



SOMALIS + MINNESOTA

IN THE EARLY 1990S, immigrants fleeing civil war in Somalia began to arrive in Minnesota. Some came directly from refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia; others came as secondary migrants from a variety of places in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. The American Community Survey, conducted yearly by the US Census Bureau, estimated Minnesota's 2016 Somali population exceeded 44,000. Somalis constitute one of the largest immigrant groups in the state, and they have made significant contributions to Minnesota's economic, cultural, and political life.

Somali Minnesota history and culture is being chronicled through new oral histories, publications, and *Somalis + Minnesota*, a Minnesota History Center exhibit that will open on June 23, 2018, and that was developed in partnership with the Somali Museum of Minnesota. Following is a taste of the Somali Minnesota narratives.

ORAL HISTORIES

The Somalis in Minnesota Oral History Project is made up of 58 interviews in both English and Somali, from residents across the state in communities from Moorhead to Mankato to the Twin Cities. Interviewees included everyday Somali people as well as prominent community members like Abdi Warsame, the first-ever Somali on the Minneapolis City Council. MNHS worked closely with Macalester College and the Somali Museum of Minnesota to complete the Somali oral history project.

Concurrently, 12 oral histories of another East African immigrant community, the Oromo, were gathered in conjunction with the nonprofit Oromo Community of Minnesota. Minnesota has one of the largest Oromo communities outside Ethiopia, where they are one of three major ethnic groups. The Oromo represent Minnesota's second-largest East African population, following the Somalis. Because the Ethiopians historically have suppressed the Oromo language—Afaa Oromoo—8 of the 12 oral histories were conducted in Afaa Oromoo. (English translations are provided.)

The Somali and Oromo oral histories, made possible by the Legacy Amendment's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, are available online on the MNHS website and in person in the Gale Family Library.

Excerpts on the following pages, from interviews conducted between 2013 and 2016, have been edited for readability. Ahmed Ismail Yusuf interviewed Habon Abdulle and Zuhur Ahmed. Ibrahim Hirsi collected the remaining stories.

ABOVE: A dhiil, or milk container made of wood. Milk stored in containers like this can stay fresh for weeks. Nomadic families milk camels, cows, sheep, and goats. (NIKKI TUNDELL). FACING: Twined bag made by a Somali elder.

Life in Somalia before the civil war

Hamse Warfa

Q: For our American neighbors right now here in Minnesota, many may think that life of Somalis [began as] refugees, but here you're talking about you coming from a financially stable family, with cars and school and education. So what else would you tell people who may not know about Somalis and families like yours?

A: A lot of times, I agree with you, the images of Somalis or refugees are mostly portrayed after the departure from their place of origin. But you know, for most of the refugees and immigrants, life was essentially the same as it is today for people in Minnesota and elsewhere. That is, just like the neighbors here, everyone was trying to raise their family. There may have been less jobs, but people had ways to sustain themselves. So life was very comfortable. And coming from Mogadishu, a place that it seems like you are in vacation all the time—it's seventy degrees all

year round—I think it's a lifestyle that before the civil war can be called a paradise. Paradise destroyed by the civil war. It's very hard to imagine that kind of a situation now, but many people have lived like that, and it wasn't really so much [something] that only certain groups had, you know. And anywhere, obviously, there is middle class, there is lower middle class, and those that are struggling to make ends meet. But one would be amazed by the similarities in how people try to go about their lives, trying to make ends meet. You know, just like any family here in Minnesota now, worrying about their kids, their future, you know, grandkids, leaving a legacy that is in a much better situation for those left behind. So the aspirations of people in Minnesota today are very similar to those that we had before the civil war.

Hamse Warfa was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the 1970s. His family fled the Somali civil war and lived in Kenyan refugee camps. He immigrated to Denver, Colorado, in 1994 and moved to San Diego, California, a year later. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science from San Diego State University and a master's degree in organizational management and leadership from Springfield College. He moved to Minnesota in 2012. At the time of the interview, Warfa worked for Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies in Eden Prairie. He has published an autobiography, America, Here I Come: A Somali Refugee's Quest for Hope.

Somali civil war

Ali Kofiro

Q: You had just graduated from high school [in 1991, just before the civil war broke out], and of course you had a dream and goals. You wanted to be somebody, but then all of a sudden, your country collapsed. What was going through your mind at that time as a young man in Mogadishu, running here and there?

A: When I saw everything had collapsed, I got in a state of shock. I saw the beautiful life I had in Mogadishu disappear right in front of my eyes. Then it got to the point where we decided we had to basically flee for our lives. And after that, that was the only thing that was going in my mind. During the first week or so, anything that would come to my mind was that the beautiful thing, the life in Mogadishu, where I grew up, everything was out of the window. But still I was thinking like, "Things will settle down, and one day I would come back to Mogadishu." And even when I left for Kismayo, the southern parts of Somalia, I was thinking like, "Oh, yeah, it will take some time, but I will come back to Mogadishu." But I had never



thought that I would give up and leave forever. However, after six months, then after [a] year, that was when I started moving around and tried to figure out or to find another place that I could live, or any other way that I could leave of this difficulty that I was in. And that is how I ultimately came to the United States.

Ali Kofiro was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the 1970s. He fled the Somali civil war and spent several years living in East Africa as a refugee. He immigrated to the United States in 1996 and lived in Texas before moving to Minnesota in the early 2000s. Kofiro received a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. He has lived in Eden Prairie and Shakopee and works as a school counselor for Minneapolis Public Schools.

First experiences in the United States

Habon Abdulle

Q: So, when you first came [to the United States from Italy], what were you thinking? I mean, what was your take, even though you didn't have any other city to compare to?

A: Was hard.

Q: It was hard for you.

A: It was really, really hard.

Q: Okay. In what way?

A: It was hard because for so long I lived in a country where I knew the language, I knew the culture. I knew it, everything about it. I'm talking about Italy.

Q: Yes. So you adopted, you had adapted, yes.

A: Yeah. And when I moved to Italy [from Somalia], I was young. I was 19 years old. Learning the language, learning the culture, learning everything was fast, was quicker, and it was easier. When you try to redo that process in your thirties, it's hard. One, because you believe

that since you lived in one western country that you are all knowing, which is not true, because it's a different culture, it's a different language. And I really suffered due to the language barrier and not being able to communicate with people, and depending on other people to translate, and not finding a job because I could not speak English. You know, I was not able to read books. I was not able to read in English.

Q: 2000 was when you came to . . .

A: I moved to Minneapolis in 2000.

Q: So English was not at all in your radar.

A: I knew it some, but that is . . .

Q: Just words.

A: Exactly. Imagine that in your thirties and trying to restart all over your life again.

Habon Abdulle was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the 1960s. She is the daughter of the military leader General Duad Abdulle Hirsi. She left Somalia in 1984 to study political science at the University of Padua, Italy. She lived in Italy for 15 years. In 2000, Abdulle moved to Minneapolis. She holds a master's degree in health and human services administration from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and is pursuing her PhD in gender studies at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. She was also a 2013 Bush Fellow, working to empower Somali American women as leaders in politics.

Somali culture and language in Minnesota

Zuhur Ahmed

Ahmed: A really important, big part of my connection to the language, especially to songs, is my mom. That, I would, I think, love to mention. My mom loved, loved, loved attending plays or seeing plays when we were back home. The best dates she had ever been to with my dad were through plays that they have seen together. Interestingly enough, although she became religious later on, she remembers, she still has all the songs memorized. Not only do I get the songs, but the way my mom and I connect, our quality times, is through cooking. My mom loved cooking. It's what she inherited from her mom and I also love cooking, so I felt like I'm inheriting that from her. She loves making big, huge feasts.

Q: So what do you cook? Do you cook any food that is related to Somalia?

A: We cook Somali food. Traditional Somali food. Rice, goat meat . . .

A 2002 scene at the Hennepin County Government Center information desk.





Q: In Minnesota.

A: In Minnesota, yep. So I am the one that goes in the kitchen with her and when we are cooking together, I have these Somali classic songs or what's known as *qaraami* songs. A collection of it, mainly of songs that were sung in the 1960s and 70s and early 80s.

Q: *Qaraami* means in English—what's the closest word? Legendary?

A: Classic. Although, from my conference in the UK, I am learning that it was a genre, actually, and it had different names—*balwo*. I won't go to the details of it. So we're listening together and then would sing together.

Zuhur Ahmed was born in Burao, Somalia, in the 1980s. She and her family left Somalia for Syria as refugees when she was about six years old. In 1998, her family immigrated to Houston, Texas, and then made their way to Minnesota through family connections. She has worked with Somali poet and playwright Said Salah, started the Somali Literary Study Circle, and hosted a weekly radio program, "Somali Community Link," on KFAI Radio. Ahmed graduated from the University of Minnesota in 2008 and is pursuing a career in medicine.

ABOVE: Recipe testers Maryan Hussein Mohamed and Saida Mahamud helped develop the new MNHS Press book *Soo Fariista/Come Sit Down: A Somali American Cookbook* (JAMES CASTLE). RIGHT: Campaign sticker for Ilhan Omar. Elected to the Minnesota house in 2016, Omar is the first Somali American legislator in the United States.

Somali political engagement in Minnesota

Osman Ahmed

Q: You have been in this field, working in politics, for as long as you can remember. For the past almost ten years, seven years. Where do you see the Somali community in the coming five, ten, fifteen years in terms of politics?

A: That's a really good question. For me right now where I see a lot of people organizing, getting involved, specifically engaged, it's really something where I smile because I know one thing is that, not even going back too far, in 2010 when I go to the state convention or I go to our local conventions where the DFL is electing their potential future representatives, you couldn't find any Somalis there. You could find one or two or maximum five. Now if you go to a convention or if you know something is going on—not even in Minneapolis but the whole state—at least you're going to find a core number of Somalis who are representing at those conventions and participating in the election and talking about it. Talk about social media, the same thing. Getting the first Somali city council member elected [Abdi Warsame, in Minneapolis] is really huge. I think what something like that does is that people organize and they want to see someone who looks like them. It's a good thing some of them are running for office because at the end of the day, the goal is to have the community, someone that looks like them. I think that motivates them to even get engaged in more elections.

Osman Ahmed was born in Somalia in the 1980s. He left Somalia as a child following the Somali civil war and lived in Nairobi, Kenya, for several years. In 2004, he immigrated to the United States at the age of 17. After graduating from Eden

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Somali Americans celebrate a shared heritage at meal-time. Realizing how quickly traditions can change in a culture on the move, the members of Wariyaa: Somali Youth in Museums, high school students from across the Twin Cities, set out to preserve their culinary legacy by interviewing family members, researching available and alternative ingredients, and testing kitchen techniques. In *Soo Fariista / Come Sit Down*, 70 recipes for everything from *sambusa* (stuffed pastry) to *suqaar* (curry stew) honor memories and flavors from East Africa with adjustments for American realities.

Maryan's Maraqa Curry

(Maryan's Butter Chicken Curry)

Serves 4

This rich, savory dish is best served with flatbread. The recipe is flexible: add vegetables or spices as desired when you combine the chicken and the sauce.

2 pounds boneless chicken, cut into bite-size pieces	2 tablespoons chopped cilantro
¼ cup vinegar	1 whole head garlic, peeled
2 tablespoons olive oil	8 tablespoons butter, divided
2 red onions, diced	1 teaspoon ground turmeric
4 small tomatoes, diced	1 teaspoon salt or to taste
	½ cup heavy cream

Toss chicken with vinegar, stirring to coat. Heat a skillet and add olive oil. Add chicken and cook, stirring, until browned and dry. Remove from heat.

Make the curry sauce by combining onions, tomatoes, cilantro, and garlic in bowl of a blender and blending for 1 minute.

Melt 4 tablespoons butter in a large saucepan. Add the cooked chicken, curry sauce, and turmeric. Heat to boiling, stirring frequently. Add salt, cream, and remaining 4 tablespoons butter, stirring well. Cover and cook for about 10 minutes.

Prairie High School, Ahmed earned his bachelor's degree in political science and international studies at the University of Minnesota. He worked on the campaigns of US Congressman Keith Ellison in 2012 and Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges in 2013–14. At the time of the interview, Osman was a field representative for US Senator Al Franken.

Somali businesses in Minnesota

Abdirahman Ahmed

Q: You have been in the business field for a while now. In our previous interviews, we kind of talked about the broader challenges the Somali community is facing, but as a businessperson, I wanted to ask if you would say what are the challenges and the successes that the Somali community is making in this business field?

A: I mean, by nature and historically also, Somalis have a more entrepreneurial mindset. They like to get into business and start businesses and become independent, and we have good opportunities. This is the land of opportunity, as people say it, but in a way it is true. If you look, you'll find it. So Somalis, the community, they have been lucky enough, especially in Minnesota. . . . I don't want to pick any other city, but there are so many cities you won't be able to prosper the way you prosper in Minneapolis because of the infrastructure, because of the people, because of the institutions that existed before. All of those were facilitated for you to succeed in business. There are a number of challenges in terms of starting a business. Like any other person. You need to have capital. Some of the businesses are not easy to get into. There are high barriers. You need to have the knowledge and expertise. You need to have the institutions that will help you to succeed into the business. So there are typical business challenges out

Asiya brand navy sport hijab.

The idea for the company began in the Brian Coyle Community Center gym, in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis.



there. But one thing I believe, the most important thing is that especially the youth who are coming up in the community become highly educated. That's very important, both because of skill set—it's going to help them to succeed in life—but also as consumers. They would have the purchasing ability or spending ability, power to spend their money to the right place.

Abdirahman Ahmed was born and grew up in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the 1960s. He moved to Hyderabad, India, for his university studies in the late 1980s, earning his undergraduate degree in science and business administration and a master's degree in commerce. Ahmed worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in India. He immigrated to the United States in 1998, coming to Minneapolis. He earned an MBA degree in 2006 from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and worked as an analyst for the State of Minnesota. In 2010, Ahmed started Safari Restaurant and Event Center in South Minneapolis.

Future of Somalis in Minnesota

Saida Hassan

Q: You've lived in Minneapolis for a while now and you've seen a lot of success in terms of politics and other professions. Where do you see the community in the next ten, fifteen years?

A: Our generation—your and my generation—we're the first professionals coming out, truly having a really good education background. Coming from that, I can see us everywhere. Like the other day, my dentist was a Somali dentist. So that felt good, being able to communicate with a Somali who is a dentist with my own language. That was great. I love it when I read articles and I see someone I know wrote it. It could have been John or Jake that's writing that, but it's Ibrahim that's writing that. [chuckles] Do you know what I'm saying? I think that we are very much not assimilating, because when you assimilate, you forget who you are. But we're very much accommodating ourselves in this society. Getting the education we need to be successful and be where we need to be and also help our families thrive and encourage them to live better lives. We don't want to live the lives of nomadic life like our parents before the civil war. We know that now our lives are here in Minnesota. I've seen a lot of young people thinking about their next step. "Okay, what's next for me? I need to buy a house. I'm having two kids." They're planning their life, and it seems very amazing when you look at that. It looks like we want to do better than our parents. Not that I'm saying our parents have not [done well]. They had to



Saida Hassan, graduation day, University of Minnesota. (PROVIDED)

struggle way harder than we did. But we're looking to give our families more stable lives.

Saida Hassan was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, in the late 1980s. At the age of three, she fled the Somali civil war with her family. She lived in various refugee camps and in Nairobi, Kenya, for several years. In 2000, she immigrated to the United States, arriving first in San Diego, California, and soon thereafter moving to St. Paul. Hassan earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in education at the University of Minnesota. She spent time teaching English in Saudi Arabia and conducting research in Somalia for the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies. Hassan works as a site coordinator for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, known as GEAR UP, a college readiness program in Minneapolis Public Schools. □

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