Somalis in Lewiston, Maine: Refugee Resettlement, New Diasporas and Livelihood Adaptation

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Background

- Refugee resettlement is a major contributor to the recent African Diaspora in the United States.

- The largest number of refugees has been from the Horn of Africa from the countries of Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia.
Forced Migration from Somalia

- Sunni Muslims almost 100%
- Clan Structure of Society
- Wars and Political Turmoil Since 1991
- Ethnic Cleansing
- United Nations Refugee Camps in Kenya
- Most refugees to the U.S. from southern Somalia; Darood, Issaq, and “Somali Bantus”
• ‘Somali Bantu’ minority, ethnically and culturally different from majority of Somali (“Ethnic Somali”)

• Descendants of slaves of Indian Ocean Slave Trade from Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique

• Sedentary subsistence rural farmers in Juba River Valley

• Blanket permission for resettlement program to U.S. for around 12,000 Somali Bantu from refugee camps in Kenya
Purpose

• Understand the cultural geography dimensions of the Somali migration from Somalia to cities and towns in the United States and then in secondary migrations on to the small Maine community of Lewiston

• Have fundamental geographic concepts such as push-pull, economic utility, chain migration, and secondary migration, cultural assimilation formed the core of the Somali displacement chronicle?

• Why did large numbers of Somalis in Georgia and other states decide to move to Lewiston, Maine, a small predominantly white city with few economic opportunities?

• Focus on livelihood adaptation of the Somali Bantu ethnic group in their new homeland

• Did the Somalis in Lewiston try to maintain their cultural livelihoods? If so, how?
Research Method

• Literature Review

• *Government documents* - Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

• *Journal Articles*

• *Media Reports*

• Qualitative Survey Methods

• *Key informant Interviews*

• *Informal Interviews*

• *Direct Observation*
U.S. Settlement Program

• For fast assimilation, settle refugees in locations across the U.S.

• Somali settlement in Atlanta, Dallas, Minneapolis major locations; smaller cities included St. Louis, Nashville, Roanoke, Rochester, Utica, and Portland, ME

• 1997-2006, > 65,000 Somalis settle in the U.S.
“Push” Secondary Migration

- Mainly from Atlanta Metro
  - Cultural confusion and clashes
  - Children assimilating too fast
  - Crime, gangs, drugs
  - Competition for few social services with other refugee populations
- *Sahan* – tradition to search for ‘greener pastures’, new place to settle
  - Lewiston, Maine
- Migration begins in 2001
“Pull” Secondary Migration

- Lewiston, Maine
  - Small town
  - Slow assimilation process
  - Low crime rate

“...one of the most unusual chapters in America’s rich history of immigration [where] hundreds of Somali decided in 2001 to move on their own to a small city whose population was 97 percent white and almost totally Christian.”

City Administrator of Lewiston, 2005
Lewiston Resettlement Struggles

- Lewiston Maine predominantly white catholic community of French Canadian and Irish immigrant heritage
- Initial concerns among locals arose over mass influx of Somali

  *Speed and volume of Somali arrival*
  *First people of color to arrive en masse in Lewiston*
  *Post- Sept 11 trauma - perceptions and suspicions about muslims*
  *Negative images of Somalia from the Black Hawk Down movie - Sgt. Thomas Field of Lisbon, ME casualty of US Operation Restore Hope in Mogadishu*
  *Old depressed mill town, high unemployment, fear over job competition*
  *Mayor’s appeal letter of Jan 11, 2003 followed by protest and counter-protests on perceptions of the nature of race relations in Lewiston*
Somali in Lewiston, Maine

• Population entirely a result of secondary migration from other United States locations

• In-migration began in 2001 and continues to the present

• Around 5000 Somali in a population of 36,000

• In 2007, Largest group - children under 18, then female single-headed households
Cultural Assimilation Challenges

• Lack of formal western education a hindrance to sustainable employment, risk of continued reliance on social services

• Some local businesses using unskilled labor have hired Somali

• Some cultural clashes with American work ethic (ex. taking time off for prayer)
Somali Cultural Maintenance

• Social stratification, clan and sub-clan prejudices continuing in Diaspora and ‘ethnic’ vs ‘Bantu’

• Male-dominant family structure

• Some resistance to education of women; “Somali Bantu” very little Western education

Communal gathering on sidewalks reminiscent of African rural life
Positive Outcomes of Emotional Debate about Race, Culture and Religion

• Innovative collaborations and initiatives within city to support Somali in-migrants

• Revitalization of old decaying crime-ridden neighborhoods

• Lewiston Public Library expansion - Marsden Hartley Cultural Center

• ‘Many and One Coalition’, colleges - Community efforts towards cultural sensitivity, diversity and inclusion

• More funds for schools with increased enrollment, ESL education
From Tropical to Temperate Farming as Livelihood

• In 2006, Cultivating Communities New American Sustainable Agriculture Project (NASAP) initiated a farming cooperative where Somali Bantu, traditionally farmers could use their skills and generate income.

• The program offered an intense study about both farming and marketing.

• By 2016, three of original farmers Abdi, Mohammed Abukar, Seynab Ali and Batula Ismail entered into a lease-to-own agreement with Maine Farmland Trust for 30 acres.

• Owners of New Roots Cooperative Farm, 7 acres tilled by hand but recent investment in tractor.
New Roots Cooperative Farm, 2018

- Convert an old dairy pasture into a farm that can grow 40 different vegetables

- Open a farmstand

- Provide wholesale products to institutions, restaurants and other outlets

- Continue their presence at farmer’s markets.

The First Somali-Owned Farm Stand Opens In Lewiston, 2018

Zuban Waledi, originally from Somalia, came to the United States 14 years ago from a Kenyan refugee camp. Like many others who were forced to leave as a refugee, Suban is a farmer, and she wants to keep on farming, growing food for her family and she wants to make a living by selling her food to the people of Maine.
Lewiston Somalis give new life to New Gloucester, Pownal farms

2015 Somali Bantu Community Association

In Lewiston, Somali Bantu refugees get in on the hot trend of food trucks
They use ingredients they've grown at nearby farms for dishes that are both delicious and bittersweet.

Isaak Gawo hands an order to a customer on Sunday. The Isuken Co-op truck has been making weekly trips to the Lewiston market. Most days though, it is parked on Sabattus Street in Lewiston, next to a farmstand operated seasonally by New Roots Cooperative Farm.
Staff photo by Joel Page
• Inspiration for new groups to emerge
• Facebook page, GO Fund Me pages
Large extended families residing in 2 to 3 bedroom apartments
Somali cultural imprint in heart of downtown Lewiston
Assimilation and Somali Future

• Somali youth are being assimilated. Helped High School football team win state championship

• After being educated, young Somalis will begin tertiary individual migrations. Internet Websites, chat rooms, and e-mail

• Having made cultural imprints in a small town in Maine, how long will the Somali culture remain in Lewiston?
Conclusion

• Large migrant population in major cities and more rural small town environment in Lewiston were major push-pull factors in secondary migration

• Efforts to maintain core values of traditional culture

• Chain migration along lines of family, ethnicity and social networks

• Somali Bantu found economic utility in underused farmland, particularly women

• Farming skills adapted to new environment
References


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