

African Minorities in the New World

**Edited by
Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi**

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IN THE NEW WORLD

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Toyin Falola
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Chapter Seven

The Making of a Modern Diaspora: The Resettlement Process of the Somali Bantu Refugees in the United States

Omar A. Eno and Mohamed A. Eno

INTRODUCTION

A refugee is an individual with a national origin no longer enjoying the protection of the national government and who had not acquired the nationality of the host country. Thousands of Somali refugees are scattered all over the world waiting to acquire the citizenship of their respective host nations, as part of the process in the making of a modern Diaspora. According to the 2002 world refugee survey,¹ there are 40 million displaced people throughout the world, of whom 15 million are asylum seekers. In addition, the prospect of life and liberty in the United States has attracted immigrants and fortune seekers from all over the world. However, about 13,500 Somali Bantu refugees currently being resettled in the United States are among those persons forced either into exile or internally displaced because of the ongoing regional war in southern Somalia. The Somali Bantu regions were seized and are under the control of the warring nomadic militiamen, thus forcing the Bantu to flee because of well-founded fear of persecution. Prior to their acceptance into the United States for resettlement, the Bantu refugees were willing to resettle anywhere in the world because their war wrecked homeland (Somalia) was not an option for them.²

The over 13,500 Somali Bantu refugees in the United States are also in the making of a modern Diaspora. This is the largest African group ever granted a non-forced migration to resettle in the US as a persecuted "minority" group. The so-called regional war in Somalia, which began in 1991, has led to the collapse of the social system and governmental structures. In the face of this situation, millions of Somalis took refuge

in parts of the country as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and in the neighboring countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Yemen, seeking asylum and a safe haven. Most of the Somali Bantu refugees crossed into the neighboring border of Kenya where the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has established camps.³ Among the most affected groups by the Somali inter- and intra-tribal regional war are the Somali Bantu who inhabit in the inter-riverine valleys and in the interior, off Juba and Shabelle rivers (Eno, 2002). The Somali Bantu are considered a "minority" group in southern Somalia whose members are ethnically and culturally distinct. They are openly discriminated against and derogatively detested as inferior people by the dominant-clans, Somali nomads. During the Somali regional war, thousands of Bantu farmers were robbed, raped, and murdered. After an exhausting struggle of advocacy for resettlement by concerned individuals, in 1999, the United States Congress approved the resettlement process of about 13,500 Somali Bantu refugees from Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya. The first batch of new settlers began arriving into the United States in mid 2003, while the process is currently approaching completion because over 12,000 of those refugees have already reached the US. It is likely that for the remaining batch of refugees the resettlement process will be concluded by the year 2006.

This chapter addresses the underpinning factors of the following questions; 1) Why are the Somali Bantu people the most victimized community by the warring factions? 2) Why is the Somali war confined to the south including the Bantu regions, while the provinces of the nomadic warring factions are relatively peaceful and calm? The chapter also observes the existing relationship between the Somali dominant clans (nomads) in the US and the newly arrived Somali Bantu refugees. Relevantly, we shall also examine whether their relationship and interactions in the Diaspora has changed/improved. Our observation regarding Bantu—Nomad relationship is partly incited by the existence in the past of imbalanced association of the two groups, which was based on a superior attitude and self-ennoblement by the Somali nomads and an inferior social status, which they (nomads) created for the subjugated Bantu population. Methodologically, the primary research used in this study is mostly ethnographic. The empirical data collection includes oral tradition, oral history, personal interviews, and written materials. Before we proceed to the main body of this chapter, the following is a brief historical overview on the background of the Somali Bantu, their origins and their place within Somali society.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SOMALI BANTU AND THEIR SOCIAL STATUS IN SOUTHERN SOMALIA

This study focuses on the southern territory that was colonized by Italy, also referred to as the southern regions. In southern Somalia, there are two groups of Bantu origin who are sedentary farmers, and, locally known as *Jareer* (Lit. "kinky hair"). The first group resides along the banks of the Shabelle River and is believed to be the indigenes of that region, the Shabelle river valley. During the Somali war, a large number of them are believed to have taken flight to Yemen, and continue to stay in refugee camps there to date.⁴ The second group of Bantu, which resides along the banks of Juba River valley, and known as *Wazigwa*, took refuge to the neighboring borders of Kenya, under the mandate of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). As we emphasized earlier, the first group of Bantu along the Shabelle River valley composes of the autochthons to their current location of abode, their residence in this territory preceding both the early arrival of the Galla/Oroma and the later migration of the dominant nomadic Somalis, which many scholars have described as a more recent movement.⁵

However, the second group of Bantu along the Juba River valley consists of the descendants of ex-slaves, originally imported from south-east Africa by Arab/Swahili commercial planters and later sold to local Somali slave traders early in the nineteenth century. They were specifically brought from regions such as Tanganyika, Pemba, Zanzibar, Mozambique, and Malawi, to the coastal cities of southern Somalia, such as Brava, Kismayo, Marka, and Mogadishu (O. Eno, *Abolition of Slavery*). They were exploited and used as slave laborers in the commercially oriented plantations overseen by a combination of Arab/Swahili and Somali merchants. They were imported into Somalia to grow grain and other food products to be exported to the then expanding population of the Omani Empire in the East African Coast and to the markets of southern Arabia and the Middle East.⁶ Slaves were also used as means of transportation for the movement of merchandise such as Ivory from the southern Somali interior to the coastal cities. They were as well exploited in the thriving weaving textile industry in the Banadir area, particularly in the city of Marka. After dwelling in southern Somalia for almost two centuries, some of the *Wazigwa* people vividly remember their ancestral country of origin and how they were transported into Somalia.

According to Cassanelli, around 1903, Salemi, who was a runaway slave in Somalia, sought refuge and the protection of the Italian abolitionists,

according to Salemi, he was captured on the Mrima coast of Tanganyika with about 40 companions by Arab traders of Sur.⁷ Then, Salemi and his companions were transported into Somalia through the port city of Marka two decades ago. According to the Bantu oral traditions, the Wazigwa people left their country of origin (modern Tanzania) because of several years of severe and consecutive famine and droughts and because of the prospect to work on a fertile land in southern Somalia as laborers.⁸ Subsequently, the Omani-Arab merchants, who assured to take the Wazigwa to their rescue in a fertile land where famine and drought had never been a concern, duped them into slavery.⁹ However, other scholars believe that some of the Wazigwa people might have deliberately sold their children and themselves off because of persistent droughts, which affected Tanganyika early in the nineteenth century. As we enlightened earlier, the Arab-Omanis brought them (the Bantu) to Somalia and later sold them to local Somalis along the coastal cities as slaves to meet the increasing demand for labor to grow grains, particularly sorghum, maize, and sesame seeds.¹⁰

After a few years of being entrapped in Somalia as slaves, the Bantu, particularly the Wazigwa, decided to rebel against slavery. They escaped and established a safe haven and a maroon society with an impenetrable defense along the banks of Juba River valley, locally known as Gosha. Thus, Gosha became a safe haven and an independent polity for all runaway slaves; later it was dismantled by the Italian colonialists who took over Somalia in 1890s as part of their colonial domain. Up until late in the 19th century, the Banadir coastal cities of Somalia were under the domain of the Arab-Omani Sultanate of Zanzibar. Subsequently, Italy purchased the Banadir coasts and immediately established a military might to be reckoned with and became part of its European colony in the Horn of Africa.

In addition to the slave labor, though, the Somali nomads treated the Bantu people callously. As Hess notes in his report, drawn from information obtained from Italian archives, "... slaves were harshly treated, often kept in manacles and fetters, overworked, and underfed."¹¹ Several Somali Hawiye sub-clans of nomadic origin in the interior such as the Gaaljael, the Wadan, the Bimal, and the Mobilen had owned slaves for farming purposes. Since the aforementioned groups possessed the nomadic Somali's traditional disdain for agriculture, they viewed owning slaves was a necessity for labor and for survival.¹² The above-mentioned groups not only owned slaves, but they were also inhumanely harsh to their subjects. This inhumane treatment was noted by colonial officers who reported, "Slaves and their wives, being laborers, were housed miserably in small, half-roofed huts, with their usual food [of] parched Indian corn and fish from the river."¹³ In the first decade of the 20th century, Italy abolished

slavery in southern Somalia. Immediately after the abolition, the European colonial regime introduced a coerced labor system, which indiscriminately conscripted the emancipated Bantu ex-slaves, the runaways, and the Bantu indigenes who were all exclusively used in the Italian agricultural scheme (Menkhaus 1989). Unlike in West Africa, where slave treatment was more passive, in the sense that slaves somehow resigned to their servile status but silently struggled to resist and to create more room for him/herself,¹⁴ in east Africa, slaves were harshly treated so they rebelled. According to our perception, all of these harsh treatments and poor living conditions might have been responsible for the slave rebellion that has taken root in southern Somalia.

A heroine by the name of Wanakucha coordinated the mutinous operation. The reason behind the rebellion was to return to their respective countries of origin in southeast Africa (Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi). Unfortunately, it was an arduous and impossible journey by foot, so the leader, Wanakucha, decided to settle them in a place known as Gosha (Forest), which is located along the Juba River, a settlement where their current name of Heer-Goleet (people of the forest) derived. They cleared the forest and established new abodes and farming lands for survival as well as a strong defense mechanism against the pursuing ex-slave masters, Somali nomads. By the 1940s, there was the rise of a Somali national movement against Italian occupation, which demanded independence for Somalia. The Bantu sided with the Somalis (ex-slave masters) to resist against the Italian colonialists where Nassib Bunde (leader of Gosha at the time) was arrested by the Italians and later died in a colonial prison.

In 1960, Somalia obtained its independence from Italy and it was the hope of every Somali to prosper under an independent Somali flag. Unfortunately, that was not the case for the Somali-Bantu people, who were and still are discriminated against and kept languishing at the bottom rung of the social strata¹⁵ because of the stigma of slavery, which is still haunting them. In October 1969, the army ousted the Somali civilian government and the late Siyad Barre became the head of the Military Regime. In 1991, after 21 years of Siyad Barre's military dictatorship under an autocratic regime, a militia group overthrew Barre, because the Somali people were dissatisfied with the political leadership of the military junta. Subsequently, a new armed wing from the same dominant clan had emerged. This new militia group, consisting mainly of the Hawiye clan family, known as the United Somali Congress (USC), actually overthrew Siyad Barre's military government.¹⁶ From 1991 to date, the militia groups who ousted Siyad Barre's Military Regime could not form a legitimate and viable government that could be recognized by all Somalis and by the international community.

To the despair of the Bantu people, the replacement of the military regime did not result in freedom and justice. Instead, it resulted in the replacement of one tribal dictatorship with many militia dictatorships, and a continuance of the macabre injustices¹⁷ and land prowling of the highest degree. Therefore, Somalia continues to suffer from anarchic and uncompromising de-facto governments based on warlordism. As a result of that, many Somalis were hit hard by that painful "civil war," the most affected among them being the Somali Bantu who were raped, robbed and killed by various militia groups from dominant clans. In Somalia, the Bantu were viewed as the African Diaspora from southeast Africa (Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi) to another African nation, Somalia. Consequently, after almost two centuries of abuse and discrimination in Somalia, and having been treated as inferior stock of humans by the Somali nomads, in 2003, a new Diaspora journey for the Bantu has begun, but this time to the US. For elaboration, the following is a description of the social imbalances, economic exploitation, and resource control subjected to the Bantu by the nomadic clans that claimed "nobility" for themselves.

THE PLIGHT OF THE SOMALI BANTU POPULATION

The potential plight of the Somali Bantu community has been predicted in the 1960s by a team of scholars called The International Committee of Urgent Anthropological and Ethnic Research: "For all we know, the future of the group [Bantu] as an entity ethnically and culturally distinct from the dominant Somali [nomad] may well be in grave danger from the moment the Italian administration withdraws from Somali land."¹⁸ That premonition is evidently supported by the fact that from 1991 to current, the inter-clan and intra-clan war among the nomads has caused a total collapse of the Somali nation, intensifying the agony of the Bantu community in particular. Simultaneously, the country continues to remain in a state of anarchy, which is intertwined with intricacies of clan rivalries led by several unruly warlords aiming for the control of Bantu resources.

In view of this circumstance, the question that instantly comes to mind is; how is it conceivable that a nation such as Somalia, whose people supposedly belong to a "homogeneous society," sharing one language, one religion, and one culture, could disintegrate so severely and remain so irreconcilable? A section of the scholarship has suggested that the motive for the Somali regional war was embedded in power struggle, clan rivalry, personalities, greed, and in the legacy of the Cold War. Others have portrayed their views as due to inequitable distribution of resources that were very limited in nature. However, in this chapter, we argue that among the main

ingredients that precipitated Somalia's regional war and the current political turmoil are entrenched vehemently in urban resources. These resources, in our belief, do not only consist of monetary grants and foreign aid from the international community as the case is often purported by certain scholars, but likewise involve potential local capital such as land, labor, water, harbor control, and the enabling environment that provides access to their exploitation.¹⁹

Although the impact of national politics on a locally produced resource is a common phenomenon to a diverse population in Africa, even the so-called "homogeneous" society like the Somalis is not immune. In order to control the national resources, the warring militia groups from the nomads have expropriated the agricultural fertile land between the rivers Juba and Shabelle in southern Somalia, in other words the Banadir and its environs. This land belongs to Somalia's victims of war and non-partisan groups, such as the Bantu and others. From independence in 1960 to date, the nomadic groups who arrogated to themselves the right to govern Somalia, and abrogated the democratic system at will, utterly dominated Somalia's sociopolitical as well as socio-economic system, thus leaving no room for inclusiveness or a turn-taking system in the nation's leadership. The "minorities" in southern Somalia particularly the Bantu, are victimized because of various reasons: one, they are the most vulnerable group in southern Somalia because they are not armed like the militia nomadic groups whose culture is embedded in belligerence. Another factor that makes the Bantu victims is that they are non-partisan; they opted to remain impartial in the ongoing tribal feud in the south. They choose not to support any of the warring nomadic clans or sub-clans. In addition to the aforementioned reasons regarding the Bantu victimization, is their ethnic composition and physical feature (the Negroid look), which places them distinctly from that of the nomadic groups. Due to these circumstances, their status became subjugation and as an inferior stock of humans of slave ancestry. Above all, the most significant *raison d'être* is their ownership of the most arable, most fertile, and most habitable agricultural land in the entirety of the Somali peninsula. On the other hand, the Bantu are traditionally known to be the most laborious and productive people in Somalia. In sum, the two rivers (Juba and Shabelle), which run parallel in Bantu regions, provide an abundant source of water for irrigation and livelihood, with potential to sustain and develop the whole inter-riverine south, if not the country at large.²⁰ For all practical purposes, therefore, a combination of the above-mentioned dynamics places the minorities particularly the Bantu in a precarious and susceptible situation, because the Somali nomads have acquired the guns, weapons that the Bantu spurn as tools subversive to human development.

Without any consideration to Somali society's sufferings, almost every Somali leadership wasted the nation's scarce resources on nonsensical and unjustifiable avenues, such as tribal defense and the security of the late life-president and his family. Although the infrastructures established in Bantu areas are undeveloped, even those developed around the nomadic groups such as schools, hospitals, and roads, the state bureaucracy allowed them to become rundown. However, this trend should not obscure the reality that state officials had access to better facilities abroad. With influence and availability of state resources, their children were safely tucked away into expensive foreign institutions,²¹ while the children of ordinary Somali citizens are discriminated and abandoned to decay in the squalid ghettos of Buur Koroole, Boon Dheere, Buulo Eelaay, Buulo Tiinka and Baraaka Cabdoow, in Mogadishu.²² It is appropriate and safe to say that the Somali Bantu felt (and still feel) like foreigners in their own homeland after being alienated ethnically from political participation in all post-colonial administrations, and presently surrounded by violent armed gangs from the Cushitic nomads.

For a Somali Bantu, acquired or inherited status such as being a King, Queen, Prince, Princess, or as an elite of outstanding academic performance and wisdom, do not put him at par with his/her peers in the society. As long as the Bantu's physical features resemble those of the Negroid looking Africans, and as long as the quality of his/her hair texture is *Jareer* (kinky), then with all intents and purposes he/she falls in the undesirable race of those humans considered as descendants of slave ancestry, *Adoon* (slave). Catherine Besteman noted ". . . the [Bantu] category is equated with "African"—and thus slave—ancestry, as distinguished from the (mythical) "Arabic" ancestry of [nomadic] Somalis."²³

To the contrary, regardless of one's ancestral background, lack of education, and less contribution to national development, as long as the texture of one's hair is soft like that of the Cushitic Somali, hence *Jileec* (lit. soft hair), one automatically qualifies for ascription as the descendant of a pedigree from Arabian "nobility." Nobility that the world is mystified to determine its exact origin, as Mukhtar elucidates, "Although Somalis claim they are homogeneous, the exact origin of their race remains mysterious."²⁴ Due to the aforementioned social classification and physical labeling amongst Somali society, purported particularly by the nomads, the identity of the indigenous Bantu people along the river valley areas in southern Somalia was distorted as "imported slaves" because of their physical resemblance (Negroid) to the ex-slave Bantu, a status that is undesirable phenomenon in Somali society. As Eno states, "The Negroid features of the Bantu soon became a distinct identity where people with such features were classified

as slaves and subjected to a variety of discriminatory practices regardless of where they came from. As a result, for the majority of slave owning groups, Negroid features became synonymous with inferior status," (O. Eno, *Landless Landlords*, 138).

It is also noteworthy to envisage that, in Somalia, identity shapes one's place in society and gives one a sense of belonging amongst Somalis. In fact, if one belongs to a powerful sub-clan or clan, it earns one status and other exceptional privileges. Identity also bears the potential to opportune one with an unprecedented access to the looting of the national economy, top political position, and high quality education, which the Bantu people were exempted due to their derogatively tainted identity classifying them all as imported slaves with Negroid physical properties. Although our study delving into a Somalo-Italian conspiracy against the Bantu is not conclusive, suggestions have it that the Somali nomads and the Italian colonialists deliberately smudged the authenticity of the majority of the Bantu people along the river valley into an ambiguous ethnic origin, with the intention to deny them their primordial citizenship as first class citizens.²⁵ As Besteman highlights, ". . . the origin of the reer Shabelle [Bantu] people of upper Shabelle is unclear, [even though] they are not connected so overtly with a slave past," (Besteman 1999, 186).

The plight of the Somali Bantu includes their paradigmatic denial to political participation and the marginalization against them upon parliamentary representation. In 2002–2004, when the Somalis were forming an interim government in Kenya, all the nomadic Somali clans were allocated an appropriate and equal number of representatives in the parliament. However, the Bantu and other "minority" groups were denied equal representation as non-qualifiers, hence a connotation of non-Somaliness (Eno, M. 2005). Discriminatorily, a dubious committee composed of exclusively nomads engineered an infamous strategy based on which they formulated an unequal and inequitable allocation of the parliamentary seats, commonly celebrated as 4.5 (four—point—five) Clan Power Sharing Formula. In other words, all the so-called four pastoral and agro-pastoral clans Darod, Dir, Hawiye, and Digil-Mirifle were each given one full representation whereas the minority and Bantu people were entirely lumped together to share half representation, hence 0.5 (point five). The group that was given half representation or literally half-Somali status, (minorities and Bantu) consists of the few communities in Somalia that did not take up arms against any clan during the Somali regional war; put in another way, they refrained from committing any atrocities against the society. Deplorably, according to the nomadic culture, these peace-loving communities do not qualify for full/equal representation, in either parliament or government, since they did

not arm themselves to indulge in the dehumanization that shrank the entire south Somalia to graveyards. Ridiculous though it may sound, in order to qualify for equal representation (according to nomado-cultural pastoral democracy), and full status of Somaliness, these marginalized communities should have first committed against humanity crimes commensurate to those meted out by the nomads themselves.²⁶

According to Rasheed Farah, from an outcast minority group, Somalia needs, "A state that recognizes and appreciates Somalia's cocktail and conglomerate culture and traditions, where ethnic fairness and justice are the moral basis, where people are judged by the content of their character, not by the community and clan they belong to. Consequently, fairness and justice can secure the normative structure for a new egalitarian system in which Somalis of every ethnic background are treated and valued equally."²⁷

We may reveal that the reality on the ground in southern Somalia is quite different from the myth of homogeneity and egalitarianism, a mythical knowledge often promulgated by the Somali nomads. It is also worthwhile mentioning that there are no intermarriages or intermingling between the nomads and the Bantu because of clan and class stratification. The lack of intermarriage between the two communities prevented from building a common family bond and compassion between them during difficult times. For example, militiamen loyal to certain nomadic warlords have been forcing Bantu farmers, including women and children in the fertile zone of the inter-riverine region, to work on plantations without any compensation save a meager diet of boiled beans consumed once a day, and only after work. Not only are these people denied their rightful earnings, but they are also turned into slaves, denied and subverted of their personhood because there are no blood-ties to bridge the racial gap. The warlords and few foreign companies benefit from the sweat and travail of the forced laborers from the farming communities. The victims are confined to semi-prison camps guarded over by the de-facto authority group, the militia. These poor Bantu farmers exist in the shadow of oppression, isolation, and exploitation, leading a perturbed life of perpetual intimidation. Stories of humiliation, horror and ill treatment in Somalia are not isolated incidents though. Numbers are hard to come by, but estimates exceed that thousands upon thousands of this community are antagonized, killed, raped and maimed as daily routine.²⁸

The warring nomads target the Bantu population for no other reason than that they did not fit in the Somali nomad's framework of Somaliness. However, that framework is often faulty, as Kusow postulates that although Somalis are often portrayed as a self-same nation, that notion

itself downplays and sometimes violently oppresses the aspirations of others.²⁹ From Aw-Dhegle to the banks of Bu'aleh, where most local farming settlers are unarmed, militiamen who have abandoned the camel nomadic life are oppressing these communities. Indeed, these young nomads have never acquired a skill for trade or to earn an income in urban cities, except being Morian (armed youth gangs), who are attached to and take their orders from their clan leaders although the only associable characteristics of leadership in their portfolio rests only in that of killer-ship, (Eno, M. 2005).

In 1992, during the Somali tribal war, some warlords and their militia refused all humanitarian relief supplies that were meant to be delivered to the most devastated and hunger-stricken areas, namely the inter-riverine region of Somalia. This resulted in an astounding number of deaths due to starvation of nearly 300,000 people, mainly women and children. As a result of this manmade disaster and destruction in the inter-riverine areas, mortality and malnutrition rates reached a peak in Baidoa (the city of death), and its surroundings, turning the region into "one big graveyard." The Somali nomadic warlords' actions show clearly that, at present, Somalia's main problem is not solely due to clan rivalry but to the murderous ambitions of the war criminals (warlords).³⁰

THE SOMALI REGIONAL WAR AND THE WREST CONTROL OF BANTU LAND

Unlike others who categorize the Somali conflict as a "civil war," in this chapter we take a different direction by calling it a "regional war" between multifarious Somali clans and sub-clans that are contending for the control of local and international resources. First, the war in Somalia is utterly confined in the south, while other regions of the nomads are relatively experiencing calm and tranquility. Secondly, those quiet nomadic regions have in fact either declared regional autonomy or seceded as an independent state such as the Republic of Somaliland in the north, the autonomous region of Puntland in east-central, and others awaiting just the slightest opportunity to announce their self-autonomy.³¹

As we read in many academic texts, journals, and newsletters, Somalis are a predominantly nomadic society with a traditionally nomadic way of governing. Colonialists, however, introduced the concept of state through their cities where societies were often sedentary. Then, the question that begs for an answer is, why is the world astounded with the lack of a central government in Somalia, knowing that from independence to date, the Somali state was utterly controlled and dominated by the nomadic groups? Yet,

the concept of a state is the creation of settled societies³² and is no way a suitable institution for the nomads whose traditional system of governance, coded 'pastoral democracy', has failed the country. From this background, we may hypothesize that the current chaotic situation in southern Somalia is, veritably, as a consequence of the visionless nature of long-enduring schemes of nomadic governance and their inept socio-political system of democracy (O. Eno, 2004).

Regrettably, the southern regions became the battlefields for the contending warlords for resources. Amazingly though, it is the very nomads from the far and strange regions who are fighting amongst themselves for the control of southern regions while the real owners of the region (minorities) are pushed to the side because of being unarmed! From Somalia's independence in July 1960, the minorities particularly the Bantu were excluded from the political process, economic opportunities, and educational advancement. Therefore, when the war broke out in 1991 in the south, they had neither the trained youth to protect the community nor the will to acquire weapons and thus became sufferers thus losing everything including their land.³³

Land looting and economic exploitation in the Inter-riverine and coastal areas of Somalia have a long-standing history throughout the period of Italian colonization down to the period of civil anarchy. Eager to exploit the agricultural potential of southern regions, the Italian colonial government set up a settler-based plantation system and development strategy, with large land concessions made to Italian settlers, particularly in the Lower Shabelle, a region near the capital and the coast. While individual settlers were given long-term leaseholds, the state remained the proprietor thereby retaining ultimate property rights.³⁴ In October 1993, an issue of *African Rights* by Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal documented the looting of land from its Bantu owners, which reached unprecedented levels; they said, "This 'land looting' was more comprehensive and far-reaching than any that had gone before; it reached to even the most inaccessible areas along the two rivers. Again, land was acquired by a mixture of purchase, bribery, threat, and outright violent seizure. The legislation for co-operatives was grossly abused as a method of land looting. The beneficiaries were, once again, elites connected with the government."³⁵ Lee V. Cassanelli, an associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and an occasional consultant to the United States Department of State on Somali affairs, has written numerous papers asserting that a major aspect of the Somali crisis that has been largely overlooked by many journalists and analysts is the intense contest for land being waged in the country. The major battlegrounds of the current civil war are located where armed militias are

competing for control of southern Somalia's most productive assets—irrigable land, port facilities, and urban and peri-urban real estate. While journalists (and even many Somalis) continue to frame the current struggle in terms of competing warlords and clan factions, what is at stake is really access to the country's material resources. The allocation of land and water rights will almost certainly remain a critical and contentious issue in Somali reconstruction.³⁶

According to Menkhaus, past exploitation of agricultural land in the Juba valley region and incidents of land expropriation have caused the displacement of thousands of the traditional farmers including the Bantu who practiced farming for generations. Some of the major products that are harvested for export are banana, grapefruit, and others, from which the gains are not distributed equitably by the state. Menkhaus further warns that because of the abundance of agricultural wealth in the Bantu regions, it is not likely the situation will change any time soon. In fact, the region is attracting more Somali nomads and outside investors, [which diminishes the prospect of the Bantu people ever regaining their land].³⁷

John Prendergast also notes that the Bantu land was being manipulated by the state itself. Land tenure laws were manipulated, abrogating individual and group ownership and expropriating all land to the state, such that the country's controlling powers [nomads] were also able to control some of the country's best land.³⁸ Therefore, land tenure in southern Somalia remains a critical issue, which has been described by one Somali official as "a ticking time bomb." It is among the issues that led to the current chaos in Somalia and yet continues to remain at the root of much of the fighting in the south, as Omaar and De Waal confirm, Clan-based militias have ravaged the country, but the commonest reason for their war is land.³⁹ Evidence from an aid official supports the aforementioned view; describing the Bantu and other farmers as historically the most affected populations in the river valley region, while further characterizing the Bantu as "great survivors."⁴⁰ Even prior to the war, Menkhaus noted many poorer Juba valley communities, especially in Gilib and Jamame districts, no longer subsisted on the staple maize dish (soor), instead eating boiled green bananas (moos), earned in exchange for plantation labor, (Menkhaus, 1994).

Reviewing the episode of land misappropriation and land looting in Somalia in his chapter entitled "Land Rush in Somalia", Ahmed Qassim Ali⁴¹ discusses, ". . . how tenure policies enacted by both colonial and post-colonial regimes led to the total alienation of land from its original owners . . ." as he details in depth on what he describes ". . . the unjust land tenure processes that begun (sic) during the Italian Colonial Administration, and adopted and later intensified by the successive post-colonial Somali

regimes." In the south, the nomadic clans have looted at will almost all the Bantu plantations and more than half of the mainly cultivable land most suitable for agricultural production "without any due process," (Ahmed, 2004). Due to this manmade disaster and destruction in Inter-riverine areas, mortality and malnutrition were at a peak in Lower Juba, according to Abdi Aden of Oxfam-UK, characterizing the southern region as "one big graveyard."⁴² The inter-riverine community in Somalia has been the prime victim of looming atrocities, genocide, and massive human rights abuse. Yet, they refrained from retaliating, because retaliation would only make a bad situation worse. Nor has it ever been part of the inter-riverine tradition to mutilate, kill, and torture the unarmed, especially women and children (M. Eno, 2004). Despite the fact that the Bantu were kept at the bottom layer of Somali society, Luling writes that: "Among the effects of the present disaggregation of Somali society, has been the emergence of these people [Bantu], or at least some of the more politically conscious of them, claiming their rights as a community and determined to speak with their voice."⁴³ To that end, we foster the notion that this could probably be the beginning of the end of the Somali dogmatic clan supremacy and its willy-nilly policy towards the Bantu and other communities in Somalia.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SOMALI BANTU REFUGEES IN THE US AND THE REACTION OF THE HOST COMMUNITY

The Somali Bantu refugees have arrived in the US with high expectations. Adaptation to the new culture was anticipated as among the major challenges. Their adaptation process, however, is comparable to the earlier experience of the Nuer, Sudanese community in Minnesota, who were fast enough in their acculturation to the US everyday life.⁴⁴ To facilitate through the process, the US government engaged experts to train the US service providers in the various host states as a preparation measure for this immense resettlement program.

The resettlement of the Somali Bantu reminds one of its contrasts with the Hmong community who had been resettled in the US in the 1970's. The commonality between these two communities (Somali Bantu and Hmong) lies in their social paradigm that (a) both have experienced a long history of discrimination as low status people, (b) agronomic culture dominates as their predominant mode of living, and (c) literacy levels of both communities is low and hence face similar linguistic challenges in the job market, for further reading see.⁴⁵

In order to enhance adaptation, it was suggested that prior to their arrival in the US, the Bantu should undergone a cultural orientation

program in Kakuma Refugee Camp. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the agency mandated to conduct the orientation program during which the refugees are familiarized with aspects of the American culture and way of living.

The resettlement of the Bantu has attracted a mixed reaction from the American community. Although an overwhelming majority of Americans welcomed the initiative with tremendous willingness to support in the process, an insignificant number of anti-immigration people expressed concern. As experts later discovered, the negative sentiments of the anti-immigration and whit-supremacist groups particularly focusing on this case was as a result of misinformation depicting the Bantu as primitive people. The misinformation, which was quoted from non-expert sources/individuals with little knowledge about the Bantu, was later addressed by experts such as Omar Eno and Dan Van Lehman through successive orientation programs in seminars and workshops for members of the US resettlement agencies.

Contrary to the negative depiction of the Bantu as an extremely backward community "incapable of opening a door", the experts have brought into the limelight the various skills many of the Bantu have acquired in trades such as auto-mechanics, electricians, masons, and carpenters, albeit through informal apprenticeship system traditional in Somalia. This revelation has to a considerable extent helped diffuse the negative picture smeared on the Bantu.

The US refugee service providers have stated the Bantu immigrants' fast adaptation to their environment and to the American culture and general way of living. Some have expressed surprise over the fast pace of adaptation, admitting, "We were over-prepared," an undertone of the effects of the earlier misinformation. The service providers remain unequivocal about the Bantu's eagerness for employment regardless of the entry-level although poor English proficiency, like the Hmong, poses a major challenge to the adult Bantu. The outcome of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes has proven tremendous success, with many of the host states reporting positive adult participation. A report elaborates that almost all Bantu learners are performing well in their ESL classes while school-age children go to school regularly. The Bantu realize that in order to break through their obstacles in the job market, they have to improve their English language proficiency. But like the Hmong have experienced, transportation stands as one of the major obstacles to employment.

Notwithstanding the cultural predominance in agriculture, the Bantu in the US have displayed skepticism about farming. Unlike the Hmong who have established distinguished agricultural entrepreneurship, the Somali Bantu are yet to overcome the stigma associated with farming in

their homeland, Somalia, a mode which was utilized as a mechanism to disadvantage them socially as well as psychologically. They gauge their preference between education and agriculture from the perspective of their Somali experience, thus education as their prime choice in the US rather than engage in farming.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SOMALI NOMADS AND THE SOMALI BANTU REFUGEES IN THE US

Overall, the relationship between the Bantu population and the nomads in Somalia can be categorized as the served (nomads) and the server (Bantu), in other words master-servant relationship. The nomads have always dictated to the Bantu what to do and when to do because of their dominance of the governing institutions within Somali society. To substantiate our argument we may quote Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal who, during their research trip to Bantu villages in southern Somalia, after the militias took over the country, witnessed this scene, "In one Bantu village in the lower Giuba, our interview with the village headman was broken up by the Hawiye man [nomad] who claimed he had 'liberated' the village plantation and who ordered 'his' Bantus not to speak to outsiders without his permission. 'I am your master now,' he shouted, as he manhandled the elder away from us. 'I will come back and kill you if you do this again.' Throughout the research, farmers were both passionate about the subject of land tenure, and frightened of letting their identities be known," (Omaar and de Waal 1993).

Unlike the popular perception, which portrays Somalis as a homogeneous society, we contend that Somalis are composed of diverse communities of multiple historical and cultural backgrounds. Thus Somalia as a nation, should harmonize the wealth and strength embedded in the diversity that held together people from different cultures, traditions, and languages. For example, the nomadic Somali administrations, especially Siyad Barre's military regime, have deliberately stifled all the non-nomadic social languages, dialects as well as accents, among them the Jido, the Dabare, the Bajuni, the Barawa, the Tuni, the Shikhal-Gendershe, the Shanshiye, the Yibir, and others. Although the two major languages are Maay and Maxaaa, the nomads predominantly speak a dialect of Maxaa, while southerners particularly the Bantu speak predominantly Maay.⁴⁶ However, the ruling nomadic class standardized their own version of the Maxaa language and "sub-standardized" the Maay language and other versions of the Maxaa dialects such as spoken in the regions from Hiran down to Lower Jubba.

In the United States, although there are some positive signs of collaboration between the Somali Bantu and the Somali nomads, it would

be dangerous, irrational, and even naive to assume that the relationship between these two groups is smooth and cordial. The relationship between the Somali Bantu (the oppressed) and the Somali nomads (the oppressor) in the United States is still ambiguous, because of the infamous culture of subjugation prevailing in Somalia against the Bantu.

As they say, Rome was not built in one day; accordingly, a mutual relationship between these two groups cannot be built overnight either. We hope that the bridge to better relations between the nomads and the Bantu in the United States will be improved gradually. The Somali Bantu are coming to the United States under the American P-2 immigration status, which is preserved for persecuted minority groups. Because of this, there was much discussion surrounding what role, if any, the Somali refugees (nomads) now in the United States—many of whom are from the dominant political clans that have, and continue to, persecute the Bantu in Somalia—would play in the resettlement of the Bantu. As we emphasized above, in Somalia and in the refugee camps in Kenya, the Somali Bantu were always condescendingly told what to do by the dominant clans. Since their arrival in the United States that contemptuous notion has been reversed because the Somali Bantu do now feel that they are in the US, where all men of all ethnicity should be equal. As a result, the Bantu have already started forming their own communal organizations under their own leadership. The Bantu have also agreed to work with the nomadic Somali clans, but only at a mutual and equal level with separate community organizations. Thus, the relation between these two groups is somewhat not alarming but the desire to work separately and equally is evident on the Bantu side (Eno, O. 2004).

Upon arrival at the airport, it is likely that the sponsor, staff member of a resettlement agency, and a translator meet the Bantu refugee family. In the event of a nomadic caseworker or translator, the Bantu refugee families either request a Maay speaker or keep low profile until they reach their destination or their host's home. Upon first arrival at a United States airport, several Bantu express their shock at being received by an Af Maha-speaking Somali from one of the politically dominant "nomadic" clan members. Anyhow, the relations between these two communities have not changed dramatically because the Somali nomads still feel "superior" to the Bantu while the Somali Bantu are still incredulous about the Somali nomads although they are the social workers engaged in helping them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, after almost two hundred years of living in southern Somalia, the Wazigwa/Bantu people are denied respect and the right to be equal

to their nomadic counterparts. They are denied access to the basic necessities of life; therefore, they continue to feel as foreigners in their own homeland. The war in Somalia, which has uprooted this community from their habitat, is utterly based on resource control; whoever succeeds to seize and control the majority of southern agricultural regions is likely to win the struggle, since as a matter of reality the agricultural produce of the south feeds the rest of Somalia. We conclude, therefore, that the war in Somalia is not a civil war with participation by all member clans of the larger Somali society, nor has it engulfed traumatically in the nomads' regions and towns as it has devastated southern Bantu land. It is, due to its tribal and geographical nature, rather a regional war targeting the acquisition of the fertile Bantu territory, rendering the Bantu victims in multiple spheres.

NOTES

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