

Somali Oral History Project

Interviewee(s): Ismael Mohamed

Others present: Omar Osman

Place of Interview: Sunnyvale Park, South Salt Lake City, UT

Date of Interview: September 30, 2019

Language: English

Interviewer: Haden Griggs

Recordist: Same

Recording Equipment: Tascam

Transcription Equipment: Express Scribe

Transcribed by: Haden Griggs

Brief Description of Contents: An interview with Ismael discussing his experiences in Somali, Kenya, his experiences coming to Houston, then Salt Lake and his experiences and service there.

Reference: **HG:** Haden Griggs, **IM:** Ismael Mohamed **OO:** Omar Osman

NOTE: False starts, pauses, or transitions in dialogue such as “*uh*” and starts and stops in conversations are not included in transcript. All additions and added information to transcript are noted with brackets.

This interview took place in a park with a good amount of background noise, none of which is acknowledged in the transcript.

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

[00:01]

HG: Okay. It's September 30th, 2019. I'm here in Sunnyvale park at a practice of soccer for the Sunnyvale neighborhood association. I'm here interviewing Ismael Mohamed, with Omar [pauses] Osman—

OO: Osman [simultaneous].

HG: —accompanying me. So, thank you so much Ismael for—

IM: Yeah, you're welcome, Haden [unclear in recording]

HG: So, before we start, can you tell me your full name and what year you were born?

IM: My name is Ismael Abdallah Mohamed. January 1st, 1981.

HG: 1981.

IM: Yes.

HG: Okay, and what do you do for work, Ismael?

IM: I do signs. Electric signs.

HG: Okay.

IM: And we have different department, I'm in letters. Letter department.

HG: So, is that like billboards, or—?

IM: We get letters.

HG: Letters.

OO: Yeah.

IM: It's a sign, full company. The sign company, but they have different department. And I'm in letter shop department.

HG: Okay. Awesome. So, when did you arrive in the United States?

IM: July 27, 2005.

HG: 2005?

IM: Yes.

HG: And, before that, where were you born? Where did you grow up?

IM: I was born in Somalia. And I grew up in Somalia. A couple years in our childhood, and we have to move because of the civil war, that was back in 1990.

[1:27]

HG: 1990?

IM: Yeah.

HG: Where specifically in Somalia?

IM: There's one village or town called Ras Kamboni—

HG: Ras Kamboni?

IM: It's in southern Somalia.

HG: So, is that over, like, near Kismayo, or—

IM: It's near Kismayo, but, border to Kenya?

HG: Border to Kenya.

IM: Yes.

HG: Right on the border. So, you were pretty young then, when you left, it sounds like—

IM: Yeah.

HG: —but can you tell me a little bit about what you remember from your village, what it was like growing up there? Maybe about what your parents did for livelihood or work, or?

IM: Yeah. I don't remember that much, because, you know, we didn't grow up like, the way we wanted to grow in our country, but, the life over there, most of was fishing, farming, and businesses.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, so people are moving around, and going city to city, or country to countries, looking for their life, so, yeah.

HG: So, did your family travel then, a lot or—

IM: Yes, they were traveling. Before the war. Yes. But when the country came, like not stable, everybody came back and see the situation. And we end up leaving the country.

HG: Okay. So, your family, were they business or herders, or farmers, or?

IM: Most likely fisherman.

HG: Fisherman?

IM: Yeah, fisherman. Little bit of business. Not like, big business.

HG: Small business.

IM: Small business, yes.

HG: Just selling fish. Okay.

IM: Yeah.

[2:59]

HG: So, do you know what caused—I mean, the civil war started—but what caused your family to decide to leave Somalia?

IM: It's a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff. Now, but what happened was, people, they killing each other. And even our villages, they came and robbed. Myself, my Dad and my Mom, they were different villages, they came different village, but they get married.

HG: uh-huh.

IM: And we leaving Ras Kamboni, but we have to move to another village, maybe, Sefti? But when we went there, was worse. Even we have to lose family members, because of the war. And we decided to leave.

HG: So, where did you go?

IM: We moved to Kenya.

HG: Kenya?

IM: Yeah, the neighbor country.

HG: What was it like to travel to Kenya? How did you guys, get there? Sounds like you were living right on the border then, right?

IM: Yes, yes. Yeah. So, what we used, we call it jahazi.

HG: Jahazi?

IM: In Swahili.

HG: Okay.

IM: It's a sailing boat. Traditional sailing boat. And those boat, they were made only for our tribe, the name, Bajunis.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, we used those one. With the sail. Only one sail, it's not like the other one, people are sailing with so many sails.

HG: Just a—

IM: Ours, only one sail. And it took us days to move from Somalia to Kenya.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, you guys went by ocean then?

IM: Yeah, by ocean, yes.

HG: Wow!

IM: Depending on the wind. Sometimes, you against the wind, you are stuck somewhere for days, and you don't go anywhere.

[4:39]

HG: So, can you tell me a little about the Bajuni? Omar told me a little bit, so, from what I understand your guys's people live in the southern borderland between Somalia and Kenya?

IM: Yes.

HG: And you speak a language that's related to Swahili?

IM: Yes.

HG: Is that right? Is there anything else that I should know about your guys's culture or—?

IM: Yeah, the Bajunis is a very small tribe in Somalia. And they were living coastal Somalia. So, it's a mixture. It's a lot of background over there. If you go to the history, you can find we come from Arabs, some says we came from Bantus, from upper countries, African countries. But, mostly, it's from Arab people.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, so they were doing business, and Islamic religions, they came down there, and they intermarried, and that's where we came from.

HG: Settled.

IM: Yeah. And the Bajunis in Somali, our culture is a Islamic culture.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: We have the traditional, like drums, like, the way we live is not like 100% Islamic. But, mostly our culture, we follow Islamic rules.

HG: Pretty much every—

IM: Yeah.

HG: —all the Bajuni are Muslims.

IM: Yes, yes. 100%.

HG: 100%?

IM: 100% Muslims, yeah.

HG: Do you want to add anything about that, Omar? [laugh, possibly Ismael, Haden laughs right after] About the Bajuni that I should know, or—?

OO: For now, I don't have anything to add for now.

HG: Okay.

OO: Maybe a little bit later.

HG: Okay. So, when you talked about the men coming to your villages, do you know who those men were?

IM: Oh yeah. Yeah, we know them. They were Somali people. The big, big tribe, they were fighting each other. And they include us for nothing. We were victims for no reason.

HG: No reason, huh?

IM: Yeah.

HG: So—

IM: Our people, they were killed for no reason.

HG: So, you have no idea why they attacked, huh?

IM: Yeah. Like what happened was the big tribe, I remember they were saying like, we as Bajunis—because the Bajunis are peaceful people. Very peaceful. If you go to the village, you live there, and nobody—you can live with the door open at night, nobody come to your house.

HG: Wow.

IM: Yeah, so, what happened, when they came to our villages. This group comes, ‘cause they are hiding from other group. When they come back, and when they hear the group coming—

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: So, they hide themselves behind us. So, we were like, a guard, or a shield.

HG: Oh, like hostages, huh?

IM: Yeah, like hostages. So, when they come, they face us first. And the militants, they are maybe in the back, in our house, they are hiding over there. So, when the militant comes, they tell us, “Oh, you guys are boarding these guys.” Okay? That’s how we get victims. And when those guys are behind us, the militant goes away, then they come and like, blaming us again. “Oh, you guys, you are with those guys, why you didn’t fight?” And we told them, we are not fighters. I remember, myself, not remember that many, but like, I didn’t see any Bajunis taking a gun. Not a gun, even a knife. Even anything for self-defense. We have some stuff in our houses that was only for hunting when you go, because we used to go very, very far for farming. Look for the area, where is good for farming.

HG: Uh-huh.

[8:22]

IM: You can walk three hours looking for the area you can farm. So, we have to protect ourself with the wild animals. That’s how we use. Only for that! Not for human. But, we were victims. And we end up killed, most of our people and we couldn’t handle it. We have to leave. We left.

HG: Wow. Sorry to hear that—

IM: Yeah.

HG: That’s a [pauses]

IM: It's a lot.

HG: It's a lot. Yeah.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, that was just the different clan groups fighting, and you guys were just caught in-between, huh?

IM: Yes. Yes.

HG: Okay. So, did you grow up in Kenya then, after? Was that—

IM: Yes. To be honest, I know much more Kenya than Somalia.

HG: Oh, that's okay. I want to learn about, you know, your experience coming, so tell me about Kenya. Where did your family end up in Kenya? What was it like in Kenya?

IM: Yeah, we, as I said before, like, we spent a lot of days on the Indian ocean. We know, the captains they knew where we are going.

HG: Uh-huh.

[9:22]

IM: But, the problem was the wind sometimes, you get against us and we have to change the sail, and maybe we're going back and forth. The boat is still there, so after those days, we end up arriving to Mombasa, Kenya.

HG: Mombasa. Okay.

IM: Yeah, so we arrived there, and there's an agency called, very small agency for helping refugees, before the UNHCR, so they were "okay. These are refugees, and okay, we will take them." So, we were there, without a camp. We just somewhere there, outside, and everybody's there, if you have big, big clothes, you make, you know, something to hide yourself from the sun, or—

HG: Set up your own camp, huh?

IM: Yeah, yeah. So, after that, we have the Islamic Relief.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, took over. And they talked to the Kenyan government. And, they rented a big land in Mombasa they called Jomvu, the city is Jomvu.

HG: Jomvu?

IM: Mombasa's big.

HG: Okay.

IM: Mombasa, they have Kisauni, they have Likoni, they have—Jomvu's a part of the island.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, so they took us over there, and they set the camp. The tent, they set the tent and it was a refugee camp over there. Got settled there.

HG: So, your family arrived before there was a camp, then?

IM: Yeah, before there was a camp.

HG: Okay, so—

IM: Before.

HG: —do you remember what year it was that you guys arrived?

IM: Yes. 1990. Late 1990. 1991. Yeah.

HG: Okay. So, even before the—

IM: Yeah, yeah.

HG: —before the UNISOM and all the—

IM: Yeah. So, Islamic relief took over. Then after, and it was really good, because they know that we are Muslims, and everything was—even they build a mosque for us over there. But when UN came, stuff start change. Because the UN is for everybody.

HG: Global?

IM: Yeah, global, yeah. So, stuff start changing, and it was took over by the UN and Kenyan government, they were controlling the camp.

HG: What kind of things changed?

IM: Like, the ration, for example. The food we were getting. The Islamic relief was better than the UN. Because we used to get even the meat. The goat, or the cow, or even the camel sometimes. They bring in meat over there. But, since UN took over, no meat. We had the gas, you know, to light the light at night?

HG: Uh-huh.

[12:05]

IM: We were given for free. But the UN when came, you have to find your own.

HG: That's too bad.

IM: Yeah. The sugar. Somali they like too much tea, and you have to find by your own.

HG: Okay.

IM: The tea. The tea itself. When Islamic relief was there, we had it for free. They put on your monthly ration. You go and pick everything.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah. So...you've got something [gestures toward Haden's face, where a bug has landed].

HG: Oh, do I?

IM: Yeah.

HG: Bug?

IM: Yeah. So—[Omar knocks it off Haden's face]

HG: Thanks.

IM: So, like a lot of stuff changed. Yeah. And the ration was lower than was higher because, also was not enough. And they were like, if we live in one tent, then sometimes, we were living over there with different families. 'Cause, most of our culture, we can live like, ten—two or three families in one place. But they didn't want that, and on top of that, the ration they have to reduce.

[13:22]

HG: So, they split up extended family?

IM: Yeah, yes, yes, yes.

HG: Okay. So, what was the name of this camp?

IM: Jomvu.

HG: Jomvu camp?

IM: Jomvu camp. Yeah.

HG: Sorry, we'll pause this for a second [Haden's papers caught by the wind, need to be retrieved].

IM: Yes, the name was Jomvu camp.

HG: Jomvu camp.

IM: And that the only refugee camp in Kenya in the coastal area. Yeah.

HG: So, was that mostly people from your group or was that—

IM: Yes, they were only Bajunis.

HG: Bajunis. So, it was camp specifically for the Bajunis.

IM: Only Bajunis, yes. Specific, Bajunis, [Haden and Ismael speaking over each other to this point] but little by little, when the UN came, then—

HG: Everybody?

IM: Everybody was there. Somali was there, other tribe, they were there. Even have another tribe they call Barawa.

HG: Okay.

IM: They were brought over there. Yeah.

HG: So, was that difficult then, to have the different, you know, different clans, different groups in the camp, or was it—

IM: For us, it was not difficult, because we all get along, as I said, you know?

HG: Okay.

IM: We can get along easy with other tribe. Yeah, and it was not really bad at the beginning. But in the end, it was bad. Because the Somali were there, and people started fighting.

HG: [unintelligible, perhaps 'sounds about right']

IM: Yeah, and before, was not fighting over there.

HG: What did people fight about in the camp?

IM: For the ration. The food.

HG: Ration?

[14:36]

IM: Yeah. ‘Cause they felt like we were favored than them.

HG: Okay.

IM: And they fought us in the camps too. Yeah.

HG: So, was that like—hold on, I got my order wrong. So you guys arrived—

IM: Uh-huh.

HG: And then you had the Islamic relief agency.

IM: Yes. Yes.

HG: And then the UN and the Kenyan government took over the camp—

IM: Yes.

HG: And then the other groups started to come?

IM: Yes.

HG: Okay. So, did the UN or the Kenyans help police the camps, or make it safer, or was it kind of—

IM: Yes. Yes. Yeah, the Kenyan government. Yeah, the police are patrolling. Not like twenty-four hours, but at least, you know, sometimes you can see them passing.

HG: Okay.

[15:13]

IM: Yeah, because they know that when it was started like that, then they know that—because it can be a really big problem.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: But in the end, everybody was “okay, you have the police now.” Yeah, everything settled again. Yeah.

HG: So, how long were you in that camp?

IM: From 1991 to 2007/8.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, you went from about ten to eighteen?

IM: Yes.

HG: So, can you tell me, what was life like for you as a youth, in that camp? What was your days like—

IM: I meant, no, no, no, no. 1991 to 1997 or 1998. I'm sorry.

HG: Okay. So, that's still about—

IM: yeah.

HG: —eight years, so.

IM: Yeah. So, what happened is then the Kenyan government decided to close the camp.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, they wanted only all refugees who lives to Kenya, they had only two big camps. The Kakuma and Dadaab.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, they wanted everybody to move and go to that big camp. And we were coastal people, and over there is upper country, and it was really hard for us to adapt to the climate and everything. Yeah.

HG: So, did you get sent to Kakuma or Dadood?

IM: Yes. Some of us we decided to go to Kakuma.

HG: Kakuma.

IM: And some of us decided not to go anywhere and go back to Somalia.

HG: Okay. What did your family do?

IM: We decided to go to Kakuma.

HG: Kakuma. Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, can you tell me what life was like for, like, as a youth. So, did you go to school, were you able to work, was it a lot of—what was life like in the camps for you?

IM: Yeah, we try our best to survive. Because only food, was not enough for us. And we need to find our way how to survive. So, some of us, when we grow up, we end up in—the camp was not like really tight. Sometimes you can get out the camp, and the neighborhood, you go there, whatever is fine. You do, and you get paid daily, whatever you do.

HG: Odd jobs.

IM: Yeah, yeah, like, yeah. Something like that, yeah. So, you do that, or sometimes we make food and get it out and sell it. Make some money so we can buy the sugar, the tea, or the gas for the night, so we can light.

HG: What did the UN give you on rations, was it just like, flour and oil pretty much, or—

IM: Yeah, flour and oil, pretty much. Flour and oil, pretty much, and they have grains. That they call—I don't know in English, those grains. They're the green ones?

OO: Peas?

IM: Yeah, like peas, but they're not peas. They're dry one.

HG: Yeah, like dried, split peas?

IM: Yeah, something like that, yeah. Those, they were main ration of food we get.

[17:59]

HG: Okay, yeah, I could see why you'd want to do other stuff, because that's not very satisfying, every day, I'm sure.

IM: And the school, in the Jomvu camp, there was no school.

HG: No school?

IM: Only Islamic school.

HG: Islamic school.

IM: Yeah, we end up going to Islamic school. Reading, you know? And learning how to read the Quran, and Arabic, and little bit of Islamic education. Yeah, that's how we grew up.

HG: Was that school overseen then by refugees? Or was that from the Kenyan Government?
Or—

IM: No, it's just for refugees.

HG: You guys set it up?

IM: Yeah, we build up ourself. Our parents, they build it with the mud. And then they make it like, two, three classroom. The girls, the other side, and the big boys, you know, the ages. And the big ones, the other side.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, [unintelligible] a lot?

IM: Yeah.

HG: And how many people is there—do you have a lot of siblings? Your mother and father both with you? Or—

IM: Yes, yes. We were together in the camps.

HG: Okay.

IM: Everybody was there, and luckily, until we are here now.

HG: And how did you end up in the United States? What was that process like?

[19:08]

IM: It's a long process. It's really, really long process, and it frustrated process. But we were lucky enough, because what we find, especially my family. And we had like, five families, they were my Dad['s] friends. So, we were in Kakuma, and then we have to leave Kakuma too, because of the safety issues. It was really bad. And my Dad he didn't work with the government, but he was like in agencies, and over there if you do that, and other Somalis, they didn't like it. It was [unintelligible].

HG: Okay.

IM: so, we have to leave the camp, and get into Nairobi, one day and try to find the process over there. And while we were registered in the camp too. Sometimes, okay, we have to go back to the camp, and we register there, we go back. But it was, then in the end, it was hard for us to go back and come out, because you have to have the authorization from the—and then we decided, okay this is going to be hard. Then we decided to leave as a refugee with the papers in Nairobi, or Mombasa, something like that.

HG: So, you were all over Kenya, huh?

IM: Yes, yes. Yeah.

HG: So, those safety issues in Kakuma, was that mostly because your dad worked for an international organization, or was there other problems too?

IM: It was other problem too. Even the neighbors, you know. The owners of the area over there—

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: Yeah, they—it was not good. Yeah, the people were get hot. Even, right here in Idaho. We have one example. We have one Somali guy, he cannot walk now, because he get shot with those guys.

HG: In Idaho?

IM: Yeah. Not in Idaho! He was in Kakuma.

HG: Oh, he got shot in Kakuma.

IM: Yeah, he got shot in Kakuma. And we have other Bajunis that were killed in Kakuma! With the knives, and the—

HG: Was that fighting among refugees? Or was that the Kenyans, or both?

IM: Yeah, I think they were Kenyans.

HG: Okay.

IM: They were Kenyans. You know, like, it's those, people who don't wear the clothes, you know? They just cover—

HG: What was that? You told me about them, Omar, what's the—

OO: Yeah, there's Pokot—

IM: Yeah.

OO: --and then there's Turkana.

IM: Yeah—

IM and HG: [unison] Turkana!

HG: That's it. Yeah.

IM: Yeah, yeah. Turkana. Those guys. It was really, really—

HG: Okay.

[21:30]

IM: Unsafe over there.

HG: So, did the government settle you in Turkana land then? Is that what happened?

IM: Yeah, yeah. Because it was their land, you know? We are there, and took their land, you know [laughs, Haden joins in].

HG: Nothing you can really do though, huh? [laughs]

IM: But now, they're doing good, because the government, for years and years, they give them, like education, how—and now they settled.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, they settle. No problem with them.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, only people, me and you maybe. You know, we get fell out, and what, I don't like you, and just—but for them, now. They're good.

HG: It's all good now, huh?

IM: They share even. They share the animals. And I think the refugees give them food. Exchanging. Really friends now.

HG: Okay.

OO: They do barter trade for—

IM: Yeah, barter trade.

OO: for the—

IM: Yeah.

HG: Okay.

OO: Yeah. Give it like a animal, you take the food.

HG: Okay.

OO: Yeah.

HG: So, mostly just adjusting to new neighbors, and—

IM: Yes.

HG: And misunderstandings. That. Okay.

IM: So, when were in Nairobi, then we started—we went there in the, like, we found the office. One guy, he was a Somali guy, can't remember his name. He knew my dad. And when we went there, and there's the area, just like Mogadishu. Only Somalis. So, he found my dad there. And, my dad tell him the story, and was, "okay, I can help." Then he took my Dad to the UNHCR office. And we started the process there. What we found out, was interesting. You know, in the list of the all refugees they have, no Bajunis. No Bajuni's tribe.

HG: No Bajunis listed?

[23:07]

IM: No Bajuni tribe listed. They didn't know anything about Bajuni. Then we have to come back, and we're in the camp for knowing the UN knows us! But, we find out, and this nobody knows, until now! How the Bajuni get the process. We start it. We have to fight for that.

HG: So, they weren't even listing Bajuni refugees—

IM: Yeah.

HG: at all, huh?

IM: Yes. We have to go back, and try to dig deep, and find our history. Then we took it to the UNHCR, you know, said, "okay, these is us. Okay, read it? Then we need to be recognized as a tribe."

HG: Okay.

IM: Then, they did that. Yeah, they did that. I think if you go to google, you can find it too. The Somali Bajuni. Over there you can find everything. I don't know, something like Ontario? They put down you in the internet. You can read. Only Bajunis. Somali Bajuni.

HG: Yeah—

IM: Other Bajunis from Somalia, to Mozambique.

HG: Okay.

[24:18]

IM: Yeah. We have Bajunis.

HG: But Somalia Bajunis are their own group, huh?

IM: But Somali Bajunis, yeah. That's only dedicated to Somali Bajuni.

HG: Okay.

IM: Then from there, we started to process. It took us years. And, you go a lot of screening.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: Yeah. Even Trump set up a screen, we have, even ourself, we felt like, the one we did, it was more than the one they doing right now.

HG: Really?

IM: It was a lot of screening. Lot of screening. Even before all these stuff started. I remember in, I think it was 1998, right? Yeah, when they bomb Nairobi.

HG: Okay.

IM: I was in Nairobi that time.

HG: Wow.

IM: Yeah. The embassy, American embassy, was bombed at that time.

HG: Who bombed it?

IM: Well, the terrorists.

HG: Terrorists?

IM: Yeah.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, it was scary. It was scary. And most of the time, we go to the UN building, the security was really, really tight that time. And it took us, the process, back. So, we have to wait for another year just to see what the progress we going to [unintelligible] with the process.

HG: So, how many years, over all did the process take?

IM: Yeah, we started the process from 1998, I think, to 2005.

HG: Five? So seven years.

IM: Seven years. Just—

HG: And that was—

IM: Back and forth, back and forth.

HG: That was in between Kakuma, Nairobi?

IM: Yes. And we didn't look back. We have to—we fought a lot. Myself, I was included too. Whatever my dad goes, "Ismael, let's go." And we go together. Yeah. That's where I started to, like, stealing: little bit of English. You know, when people they start talking English, I say okay. I have to learn English, because sometimes, you go there, you meet with the white. They don't know Swahili, and you have to find out, translate, you don't know what they're telling them.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: We felt that way too. Because, we have a lot of Somalis working there. And, the process was always, just right there, it doesn't go anywhere. That's why we started to figure ourself how to do that. Then, after that, the process, really process started now. You go with a lot of screening, and a lot of interviewing. A lot of questions, and they ask you, like family questions, one by one. You go to this room. They ask you questions, and they—maybe the same questions. So, the way you answer here, the question has too match [laughs] over there.

HG: They check your answers—

IM: Yeah.

HG: Against your brother's answers, and your mom's answers, and—

[27:01]

IM: Exactly! Yeah, and we didn't know that at the beginning. So, one day we were sitting, and we were just talking about dinnertime. And it was like, "okay. What question did you get?" "That's question so and so." The same question. "What did you get?" [Haden laughs] "I get this." Same question. So, we realize, oh, all these questions. Then we started to, like, organize ourself. Then we passed the interview, and we end up getting, when we finished the interview, you don't know where you're going to go. So, they sent our application. According to them, they sent it to Canada. Canada refused us. Then they sent it to Australia. Australia refused us. Then, they sent it here. And they accepted us. Yeah.

HG: So, how old were you, you said 2006, so about twenty, twenty-five?

IM: 2005. I was twenty-four, that time.

HG: Twenty-four?

IM: Yeah, I was, like grown-up person, and I was taking over everything.

HG: Had you gotten married as well? Or—

IM: Yes, I get married when I finish the process.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, where did you end in the United States? Did you come right to Utah? Or did you start somewhere else?

IM: No, I came to Houston, Texas.

HG: Houston.

IM: Yeah. Houston, Texas. About two months. And then, remember that time, the hurricane Katrina, I don't know if—

HG: Uh-huh, I do.

IM: Yeah, it hit me really bad over there.

HG: That's not a very good welcome to— [laughs]

IM: No, no.

HG: —America.

IM: No, it was not good. And even the family. My family just there for one week, and the hurricane was there. So, you know what, this is not good place to live. We had a friend here, we called him. “Hey, this stuff is coming again.” After Katrina was Rita.

HG: Yeah, I remember that.

IM: So, the Rita was coming. And we already experienced the Katrina. So, you know what?
[laughs]

HG: One’s enough? [both laugh]

[28:44]

IM: Yeah, then we have to move. We moved to Utah, since 2005. The same year. We arrived in Houston, after two months, we were here in Utah.

HG: Okay.

IM: And from here, we never—we just go back Africa, and visit, come back.

HG: Okay.

IM: This our homeland now.

HG: Where do you visit in Africa, is it back in Kenya? Or—

IM: Yes, in Kenya. I never been Somalia. I don’t know anything about Somalia.

HG: Okay.

IM: We have people there. We have a lot of people. All extended family. It’s most of them they’re in Somalia. Some of them they’re in Kenya—

HG: Kenya.

IM: —But, most of them in Somalia.

HG: Okay.

IM: But we cannot see each other. They just cross the border to come and see us in Kenya. We cannot go there.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah. Especially in our village. We can go to big cities. But in our villages, it's very, very dangerous. In a different way. 'Cause, like, first of all, you're Americans right now. And the second thing, you know, when you're coming from the West, and you've been here for years, the people over there think that you have money. So, they can come and rob you. Or sometimes you get killed for nothing. That's why we decided ourself not to—

HG: Not to go?

IM: Yeah, to go over there.

HG: It's not worth the risk, huh?

IM: It's not worth it, yeah, yeah.

HG: Okay. So, can you tell me what it was like, coming to the US? I mean, that was quite an adjustment, coming from Kenya.

IM: Yes.

[30:05]

HG: Was it—like, how did you deal with the difficulties? Maybe the culture shock, or language, or work?

IM: It's hard. It was hard. First of all, even in airplane, you know, you get the food, and the food is not like the one you have, you know? Sometimes, you stay hungry. And you want the food, but you cannot eat it. It's there, they serve you, right? But that was the first to feel about. We are, like, "I'm going to a different world." And when I came there, I came to Houston, even the food was different too. I had my sister there, here before me. And when they came to the airport, you know, like, "oh, the brother's coming." They prepare the food. When I went home, with them, okay this the food. I couldn't eat, because the oil is different, and the taste was different. And everything was different. So, yeah. The language was a little bit— I had my English, little bit. So, it was not really big problem for me to adapt.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: Yeah. Then, I went to school over there. Right away. I warned them, "I want to go to school—"

HG: In Houston?

IM: Yeah, we didn't have this chance, so I want to go to school.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, I went to school daily, just for the English. But, then they took me to, like—they told me, “you’re going to go to—your English is good. You can go, like, somewhere else, not in ESL.” English as Second Language. I say, “Okay.” But we have to move.

HG: Okay.

IM: We moved, and I came here.

HG: So, did you pick up school then, in Utah, as well?

IM: Yes. I went there for a little bit, but the life was too much on me. Because It’s only me and my Dad when we came. And it was only me speaking English.

HG: That would be hard.

IM: Yeah. Only me. All siblings, nobody has English. Even my Dad, my Mom. No one. So, I have to be everywhere. I have to be everywhere. I started working, going to school, working, going to school, then I have to quit school. Even I have to change my work schedule. Because of [pauses]

OO: Appointment?

IM: Yeah, appointment, all those stuff.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: And they don’t drive, and like my Dad, for example, he get a job at airport. And he start at four o’clock in the morning. And that time, there’s no Trax, nothing. Even bus, they go there, but not that time.

HG: So, you had to drive him to work, and—

[32:45]

IM: Yes, I have to go drop him over there. And I have my sister too, she was working at work. She needed by six o’clock. So, in the morning, I couldn’t work, because most of the work, they start at six. So, I said, “okay.” I change the schedule to like the second shift, so I can do everything in the morning, then go to my work at two o’clock. Then come home around 12:30. Midnight. Then I’m awake at--

HG: Four? [laughs]

IM: four. [laughs] Even before four—

HG: Before four, yeah.

IM: --because I have to be at airport four. So, it was a mess, to be honest. But, luckily, you know, we fought for ourself. And in the end my sister, she's a degree holder right now. Bachelor, right? Nayma.

OO: Master.

IM: Master.

HG: Master.

IM: Yeah.

OO: Master of the social work.

IM: Yeah.

HG: Awesome.

IM: Yeah. So, I say, "okay, this for you guys. For me, I'm old right now, and I'm not going to go back to school. I'm just keep working now." I have my family, my wife, and my son is here, playing. So, yeah.

[33:43]

HG: Can you tell me what it's like, being a Muslim in Utah and the United States? 'Cause, when you're coming from the refugee camps, it sounds like most Somalis were Muslims—

IM: Uh-huh.

HG: Then, here there's not as many Muslims, is that difficult at all, or did you find things were—like, is there a pretty good community established when you got here? Or—

IM: Yeah, good question. When I get into Houston, my apartment, it was the next building, it was a mosque over there.

HG: Oh.

IM: Yeah. So, for me, personally, I didn't see any big changes, because I was performing my prayers, regularly in Houston. For those two months. Then, when I moved here, it was a little bit tougher, because at the mosque was too far. But in Islamic, you know, you can pray anywhere.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: So, we used to prayer at our house, over there. But Fridays, we go to the mosque. At the mosque we met [referring to Haden and Ismael's first meeting], so, when we came here, the mosque was already there. Yeah. So, for me, I didn't have any problem with any religious racism. And, maybe [behind] my back, I don't know.

HG: Okay.

IM: But, you know, to meet with the people, and do those kind of stuff, especially in Utah, I never.

HG: That's good.

IM: Yeah.

HG: Is it different to be going to a mosque with Muslims from all over the world? Is that an adjustment at all? Or is it—

IM: Yes. Because, we Muslim, we are different, you know. The faith is the only one, but we are different...

HG: *Madhhabs* [schools of Islamic jurisprudence]?

IM: *Madhhabs*, yes. *Madhhabs*. Yeah. That's the only thing. For example, the mosque we go, is not my *madhhab*. But, myself, I'm Muslim, and they're Muslims. I don't fight them. So, they have their opinions, I have my opinion, we have to respect each other. That's the only thing. But where we came from, was only one or two only.

HG: Uh-huh.

[35:46]

IM: One or two. You know, like, two *madhhabs* over there.

HG: Yeah, it was—

IM: Shafi'i and Hanbali over there.

HG: Hanbali?

IM: Yeah. The East African. It's only those. The Shafi'i the majority. Yeah. So, it was just like that. But here, we have everybody. Even Shi'a we have here. They come to the mosque.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, so, yeah.

HG: So, it just—

IM: But they don't show themselves because of the respect. Yeah.

HG: Okay. So just it's about figuring out how to, you know, find the balance? But—

IM: Yeah.

HG: —respect for everybody, and—

IM: Yes, yes.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah. So, and not only the Khadeeja mosque, we have a lot of mosques here now.

HG: Uh-huh. Yeah, I've been to the al-Huda.

IM: Al-Huda.

HG: Al-Madina.

OO: Madina.

IM: Madina, yeah. So, and they have another one they call Islamic center, at the—

OO: Sandy?

IM: Sandy, 1900 south?

HG: Oh, it's that one?

OO: 90.

HG: Does that one have a name, or is it just—

IM: Yes.

OO: They call Islamic center.

HG: Okay.

IM: Islamic center.

HG: Islamic center.

IM: Yeah.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, they have over there. And they have another one. Shakali, it's a—

OO: Yeah, al-Huda.

IM: Not al-Huda.

OO: Yeah, another one there.

IM: And—

HG: And there's al-Noor, right in Salt Lake as well?

OO: Yeah.

IM: Al-noor. Yeah. Yeah. Noor, they combine with Khadeeja.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah, they're both from Khadeeja.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, how did you end up Khadeeja? Was it just the biggest mosque, or the closest? Or?

IM: For me, when we came here, that the only mosque. And Noor. So, I get used to go there. So, when have these different mosques, it was not easy for me to change it. So, that's why I decided just to stay there.

HG: Stay there.

IM: I go to the other mosque.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: I go to the other mosques. But, for now, even that one is closer to my house. When I drive, if I put GPS, that's the closest one. So, I just go there.

[37:36]

HG: You'd just already established, and—

IM: Yeah, and also like, all our community, we pray there. Especially Fridays. Even sometimes, we had our meeting at the mosque. Because everybody's there. If you have an emergency, we just call each other there and we do our meeting over there.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, there's a good support system in place—

IM: Yeah, yes, yes.

HG: That's good.

IM: Yeah.

HG: Let me see if I have any other questions [pauses] So, can you tell me a little bit about the work you do here with the community? The soccer, or anything else you do?

IM: Yes, yeah. When we came here, back in 2005, was only like two families here, the Bajunis. They were only two families. So, and that family was only one family. But—

HG: Extended family?

IM: Yeah, two brothers, and their wife and their kids only. And the brothers.

HG: So, you guys were *the* Bajunis [laughs].

IM: Yeah, and their mom. So, when we came here, the way they were living, it was okay. But, sometimes, we thought, you know what, we can do better. We are only few people here, and everybody to live by their own, is not going to be good. And the way we saw their life was really hard. So, we decided to put ourselves together, even if we are not—we know each other since in Africa, but we are not related, but we see okay, let's come together and form a community. So, whatever happens is a community thing, not coach Omar, or Ismael, or Haden, no. We need to have it this way. So, we started little by little, we have the barriers, especially Somalis, they were on top of us: "Oh, you cannot make this. You need to join us." I say, "Yeah, we can join you guys in larger, but right here? We are the Bajunis we need to do this the Bajuni way too." So, we just decided that. Then, little by little people are coming. Back in 2007, we started if we can register our organization. In 2008 we were registered as Bajunis. And I was, like a founder for the community. So, we went there and register ourselves and we started working. Just helping Bajunis among us. Then we, back in 2009 and '10, we tried to apply the grant, the refugee grant, and we got it, about eleven-thousand. Then we started, even having our own office.

HG: Okay.

[40:15]

IM: So, we can have more resources for our people. Not even our people, even the Bantus, we were like, okay. They need help, and they were using to come to us, and we help them. So, other tribe, they came to. Like a [unintelligible].

HG: Sorry, what was that?

IM: Burundian community.

HG: Burundi. Okay.

IM: They're not Muslim, many of them, I can say maybe 99%. They're Christian. So, we try to put ourself all over the place. Yeah. So, that's how we started. And, then around 2011, 2010, in the middle, you know, the people who used to work at the office, you know, they just started not to participate in everything. Then I was only by myself, even before coach Omar came, and other people. So, I didn't leave anything, but I couldn't do all the stuff by myself. But the community was there, we were doing our stuff. But it was too much for me. Then I let the license expire because it was useless for myself to do it.

HG: Right.

IM: But then, back in 2013, we revived again. And that's where coach Omar jumped in, and other people jump in, until now. Yeah.

HG: So, how many Bajunis are there around here? Is there a good number? Or—

IM: Yes, it's a good number. You know, the Bajunis with the kids, we can say we're about two-hundred plus.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: And, did that organization—before, was it just people moving, or are they getting busy, or staying, or like?

IM: Our organization?

HG: Well, yeah. You mentioned that, you know, it lapsed for a while, and people—

IM: Yeah--

HG: So, did they move, or did they just become—

IM: No, they just—

HG: —busy?

IM: they decided not to work.

HG: Gotcha.

[42:01]

IM: Yeah, they decided not to work, and I was trying to pull them back, and decided—

HG: Just too many things going on?

IM: Yeah, too many things, and by myself, and the government side, I pull up myself, but, we were helping each other. Just like volunteering stuff.

HG: That's sounds like a lot to juggle. 'Cause I mean—

IM: Yes.

HG: —You've got like, you said, the wider Somali community—

IM: uh-huh.

HG: —and then the Bajuni, and then you guys are reaching out to the Burundi—

IM: Yes. Yes.

HG: and then, is it the Somali Bantu?

IM: Yeah, the Somali Bantu as too.

HG: Everybody? Wow.

IM: Yeah.

HG: That's a lot to—

IM: And it took us, we end up having like, the call East African Goat Project. We joined by Burundian, and the Somali Bantu.

HG: Okay.

IM: And we, we raise the goat from—the process started 2010, 11. And 2013 we had our goats on the ground at the airport field. Yeah, so started with the 47 goat, by last year, we end up having 500 goats.

HG: [laughs] That's a lot more than forty-seven.

IM: yes. Oh, yes, yes. And we have to sell off goats, because it's too much work. So, this year we sell a lot of goats, so to reduce the herd down.

HG: Gotcha.

IM: And we did that.

HG: Wow, so you've done a lot then.

IM: Yeah. It's just, too much. It's a lot. It's a lot. Yeah, I'm thinking myself to leave all this stuff to Omar right now, because he has the energy and I feel like he can do better than us that we did. Yeah.

[43:32]

HG: Well it sounds like [Ismael laughs] it's a shared project, everybody's gotta pitch in, right?
[both laugh]

IM: Yeah, so I want to leave the stuff right now.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah. I'm here because of, you know, I'm the founder, and I feel it sometimes, when I don't do the stuff, I feel like, maybe, I made a sin, you know? Then I go back, I say, "no. I cannot leave. I have to work with these guys." Yeah. But I just, I don't do that much, but they do a lot, to be honest. Myself, right now, I feel like I did a lot of stuff, before. So, right now, I wanted time with my family too. Yeah.

HG: It's very understandable.

IM: Yeah.

HG: Family is super important.

IM: Yeah.

HG: So, I guess, maybe just one or two more questions, 'cause—

IM: Yeah--

HG: —I don't want to keep you too long, and it's getting cold, huh?

IM: Yeah, yeah.

HG: Do you see yourself going anywhere else in the future, or is Salt Lake where you're going to stay?

[44:26]

IM: To be honest, I wish I can retire right now.

HG: Retire?

IM: So I can enjoy my life. Because I've been working, you know, since I came here?

HG: uh-huh.

IM: And hard work. The sign business is really hard. Omar will tell you, he's the same thing.

HG: Okay.

IM: So, I feel like I can retire right now. But I don't see myself right now. My plan is to live here until I retire, then we can stay here, or we go back home. I mean Kenya. I call Kenya home. Even I'm thinking to invest there too, because Somalia, we cannot trust the best in anything over there right now. I don't know for the future, it doesn't seem like it going to be better.

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah.

HG: And is there anything else you want to tell me that we haven't discussed, anything you think is important to know, or?

IM: I don't think so. Should we think something maybe I forgot? Or? That I should tell him?

OO: No, it's nothing to add, but I want to add for like Mombasa camp?

IM: Uh-huh.

OO: After Kakuma, and then after that, after Jomvu, they come another two camp.

IM: Yeah.

OO: Another called Utange.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: Yeah.

OO: They live Somali, and Jomvu they live Bajuni.

IM: Bajuni, yeah.

OO: And then there's another place, they live Barawa. For Barawa camp, I don't what the name is—

IM: Benadir.

OO: Benadir. They call Benadir.

IM: Yeah, they call Benadir, yeah.

[45:52]

OO: So, they have different—

IM: They have three camps in Mombasa.

OO: Yeah, different place, yeah.

HG: So, the camps were divided then, by group?

OO: Yeah—

IM: In the end the—

HG: Everyone got filtered—

OO: Yeah.

IM: In the end they closed those one first. The good thing, or the Benadir, they get a chance to come to United States.

HG: Huh.

IM: They get the process really fast then us. Then there were very few people, that's why they're okay, they shut down the camp. And the Somalis too. They're the Utange. Utange was a mixed, with everybody over there.

HG: Gotcha.

IM: Yeah. So, then they closed, that's why from there, they were moving to Jomvu camp, and it's where we get some, trouble, a little bit. But the Kenyan government step up and, yeah. Thank you for bringing that. I was talking only for Bajunis, you know? [laughs]

HG: Well, that was your experience.

IM: Yeah, yeah. You see how it is, right? So, these is the Somali problem, until now. To be honest, I don't scare to say this, I'm in America here. These the problem, on the government right now. If you follow the news, if you follow the Somalian politics, it's tribalism. Until now. Even in our area, they made an election last month. They still—

HG: There's still tribalism, huh?

IM: they have three president right now. Three president.

HG: So, that tribalism, is that like the clans?

IM: The clans, yeah, the clan. Yeah, the clan. So,

HG: Okay, so that's still something you have to deal with, sometimes, here, huh?

IM: Yes. Even here. Even, you see it, but we don't you know, put ourself carried away. Say, "this, we were doing back there. But here, we're all one nation here."

HG: Okay.

IM: Yeah. It's one nation. We don't care about what happened over there. So—

HG: So, is it just easier because the community is so much closer?

IM: Yes.

HG: To ignore the tribalism than it is back home where it's bigger? Or why do you think it's easier to overcome here in Utah?

[48:00]

IM: Yeah, because here, first of all, is everybody's busy working.

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: And, if you look at—our heads opens up. Because myself, when I came here. I was the same way thinking only, you know, like—

HG: Bajuni?

IM: My family, or Bajunis. But, when I open up the organization, I was going to the meeting. Okay? I was invited, even they called like, advisory refugee board meeting?

HG: Uh-huh.

IM: And over there, sometimes, you can sit with—that time, what was the name of the governor? Before Gary Herbert? Uh, the family with the—

HG: Huntsman?

IM: Huntsman. I've been able to sit in the meeting with Huntsman. You know? So, I was learning a lot of stuff. So, myself, I start changing. I see myself, I'm not Bajuni anymore. I'm everybody. That's why, if you look our community, we're all over the place. All over the place, but the other communities, especially Somalian community, you don't find them everywhere. They still sometimes, bullying other people here, but we tell them, "here, we are strong. You're not going to do nothing." And here, everybody has their rights. Yeah, we practice the rights in the right way. Not in our countries. You don't have the right, whoever's in charge, he's above the law.

HG: Gotcha.

IM: Yeah.

HG: All right, well, thank you—

IM: Yeah.

HG: Ismael, for the interview. That was—

IM: Yeah, no problem, thank you.

HG: I learned a lot, and we'll just close the interview, so we're at the Sunnyvale park

IM: Uh-huh.

HG: I'm interviewing Ismael Mohamed.

IM: Yes.

HG: I'm here with Omar Osman, and it is September 30, 2019.

