

**Is My Baby too Black?  
Slavery, Silence, and Self-Image among Somali Bantu Refugees in Kansas City**

**Marwa H. Ghazali**  
PhD Student, Department of Anthropology  
University of Kansas

**Introduction:**

Early on in my research among Somali Bantu refugees in the projects of Kansas City, Kansas, I came to the realization that despite its proximity to more affluent areas, this space, and those who inhabit it, had long ago been relegated to the realm of things forgotten. It was here where society sent those whose suffering it could no longer bear to witness, and where the suffering arrived after their sorrows would no longer be heard. I sat for a moment pondering this social “geography of suffering”, where the public desire to contain a kind of pain it cannot alleviate has resulted in the confinement of those who suffer to certain marginal spaces.

Thus it is here in the projects where one finds a concentration of suffering, and where one may locate over forty-five resettled Somali Bantu refugee families. Yet this tendency to concentrate suffering into certain spatial areas, and moreover to resettle refugee populations within them, is troubling. The re-rooting of refugees to marginal spaces reproduces the old traumas of social marginalization, exclusion, and feelings of inferiority and produces new traumas through the limitations and difficulties accompanying life within these spaces. While there is a generally and historically rooted tendency among Somali Bantu to remain silent on such issues, their bodies bear witness to suffering through the physical manifestation of trauma.

Understanding trauma, not as a set of external, isolated events, but rather, as part of a larger “continuum of suffering” that make up one’s life story raises questions pertaining to how experiences of violence alter one’s sense of “everyday-ness”; how the familiar world is made unfamiliar, or conversely, how the unfamiliar world becomes *all too* familiar amongst various cultures of exile.

**Problematizing Tendencies that Cast Uprootedness as A Pathological Condition**

Since the 1648 Peace Treaties of Westphalia, identity has become intrinsically rooted in the national space. From the concept of a bounded, nationalized, sovereign territory emerged a new notion of personhood that revolved largely around one’s participation and recognition within a functioning nation-state (Fulcher 2000; Kastoryano 2004).

Through this nationalist lens, uprootedness is considered to be *the* primary source of suffering amongst refugees. Within anthropology, refugee populations are characterized as “liminal” relative to their citizenship status within the “national order of things” (Malkki 1992; 1996). As they are no longer citizens of the states from which they fled, and are not yet citizens of the states in which they will be resettled, they are assumed to exist in a state of identity limbo (Harrel-Bond & Voutira 1992).

By adopting this lens, resettlement organizations and international relief agencies attempt to alleviate suffering through the recreation of the sense of national belonging either through repatriation or resettlement (Nyers 1999). In this sense, the process of resettlement—filing paperwork, attending acculturation classes, packing, boarding a plane, crossing the Atlantic, and resettling—becomes the ritual which reconciles the past self with the future, thereby ending the liminal phase.

In the aftermath of resettlement, residual suffering is then quickly diagnosed as “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” or “Acculturative Stress Syndrome” and the resettlement case is quietly closed. However, this approach fails to capture the ongoing, continuous nature of suffering, especially among those who, for years, have been living in exile within their own states.

Bearing this in mind, the case of the Somali Bantu is a useful one to consider. Because their exclusion from the nation-state began with their enslaved Bantu ancestors in Somalia, long before the event of flight to the camps, they have found new ways to belong and to generate meaning by re-rooting identity in the personal relationships that bond together the members of this group. Through two narrative excerpts collected during my fieldwork, I will demonstrate how this sense of belonging was damaged through the process of life in Somalia, the war, and resettlement, therefore revealing the lived suffering that characterizes the everyday lives of these supposedly rooted bodies.

### **Abdi: Somali Bantu Refugee**

Abdi is a respected elder of the Somali Bantu community. The Somali Bantu are a minority group of Somalis whose origins can be traced back to the agricultural Bantu tribes of Tanzania and Mozambique taken as slaves to Somalia beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Labeled as *Jareer*, a derogatory Somali word meaning “kinky-haired” in reference to their slave history and African Bantu physical features, the Somali Bantu have long-since been considered the inferior African “Other” relative to their “Arab” Somali Somali counterparts.

Abdi estimates that he is about sixty-five years old. He spent many years in Somalia, working as farmer, a common occupation for Somali Bantu. When he spoke of his life as a farmer, he often held out his hands, palm-side up, revealing deep callouses and scars; a testimony to his long years of hard work in the fields, and proof of his contribution to Somalia. As a *jareer* farmer, Abdi was denied access to education and is therefore illiterate. Elaborating on the reasons for his inferior status he stated that “in Somalia, it has always been this way. Our ancestors were lower so we are lower”, a statement which resonates with the many other Somali Bantu refugees who understand their inferior status as a result of “being black”.

Abdi’s life worsened with the eruption of the Somali civil war. Despite the violence all around, it was not until Abdi suffered a personal loss that he realized he had to leave his home and land:

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

While hiding in the jungle, Abdi’s wife was captured by Somali bandits and raped. After this event, the couple decided to make the long journey to the refugee camps in Kenya. Travelling for days on foot with no water and rotting food, they finally arrived at Dadaab refugee camp, fatigued and malnourished. In 2004 they were finally granted resettlement. Initially resettled to North Carolina, Abdi could not find work and therefore he and his family packed their belongings in 2006 and moved to Kansas City in the hopes of finding more lucrative opportunities. Unfortunately, shortly after arriving in Kansas City, Abdi badly injured his knee

and back while lifting heavy boxes at his new job. He is now unable to work, so, for the first time in his life, has begun schooling at the age of 65.

Throughout our conversation, Abdi communicated a deep nostalgia for the familiarity of life in Somalia:

Now I can do nothing because I got old, but I wanted to see with my eyes how is my land and my people and my country. To see them and make sure they are ok. But now I am old. They still have the same culture as before. I have a video of my family in Somalia they sent to me. I begged for money to buy the camera. \$150.00 so I can see my family and the people back in Somalia.

We moved over to a television where Abdi played a tape of his relatives still residing in Somalia. Strangely, he kept the sound muted. A woman appeared on the screen, angry, waving her arms frantically. Abdi did not acknowledge her gestures but went on to introduce her as his sister. I asked Abdi to unmute the T.V. Suddenly her yelling and screaming was loud and clear, blaming Abdi for not sending them money, calling him selfish, and threatening to cut off her relations with him if he continued to fail to provide for them.

### **Hawa's Story**

Hawa, on the other hand, is a forty-two year old single mother who is currently unemployed. She was resettled to Wyandotte County, Kansas and started work in a warehouse producing single-use plastics. She does not read or write and speaks very little English. In 2007 she suffered a heart attack. During her recuperation, and perhaps because of it, she was laid off from her job and has not been able to find work since. Her medical problems have placed her in a considerable amount of debt, totaling approximately \$40,000 USD. Pleading her case in court twice, her requests for debt relief were denied, and she currently lives with the weight of a financial burden she fears she will never be able to repay.

For Hawa, the horrors of the war were most strongly felt when her village was attacked. All male adults were rounded up and publicly executed, starting with Hawa's two brothers. During the event of the death of her eldest brother, Hawa interjected herself between her brother and his attacker, using her body as a shield to preserve this unique bond. Yet the deep scar on her left ankle signals the memory of the bullet that stopped her from saving the life of the only brother she had left.

Following these violent events, Hawa, her husband, and all but one of her children, fled to a city called Baladunkarim, or the City of Generosity. Yet this proved to be an equally dangerous place. After the rape of her teenage daughter, enduring the pain of malnutrition, and watching her husband's body succumb to the suffering of starvation, Hawa finally arrived at the refugee camp of Dadaab in Kenya. When her process for resettlement began, rather than celebrating the news, she found herself facing a huge loss. After the death of her first husband, she was married as a second wife to a Somali Bantu man residing in the camps. In order to qualify for resettlement, her husband was forced to choose only one wife, in accordance with the laws of the United States. So Hawa suddenly found herself without a husband and with their two children to care for. The very process of resettlement, rather than alleviating Hawa's suffering, has continued to unravel the already worn threads that tied together her social world.

Resettlement also led to the loss of her daughter. After the outbreak of war, Hawa was separated from her daughter indefinitely, as she stayed behind to care for Hawa's sister who was

too old and frail to make the long journey from Somalia to the camps on foot. When applying for resettlement, Hawa had to deny her maternal relationship to her daughter because she had been informed that her resettlement was contingent upon the presence of all living children. This has left her with deep feelings of guilt:

I see the tape of my granddaughter telling me ‘oh my grandmother, I want to come to the United States to be with you.’ When I hear that I just cry. I can’t do anything about it now... I encountered all these problems to get to the United States. Some of them I forget. If I try to remember, my mind will change to forget. When I think about this I feel very bad. If I remember, my heart changes. When the heart grows sad, everything stops. I cannot move, I feel heavy things on my heart. I feel frozen. In 2007 my heart stopped and I fell down and my children called 911.

Despite this continuous suffering, Hawa admitted that this was the first time she had ever shared her story. “Nobody ever asked me about it” she said. “If someone would have asked me surely, I would have told them”.

These last words were alarming. How could Hawa have never been asked about her story? How had she qualified for refugee status and resettlement without providing the reasons behind her fear of persecution? Why do we force people like Hawa to be silent; to bury these secrets deep inside themselves, only afterwards to diagnose them with PTSD because they can’t talk about it? As difficult as it was for her talk about her past experiences, there was something very urgent about her sadness that brought the past into the present with full force. She did not seem to suffer because she remembered, but because she had a deep, ongoing knowledge about these events, and how they had so dramatically altered the rest of her life.

### **Bodies, Spaces, Suffering**

As these narrative excerpts show, trauma is not an external force which is suddenly thrust upon us. Rather, it is a historical production which, over time, creates a marked difference between life before and after violence. It is this knowledge that connects these events to everyday life, thereby making them “traumatic”. Veena Das refers to this as the sense of reinhabiting the world “in a gesture of mourning for it” (Das 2007:77).

Both narratives reveal how Somali Bantu’s sense of “being in the world” has been damaged through the war and resettlement. Abdi, when speaking of the death of his brothers, does not discuss the explicit details of how they were killed, but focuses on how their deaths lead to an ongoing disruption to his everyday life by signaling danger and forcing him to flee his home, eventually leading to the rape of his wife.

Hawa begins her narrative by discussing how the violence of the war irrevocably damaged her relationship to her brothers. Because the relationship between siblings born of the same mother and father cannot be reproduced, it reflects the mourning of something irreplaceable. But the suffering is complicated further when one considers the modern implications of living without one’s male relatives in this culture, and especially in the foreign context of the United States.

Another troubling trend which emerges through the narratives is the internalization of inferiority and subordination. For Abdi, the discrimination that marked his life in Somalia is traced back to a racialized identity. Early silence on slave history became prevalent during the institution of then-president Siyad Barre’s “laws of nationhood” in the 1970s which sought to minimize social disunity by banning any mention of tribal affiliation. Somali Bantu living in Somalia during this time implemented the practice of strategic silence on slavery in the hopes that by

downplaying the reasons for their subjugation, they would finally realize an equal social status to their Somali counterparts (Besteman 1993). Buckley-Zistel (2006) has discussed this “chosen amnesia” in her work with Rwandan refugees, as a coping mechanism through which refugees silence trauma in order to continue to coexist in the same social space with perpetrators of the violence.

Following from this, “forgetting”, and the inconsistencies that consequently arise, are not the result of carelessness or negligence on the part of the Somali Bantu community. Rather, they are the result of strategic uses of collective silence that illustrate collective efforts of mending Somali Bantu identity. Initially, strategic silence is drawn upon to eliminate traumatic experiences from the collective consciousness in an effort to reduce the stigma associated with Somali Bantu identity, as well as to reproduce the sense of social unity. Thus at the start, silence breeds the loss of a particular historical narrative deemed negative in the present in the hopes of gaining an alternative through which positive social changes may be realized.

Over the span of generations, however, the loss becomes an absence; no longer strategic or “chosen”, but genuinely absent from Somali Bantu collective memory. The lack of such an important piece of Somali Bantu experience leads to a troubling conflation between the causes and effects of violence among members of this group. Without this narrative, many Somali Bantu today are left to wonder about the causes of their persecution without the major event of slavery to inform their inquiries. While the history of an economic-based slavery was a major reason for the social isolation, persecution, and marginalization of Somali Bantu in Somalia, members of this community today who have little to no knowledge of this history attribute the reasons for isolation to their racial identity as *jareer*, and the body maps (Malkki 1995) of Somalia are reproduced in the post-resettlement phase.

Many comments surfaced during the course of my fieldwork which revolved around the idea of black as an inherently negative characteristic, signaling a collective internalization of racism. Remaining silent on this particular memory, as the Somali Bantu leaders explained, protects Somali Bantu from recalling an unnecessarily painful memory that is “irrelevant” to their present lives. But this “irrelevance” is called into question as one begins to notice the internalized racism that has emerged, first from the loss of the story through silence, and second from the genuine absence of the narrative altogether. One man, for example, admitted the following:

We don't like to be called African American because we are not. We are afraid our children will think they are African American when they grow up then they will behave badly...Do you like to be called something you are not? African Americans are different from us in many ways. They are loud and they are not Muslim. Sometimes they steal and they do drugs. This is not something we can ever do. These things are wrong for us.

While the growing fear of the African Americanization of their children is generally the concern of the men in the community, the understanding of black as something shameful surfaced during my time with the Somali Bantu women in their homes. On one occasion I brought a framed picture of myself with a woman named Farah, as a gift. Upon seeing the picture she immediately covered the image of herself with her hand, saying “look at me. I'm so black. You're white, so pretty. Black is no good.” On another occasion, I was presented with a small white doll. Farah's family excitedly told me that the young daughter had named the doll after me. Curious, I inquired as to why. They responded “because she's white like you.”

Furthermore, although it is common to see Somali Bantu women wearing the *hijab* in public, I wondered why even in the privacy of their homes, all of the women and female children donned the Islamic *Hijab*. Many of the women admitted their hatred of the texture of their hair, citing it

as “kinky black people’s hair” which they wished to conceal. Children argued over who was lighter-skinned, and therefore, more beautiful.

On a visit to the home of Farah after the birth of her daughter, she told me, “my daughter is telling me that my baby is black and she’s not from our family! What do you think? *Is my baby too black?*” She insisted that the “blackness” was from her husband’s side of the family, as her own father was “very, very light, very white.”

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1991) is especially helpful in understanding class divisions, Somali Bantu subordination, and the reproduction of the “body maps” (Malkki 1995). The lower social status of Somali Bantu is symbolic of the racial violence associated with the history of slavery. Being *jareer* extends beyond the physical features it seeks to characterize. It is a reference to a very particular historical lineage based on slavery and infused with a long history of social subordination. As Besteman (1999) has explained, “it is a term which refers to history—that of non-Somali pagan slave origins; a history devalued in Somali culture and ideology. The effect in social terms of carrying a *jareer* identity was a denigrated status within Somali social structure” (118). The absence of the slave narrative has meant forgetting about the social construction of race in Somalia and the economic reasons for which slavery became rooted in racial rather than religious differences. Consequently the racialized inferiority of Somali Bantu has become so deeply intertwined with the social fabric of Somali society that its origins are now taken for granted as universal and absolute. The residual effects of this symbolic violence thus surface in the Somali Bantu self-image.

It is no surprise then that Somali Bantu quietly accept their marginalized status in Kansas City, living life *around* Americans, rather than among them. Therefore the resettlement of Somali Bantu to marginal spaces plays a major role in reproducing and solidifying the belief in an inherent inferiority—an identity that warrants isolation and exclusion—within this culture of exile.

In a rushed effort to resettle refugees, spatially-strategic resettlement divides society along various lines of inequality. These lines are maintained through “public secrets” (Taussig 1999) which, when kept, confirm a familiar and structured spatial order. That certain spaces of a city are “ghettos” where bad things happen, and others are “safe”, and that ghettos are associated with certain demographics, and safe areas with others, is no coincidence. Members of a society are complicit in these spatial divisions as long as this secret of segregation is kept; an easy task considering that divulging the secret may result in further exclusion, isolation, and even hostility.

Thus the Somali Bantu must keep this secret from the larger American public which is oftentimes perceived as hostile towards refugees. Take for example the situation in Emporia, Kansas where the influx of Somali refugees was greeted with a slew of headlines reporting that “Tyson Foods Brings Latent Tuberculosis to Emporia” followed by comments from Emporians such as “go home! This is not a refugee camp”. After much popular opposition to the continued resettlement of Somali refugees to this small city, hundreds of refugee families were laid off from their employment at the Tyson meat-packing plant, uprooted, and dispersed to new resettlement sites across the United States.

The general lack of both media and public attention to this situation should alert us to a larger problem of differential social capital—that refugees, stained by the experience of uprootedness and all the obstacles that follow from it, hold little social worth. And while this should be alarming to us as academics and researchers, those who must live with this realization are the same individuals whom our society accepts only on the condition that they remain confined to

the margins. The fear of being viewed as “ungrateful” or as an even bigger burden for America, forces the knowledge of inequality into secrecy.

Somali Bantu must also keep the secret from family members still residing in the refugee camps in Kenya, or in Somalia. Abdi’s spatial relocation, for example, coupled with his injury and illiteracy, has limited Abdi’s ability to achieve the successful “American” provider role which his relatives in Somalia expect him to be. The emergence of this “provider complex” is a new source of trauma produced only after resettlement.

Stressing the interconnections between space and lived, corporeal experience, Edward Casey argues that the “lived body is coterminous with place because it is by bodily movement that I find my way in place and take up habitation there” (Casey 1987:180). But the interaction between body and space is more intimate than this statement infers. Not only is it through the physical body that we find spaces to inhabit, but it is through the body that social hierarchies are constructed, and the deficiencies of certain social spaces are inevitably expressed. Physically deteriorating spaces with poor ventilation, poor sanitation, and generally inadequate living conditions certainly impact one’s health. But also, as in the cases of Hawa, Abdi, and others, spaces where “normal” is defined by an ascribed physical inferiority, followed by a lack of access to affordable healthcare, lack of access to transportation, high unemployment rates where illiteracy places one at a terrible disadvantage, shouldering large amounts of debt, struggling to make ends meet, and fearing the consequences of forgetting to lock one’s doors at night will inevitably take a toll on one’s body and one’s sense of self. In other words, it is on and through the physical body where larger structural forces come to be inscribed.

Abdi’s scarred hands bear witness to more than a long life of agricultural work. They are the hands of a black body in a social space where blackness has come to distinguish former slaves from masters, thus casting these bodies into physically marginal spaces of suffering. These markings, therefore, reveal the consequences of being labeled *jareer*, and the limited opportunities available to him outside of agricultural or manual labor. Thus it can be said that Abdi’s hands have come to embody the difficulties, inequalities, and injustices of his social reality. The injury to his knee, incurred after resettlement, reveals the perpetuation of these previous inequalities in his present life. Lack of access to education in Somalia because of his status as *jareer* has limited his work opportunities in the States to manual labor, even at the age of sixty-five.

The bullet scar on Hawa’s leg, more than a sad reminder of the death of her brother, represents what it meant to be an African minority in Somalia, and the increased vulnerability of these groups during the war. Hawa’s heart attack also demonstrates embodied traumas from her past and present combined. Furthermore, her medical debt and her dealings with the American legal system have produced new sources of suffering in her life in the United States.

Failure to recognize that the spaces to which refugees are resettled are actually spaces of suffering translates into a failure to successfully anticipate and alleviate sources of trauma. It is within these newly resettled spaces that Somali Bantu must, once again, join the ranks of those who occupy the bottom rung of a hierarchical social ladder, and where trauma is reproduced. For many Somali Bantu in Kansas City, little improvement has been made. Worse yet is the possibility that life has become even more difficult due to the reproduction, and production, of trauma in the post-resettlement phase.

With this culturally-embedded approach to traumatic memory in mind, one may begin to understand how the suffering portrayed by the widely circulated images of refugees, and the state-centric notions of identity which we draw from them, slowly influence and alter our

perceptions of the healthy body and the sick body, undermining individual experiences of trauma. In the aftermath of resettlement, healthy bodies are associated with rootedness, and sick bodies with uprootedness, regardless of the suffering these supposedly “rooted” bodies continue to endure.

## Works Cited

Besteman, Catherine

1993 Public History and Private Knowledge: On Disputed History in Southern Somalia. *Ethnohistory* 40(4):563-586.

1999 *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre

1991 *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Buckley-Zistel, Susanne

2006 Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76(2):131-150.

Edward Casey

1987 *Remembering: A phenomenological study* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Veena Das

2007 *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

James Fulcher

2000 Globalization, the nation-state and global society. *The Sociological Review*.

Harrel-Bond, Barbara E., and Eftihia Voutira

1992 Anthropology and the Study of Refugees. *Anthropology Today* 8(4):7.

Riva Kastoryano

2004 Religion and Incorporation: Islam in France and Germany. *International Migration Review* 38(3):1234-1255.

Liisa Malkki

1992 National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1):24-44.

1995 *Purity and Exile: violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

1996 Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3):377-404.

Peter Nyers

1999 Emergency or Emerging Identities? Refugees and Transformation in World Order. *Journal of International Studies* 28(1):3.

Michael Taussig

1999 Defacement: public secrecy and the labor of the negative. Stanford: Stanford University Press.