me isolated, I mean, to their communities means, if you may want the Somali ladies to be like South African ladies or American girl, I mean, you are taking them out of their communities. You are isolating them. But in a sense, you empower her to, to empower others who are not positive enough to speak either the language or clever enough to take their challenges, then maybe the NGOs will emerge helpful. I think that is the only thing I can think of for the NGOs.” (Mohammed H.)

Services provided by external actors need to be examined in the context of Somali norms of assistance. “When individuals or families are not assisted through the refugee regime, the Somali community will mostly assist them, as both Somali religion and culture requires people to take care of the needy.”⁴³ Indeed, when Somalis first arrive in South Africa for the most part they stay with other Somalis, whether they have known them previously or not, before seeking out other forms of assistance. Throughout their travels to South Africa, most of the interviewees were assisted by other Somalis rather than the UNCHR or a similar agency. Also, generally the interviewees were more likely to have interacted with Muslim organizations than the more general programs targeting refugees. More interviewees refer to Islamic Relief, a certain mosque, or the Muslim Judicial Counsel than the UNHCR or other secular aid organizations. No one spoke of contact with any of Cape Town’s larger NGOs that target refugees, namely ARESTA, the Trauma Center, Scalabrini Refugee Services or the Red Cross. The consensus appears to be that organizations are helpful when one is desperate, but mostly they access the network of Somalis in Cape Town and assist each other.

⁴³ Horst, *Transnational Nomads*, 97.

Oral History and Development Methodology

Development and policy initiatives would do well to begin with an enquiry into the history and nature of the target community, including a description of the problems they are facing and an analysis of their past. Jeff Crisp suggests that humanitarian bodies do not know enough about the refugees they are mandated to protect, particularly the social dynamics of refugee situations.⁴⁴ Aid workers should have a solid understanding of refugees' history as well as their current circumstances.⁴⁵ If communities of the displaced are allowed to voice their own needs, relief agencies and governments have more options as to how to assist them, instead of the standardized aid solutions.⁴⁶ In this case, it would be very practical to examine the ways in which Somalis assist each other, not only through the Somali Youth organization, but through the informal network of assistance. This network is strongly influenced by clan divisions. External actors could gain a lot of insight by understanding the Somali norms of assistance and supporting those structures already in place as opposed to imposing standard forms of aid, derived from macro-policy frameworks.

By ignoring the norms of Somali culture and the ways they have of helping each other, local organizations are in danger of falling into the same trap as the international organizations; that of labeling all refugees as in need of assistance and ignoring the political and historical context of their circumstances. With direct access to communities at the grassroots level, both international and local organizations would benefit by being equipped to conduct in-depth interviews to be used both for policy planning and evaluation. Oral history deals with people who know the most about their life stories and their communities, therefore offering a conceptual break with the perception that researchers and development workers are the experts.⁴⁷ When working with displaced

⁴⁴ Powles, J., "Life history and personal narrative: theoretical and methodological issues relevant to research and evaluation in refugee contexts." *New Issues in Refugee research*, Working Paper No. 106, UNHCR, pg. 20.

⁴⁵ Slim, Hugo and Paul Thompson. *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995, pg. 21.

⁴⁶ Slim and Hugo, *Listening for a Change*, 32.

⁴⁷ Field, S., "Developing Dialogues: The Value of Oral History," pg. 3.

communities the starting point should be the interviewees' knowledge of themselves, which is then utilized by the skilled professionals.⁴⁸

Local organizations would also benefit greatly from a better understanding of government policies. As some of the major obstacles that the Somalis, and all refugees, are facing are derived from government inadequacies, NGOs must step in to fill that gap. Not only would it be beneficial to examine the crucial areas in which the government has failed to provide for refugees and work within those areas, but also to educate refugees about their rights in South Africa and the services to which they are entitled. One of the reasons the SAFER workshops have been so successful is that they have empowered refugees to confront and manage challenges in their own way. They are actively bridging the gap between policy and the realities on the ground.

It is not that the laws and policies are inadequate, it is a problem of implementation. Due to the myriad of socio-economic issues facing South Africa at present, it is unlikely that the government is going to perform a massive bureaucratic re-structuring, however needed. They do not have the capacity to perform an in-depth enquiry into the complexities of each separate refugee group. Oral history methodology is too labor intensive and time consuming for the government to use as a widespread tool for policy planning or evaluation. The slow process of building trust and oral history being an inter-subjective dialogue seems impractical in policy making and government operations. Instead those working in the Department of Home Affairs and as border officials need to be educated about the current laws and policies, as well as the basic definition of a refugee. The government could also make more of an effort to utilize the work of NGOs by accessing their research and knowledge of the situation on the ground, as well as liaising with them to identify problems in the process of issuing documentation. A poorly developed relationship between the national government and NGOs is central to the problems of policy implementation and the role of NGOs has been negligible.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Field, "Developing Dialogues," 4.

⁴⁹ Mutahaba, G., R. Baguma and M. Halfani. *Vitalizing African Public Administration for Recovery and Development*. Connecticut: Kumarian, 1993, pg. 61.

However, both local and international organizations have a stronger capability to utilize the oral history method. This is not to say that it is the only tool that should be drawn upon, but that it should contribute to evaluating refugee communities. It allows for the refugees to express their experiences and analyze them on their own terms, historical, social and cultural. Also there are some topics that can simply best be communicated through narrative, including the meaning of home, the impact of trauma, and differing identities. Such issues form the basis for how refugees negotiate the present as well as their hopes for the future. The oral history method can most strongly contribute to longer-term solutions, as sought after by organizations in the country of settlement as opposed to emergency and relief programs.⁵⁰

Each sector described in this chapter; international organizations, the national government, and local NGOs tend to fail to address break through the barrier that the refugee label represents and rather need to explore the ways that refugees relate to different forms of assistance, as illustrated by the Somalis' stories. International organizations' efforts to defend against a cycle of dependency actually result in insufficient aid because the camps lack any opportunities to develop economic independence. They continue to provide standard measures of assistance, assuming that basic needs are being met without looking at the specific contexts within which they are functioning. While the South African government guarantees a host of rights by law, they fail to ensure that the structures are in place for these rights to be protected on the ground. It is the local NGOs that are best placed to fill this gap between policy and practice, but most are under-staffed and lack funding, as well as a clear knowledge of both the policy and the inner-workings of the Somali community. If these bodies can move away from using the widespread refugee label by taking the characteristics, needs, and history of the Somali community, as well as the South African context, into account, real progress could be made towards security and stability for this refugee community.

⁵⁰ Powles, "Life history and personal narrative," 20.

Chapter 7

Transcending Context: Conclusions on the Question of Agency

The war in Somalia has devastated the nation's landscape and its people. The post-colonial context and the Cold War, along with the political manipulation of the clan structure, resulted in the displacement of thousands of people. The happy childhood and peaceful country spoken of by the interviewees ended with the bombing of their northern cities, the division of Mogadishu by warlords, hunger and widespread warfare. As the violence worsened they fled across the borders; they became separated from their families, had their education interrupted, and were removed from any secure social network they may have known. Some walked for days to Ethiopia or Kenya, where they then lived for years, while others took a more direct route to South Africa, catching overcrowded boats from Kismaayo to Maputo. Their journeys were filled with malaria, fear of being arrested at the borders, clever guides trying to steal from them or more outright muggings, and altercations due to differences in culture, religion and language. But perhaps the most difficult aspect of traveling was that most of the interviewees did not have a clear idea of where they were going or how to get there.

They came to Cape Town based on the stories of acquaintances, friends or relatives that were living in South Africa or heard that one had the opportunity for a better life there. The information the Somalis were given was often false or based on wishful thinking and resulted in their view of South Africa as the 'promised land' where they would safely return to school, raise their families and earn a comfortable living, or easily continue on to Europe or North America. Instead, they survive in Cape Town without the benefit of government assistance, unable to find work and without education for themselves or their children. They cannot travel either back to Somalia or on to a first world country.

The Somalis have become the targets of violent xenophobia from which the government has failed to protect them, as Chapter 4 explains. Many people continually debate the

merit of their decision to come to South Africa. As they try to re-build new lives in South Africa, they face numerous obstacles that they never imagined. The structures that should be able to help them resettle are either non-existent or are only mandated to help the refugees to subsist. Instead, the Somalis manage to negotiate the new society mainly by learned survival skills.

The identities and life strategies of Cape Town's Somali refugee community have developed throughout their lives; from childhood through the beginnings of the war, their flight, and the realities of their new society. They are shaped by their individual histories as well as the collective nature of Somali culture and society. As the Somalis attempt to resettle in Cape Town, these historical and cultural aspects of their identity cannot be overvalued. Neither can one ignore the specific historical context of post-apartheid South Africa.

South Africa's current refugee policy was developed in the specific context of the nation's transition to democracy and does succeed in adhering to the humanitarian principles set forth by international bodies. Unfortunately, the social dilemmas that still plague the country not only inhibit access to the rights prescribed in the 1998 Refugees Act, but create an environment that is hostile to foreigners. Instead of attacking the national government's policies, one must examine the obstacles in its implementation and look for ways to alter the xenophobic mindset of so many South Africans. South Africa will only be capable of managing the influx of refugees when it has dealt with the more basic issues of social justice faced by the entire country.

The negative effects of removing South African policy from its historical and political context are similar to the consequences of dehistoricizing the refugees themselves. One gets an incomplete picture of the root causes of the problems, i.e. barriers to implementation, as well as the difficulties faced by the refugees. As part of fully understanding the Somali's current circumstances, it is equally important to acknowledge their past as well as the specific historical and political context that shapes the behavior of South Africans. In fact, it is just as detrimental to the repute of South Africans not to

comprehend the origins of the current xenophobic environment. It is too easy to demonize prejudice or discriminatory behavior, which does not help to combat it.

As described in Chapter 5, Somalis position themselves in relationship to their clan, nation, and refugee status in a variety of ways. They construct an identity for themselves that reflects past experiences as well as corresponding with their current situation. In exploring these identities from a variety of angles, it becomes clear that all the interviewees have two commonalities: their nostalgia for home and their negative view of the refugee label.

All of the Somali refugees speak of home as an ideal place. They cling to this construct that exists only in memory. It serves as a contrast to the challenges of the present and a reminder that a better life is possible. However, as described in Chapter 5, their longing for home does not necessarily equate with their desire to return. Even those who recall a happy childhood and beautiful country may have had experiences in the interim that prevent them from wanting to return. Unfortunately most structures function under the assumption that since refugees remember home in a positive fashion that their priority is to return. They do not explore the other layers of memory and identity that would allow them to understand the complex functions of this nostalgia. At the macro-level, longing for a past homeland is viewed by external actors as being the equivalent of wanting to return to their country of origin, which then translates into policies aimed at repatriation and perpetuation of the refugee label. Instead of assisting them to reach their goals of settling in a new country, gaining education, etc, it appears that many organizations simply help refugees to subsist in the short term, rather than taking into account the possibility that they may never go home. The refugees then are forced to remain in a state of limbo, unable to return, settle, or move on, viewed both by themselves and others as temporary residents.

The refugee label as assigned by governments and relief organizations has gained certain social and political implications. The term refugee goes beyond its legal meaning to encompass a range of negative connotations. “The humanitarianism which created the

label is still a compromised concept. The label itself remains problematic.”¹ Labeling defines a client group and prescribes an assigned set of needs together with an appropriate method of distribution.² In this case, it is not that the Somali’s needs differ drastically from other refugee groups in Cape Town (all need access for food, shelter, and protection) but how institutions interact with different refugee populations to fulfill these needs. In order to be granted official refugee status by the host government or receive humanitarian aid one must conform to the constructed refugee label, to become one of the generic mass inside the camps or lined up outside of Home Affairs. It is how each individual relates to the assigned refugee identity that defines their ability to negotiate the external structures. As diverse as personal identities may be, all of the Somalis view the refugee label as negative. They must comply with it in order to survive, but this of course involves submitting to systems of humanitarian aid and the bureaucracy of government that tend to remove one’s feeling of empowerment, especially if the individual has historically lacked control. The willingness of each person to accept this label and its implications depends on how much agency they have felt over their own lives in the past. All events happen within a certain context of conditions, circumstances, and constraints, but it is the human capacity to exercise agency that which enables people to transcend context and alter their situation.³ If they envision themselves as able to exert some amount of power over their lives, they are less likely to allow their lives to be removed from their historical and political context and accept the stereotypes of vulnerability and helplessness as set before them by institutions. Instead, they learn to navigate the institutions and structures, whether they are the refugee camps or the Department of Home Affairs, and actively and creatively seek out ways to manage their situation and better their lives.

Refugee camps may disempower their residents by portraying them as a generic mass of people in need as well as by their internal policies. These policies that were discussed in

¹ Zetter, R., “International Perspectives on Refugee Assistance” In *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Alastair Ager, ed., New York: Continuum, 1999, pg. 76.

² Zetter, R., “Labeling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity” in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991, pg. 44.

³ Roberts, G., “Geoffrey Elton: History and Human Action” In *The History and Narrative Reader*, Geoffrey Roberts, ed., London: Routledge, 2001, pg. 131.

Chapter 6, do not necessarily recognize or stimulate people's own initiatives, or may even obstruct them, by regulating and restricting refugee movements and economic activities. The constraints placed on refugees serves to limit their attempts to use their own strengths.⁴ However, it is not necessarily the case that massive humanitarian intervention has a lasting impact on the agency individuals feel in their lives. In debates of structure versus individual agency, how much of one's life is determined by them or for them, differs depending on where one stands in relation to social power.⁵ Not all of those in this study who spent time as residents in the camps present themselves as victims, quite the opposite in fact. The identities and strategies one utilizes throughout life are formed from childhood. The experiences of each person provides him or her with information about possibilities for personal action and their ability to react appropriately to the demands made by their surroundings, which then contribute to the formation of a strategic public identity. The effects of individual experience on future agency depend on how the results of those actions are perceived, interpreted, and remembered.⁶ Those whose parents and families exercised some sense of control over their circumstances during their childhood and even as they were displaced have been able to maintain that agency despite the helplessness they may have felt while being the recipients of humanitarian intervention. Looking at the accomplishments of many of the Somalis interviewed here, this portrayal of refugees as helpless victims becomes even more problematic.

However, the opposite is true as well in that some of the Somalis interviewed who did not come into contact with international organizations still had a more prevalent victim mentality than those who did. People who historically have had limited agency, living in poverty, at the mercy of the war going on around them, still today fail to exert power over their own lives. As refugees become more alienated from society, first under threat from the conflict in their own country and then marginalized in exile, people become increasingly incapable of seeing themselves as exerting power beyond a limited space.

⁴ Horst, C., *Transnational Nomads: how Somalis cope with refugee life in Dadaab camps of Kenya*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2006, pg. 16.

⁵ Bozzoli, B., *Women of Phokeng*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991, pg. 1.

⁶ Schoenmeier, H. "Refugee Policy: The Need to Include Psychological Aspects," In *Refugees: A Third World Dilemma*, John R. Rogge, ed., New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987, pg. 69.

They have been denied positive reinforcement for their actions by the structures of their society, therefore endangering their ability to continue to attempt self-sufficiency.⁷ Their personal agency, or lack thereof, is thus formed within and against institutions and cultural norms, first in Somalia and then in exile, as opposed to above and around them.⁸ In short, they see themselves as being at the mercy of superior structures instead of being able to influence them or find methods of successfully navigating them. The identity each person has constructed as a strategy to negotiate society is thus confined by these structures; the choices, possibilities and constraints that they present.⁹ As the war in Somalia worsened, often the clan was the only broader structure that maintained some form of control and provided a sense of security. A sense of belonging and empowerment was then derived from this construct. An individual's place in the world was defined not on their own terms necessarily, but by the clan: the collective structure that they were born into and that regulates Somali society. Later on, while in exile, those people who lacked agency or relied on the clan structure for it, will be more vulnerable to the disempowering effects of humanitarian organizations. They will be less likely to take a leadership role in their own community and view organizations as a source of charity rather than taking initiative on their own. They are deeply vulnerable to the problems of bureaucracy and failings of the government because they hold some expectation that these bodies will provide for them in a way they have been unable to do for themselves. Again, local agencies now working with the Somali communities must be aware of the full extent that which the Somalis are escaping, not only the violence but the destruction of their society, family and identity.

Humanitarian assistance programs thus should attempt, as far as possible, to take into account everything that the Somalis have survived, their resilience, life strategies and learned survival skills. One must be cognizant of the success achieved by the Somalis by escaping the war, traveling to South Africa, and resettling in Cape Town. To ignore these characteristics is to continue the cycle of dehistoricization and to create the dynamic of "us and them" that Abdifatah refers to and is so dangerous to humanitarian efforts.

⁷ Schoenmeier, "Refugee Policy," 70.

⁸ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, 2.

⁹ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, 236.

Policies should be written based on knowledge that moves from the grassroots up in order to foster community self-sufficiency.¹⁰ And, in terms of research methodology, there is a strong case for the use of oral history and qualitative survey methods to inform the refinement and implementation of refugee policies. Above all, those working with refugees need to have empathy for the history of their actions. Refugees should be approached as historical actors as opposed to victims of history. Even those who do not envision themselves as having agency in their lives should not be treated as helpless, but supported and assisted in a manner that is sensitive to their history and culture. The ways that the Somalis approach the institutions that define society are derived directly from their interpretations of prior experiences as well as the situation they now find themselves in. Within the realm of humanitarian assistance and organizations' approach to refugees, there must be a way to acknowledge human suffering as well as narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory.¹¹

Oral history methodology's definitive strength is its ability to sensitively explore and understand all of these human activities. It is neither logically or practically necessary that humanitarian assistance dehistoricize these situations of forced displacement.¹² There may not be a perfect or simple answer to the problem, but there are certainly many small changes that can help. Within people's life stories are their memories of everyday choices and decisions and people or forces that intervene, influence, or undermine their decisions or decision making. By facilitating an interview dialogue which allows for narrative agency, one can learn more about the interviewee's agency or passivity in the past.¹³ "Regarding refugees as passive recipients of external assistance rather than as active agents capable of making effective decisions and helping themselves will greatly reduce the utility of any development program."¹⁴

¹⁰ Field, S., "Developing Dialogues: The Value of Oral History," pg. 4.

¹¹ Malkki, Liisa H., "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization." In *Siting Culture: The shifting anthropological object*, Karen Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup, eds., London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 248.

¹² Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 248.

¹³ Field, S. "Remembering Experience, Interpreting Memory: Life Stories from Windermere," in *African Studies: Oral History in the Western Cape*, Vol. 60, No. 1, July 2001, pg. 131.

¹⁴ Sorenson, J., "An Overview: Refugees and Development," In *African Refugees: Development and Repatriation*, Howard Adelman and John Sorenson, eds., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, pg. 187.

Making development and assistance programs participatory processes using the oral history methodology not only strengthens the programs, but contributes to building individuals' ability to assert control over their future. The goal is to enable refugees to care for themselves in the long term and live peacefully alongside the host population, neither of which can be obtained without consulting the refugees and the local people.¹⁵ Integration and self-sufficiency are continuous processes of problem solving, and adaptation to maximize well-being.¹⁶ Enabling refugees to exploit the diverse complexities of their circumstances is key to long-term success.¹⁷ Development workers are not necessarily mandated to empower people, but basic needs should be fulfilled within an empowering framework. The simple recognition of refugees' stories by external actors as being valuable and incorporated into the broader collective memory is important in itself, but furthermore it has a direct impact on the lives of refugees in the present as being actively listened to give each person a sense of agency and a sense of the right to be heard. Organizations need not even look at every single specific incident, but look for themes and patterns across a series of interviews. Using these themes, NGOs can then attune and sensitize policies and strategies to individual stories.

Oral history methodology is not the ultimate solution for development problems and community empowerment, but should be one amongst several strategies in resolving humanitarian issues.¹⁸ The inclusion of direct testimony in the development debate creates a dialogue between interviewees, communities and humanitarian workers that requires answers from the institutions, making them more accountable to their targeted population and thus empowering the refugees themselves.¹⁹ This sense of accountability has the potential to convince governments and organizations to see refugees not as generic victims but as people who contribute to history and should receive assistance based on certain a specific historical context. Furthermore, oral history's ability to

¹⁵ Schoenmeier, "Refugee Policy," 67.

¹⁶ Chambers, R., *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development*, London: Intermediate Technology, 1993, pg. 10.

¹⁷ Chambers, *Challenging the Professions*, 11.

¹⁸ Field, "Developing Dialogues," 4.

¹⁹ Slim and Thompson, *Listening for a Change*, 3.

analyze how an individual's agency has changed over time directly addresses one of the humanitarian assistance field's inability to take personal histories and questions of agency into account.

Further Research: "You are also not from here."

The information obtained in this series of interviews was no doubt influenced by my being a young white female from America. Most of the interviewees immediately assumed that I was in a position of wealth and power and asked for some type of favor, whether it was information about schooling or a plane ticket to the United States. In my interview with Abdullahai, and some of the others as well, it seemed that his narrative was geared towards convincing me to help him. That is not to say that his stories were untrue, but his own agenda, or life strategy, was clearly evident. In another case, a deeply religious man would not allow me, as a woman, to interview him. The choice of people interviewed was also limited by language; I could only interview people with strong English skills. Given that English is not widely spoken in Somalia, the majority of the refugees only began to learn it here, so most Somalis still do not speak the language fluently, if at all. Even with the people I interviewed who spoke English reasonably well, it became apparent on occasion that an individual was not able to fully express him or herself in this second language. It would be very interesting to see how the narratives were shared if the researcher spoke Somali or even Arabic. Finding a quiet setting conducive to long interviews was also difficult. Ideally the interviews should have taken place in the subject's home, but because of issues of trust similar to those discussed in previous chapters, the Somalis were not open to having a virtual stranger enter their houses. Finally, the women who strictly adhere to laws of Islam did not want to be interviewed alone, but instead brought other female friends with them. The presence of this second person surely affected the contents and presentation of the narrative.

This particular study only took into account a broad survey of local structures. There is surely much to learn from more in-depth research about the specific work of each NGO and the nationalities with which they are most involved. How do refugees from other

countries, Rwanda or the DRC for example, relate to assistance organizations? Also, while conducting this research, it became evident, that there is quite a strong social network of Somalis in South Africa that many access when they enter the country. Regardless of whether the Somalis know each other personally, they welcome others into their homes and help them to find their way in the new country. The details of this system would be very useful to anyone interested in the inherent nature of Somali society and norms of assistance, which would subsequently be key in developing a method that truly assists Somalis in resettlement. Finally, questions of class were not included in this study. The Somalis interviewed here come from a range of economic classes and the connection between class, identity, and agency is far from straightforward. A closer examination of this relationship as well as the monetary support that Somalis send back home would be enlightening.

The Somali community in Cape Town presents a complex case study of a population in exile. In one sense, they represent a microcosm of the challenges faced by refugees and those attempting to assist them, but they also exemplify the individual characteristics that are present in any community and host country and the dangers of making generalizations.

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1951 Geneva Convention Related to the Status of Refugees

Interview Details

Nasid Shide Muumin Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Maxamed Osman Xaaji Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Nuur Ahmed Elmi Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Abdullah Hassan Farah Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Hassan Abd Ali Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Hassan Wynberg	Male	4 November 2007	1:10:11
Ruqiyo Masiphumelele	Female	3 May 2007	1:1:49
Ayah Mohammed Ali Masiphumelele	Female	22 August 2007	31:27
Deka Abd Noor Masiphumelele	Female	22 August 2007	30:55
Abdulaahi Husein Masiphumelele	Male	10 May 2007	1:31:27
Mohamed S. Liban Masiphumelele	Male	11 May 2007	45:30
Abdifatah Ismail University of Cape Town	Male	17 September 2007	1:40:33
Shukri Abdukadir University of Cape Town	Female	17 September 2007	28:18
Mohammed Hirsi Mitchells Plain	Male	4 May 2007	1:13:05

Zubaida Mohammed University of the Western Cape	Female	8 September 2007	57:19
Abdulkahder Hussein Ali University of the Western Cape	Male	20 October 2007	1:18:23
Muqtaar Muhamud Ahmed Masiphumelele	Male	25 July 2007	25:47

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