

Somali Oral History Project

Interviewee(s): Aden Batar

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Interviewer: Haden Griggs

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Transcribed by: Haden Griggs

Transcript Proofed by: Aden Batar

Brief Description of Contents: An interview with Aden discussing his experiences in Somali, coming to Utah, and his experiences and service here.

Reference: **HG:** Haden Griggs, **AB:** Aden Batar

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.

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

[00:01]

HG: All right. So, it is August 10, 2019. I am Haden Griggs, I am here with Aden Batar in his home to learn a little bit more about him and his experiences. Mr. Batar, thank you very much for your time this morning.

AB: Thank you so much.

HG: Could you please tell me your full name and birth year?

AB: My name is Aden Batar and I was born in 1967.

HG: Thank you. And what do you do for work, Aden?

AB: I work for Catholic Community Services of Utah. I am the director of migration and refugee services. I help refugees and immigrant to start a new life, basically.

HG: How long have you worked there?

AB: I've been working since 1996. Yeah.

HG: When you did you arrive in United States?

AB: I came in 1994. I was one of the first Somali refugees resettled here in the state of Utah.

HG: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up? Where did you grow up?

AB: I was born and grew up in Somalia. A city called Baidoa which is south of the capital of Mogadishu. And that's where I went all my schooling, elementary, and middle school and high school. And then when I completed high school I went to Mogadishu to go for university.

[1:31]

HG: Can you tell me what life was like growing up in Baidoa?

AB: Baidoa, it's a town that, it was called the city of paradise because of the natural resources that city had. I'm sure some of the professors from Utah State University extension project in the agricultural department, some of them have been there. Because we had such a huge agricultural programs there in Baidoa. They had an extension, a testing farm there. The professor used to come there, and I've seen some of them when I was in high school. It's really a beautiful town that, as we were growing up we had everything that we needed there. We have all the farms. Every family has a farm and we used to go outside of the city. There's a lot of places to hike. It was really beautiful. Everybody who came to that city, to my knowledge, I haven't seen them going back [chuckles]. So, they usually stay there [haden chuckles], reside there and have family. And I had a lot of friends, we grew up together. The school was great and we had really nice, I mean we had free education, free health care. And, so, yeah. Life was so beautiful.

[2:57]

HG: You mentioned farming. So, was your family farmers or did you just have a farm in addition to other things, or—?

AB: So, the farm is kind of like, basically, every family owned a land to farm. But we were not farmers. We had some of our family members live in the farm and then whenever we need something we usually go there and basically, we got all the crops that we needed. But my family, we were doing import export and so that's how we sustained our life.

HG: Is Baidoa a pretty big city? How many people?

AB: Baidoa is, I think one of the three largest cities in the [country]. But it has a population, I can't remember exact number, but it has—It was a mixed city where everybody lived in that city from the corners of the country and it was not that far from the capital as well. It was like 250 kilometers away from the capital.

HG: Thanks. Sounds like a really nice place.

[4:04]

AB: Very beautiful and unfortunately that city later, was turned into the city of death. Because of manmade atrocities that people who had all those farming and had their crops and so forth, they did not have the peace to continue to have their life. People have attacked the city numerous times and killed a lot of people. Then it became one of the city that thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives and the international community had to step in and provide the food aid and security.

HG: Sorry to hear that.

AB: Yeah.

HG: So, you said you went to university in Mogadishu? When was that you would have moved?

AB: So, I moved to Mogadishu in 1996, that's when I started—1986, I'm sorry. To go back, it wouldn't have been '96. [both laugh] So it was 1986 because I completed my high school in 1984 and then two years we have to do, what we call it, national service. Everybody has to serve the community. And then, '86 I started the university until 1990. I went to college of law and I studied law and completed my law school in 1990. And that's when the civil war broke. Yeah. After that.

HG: So, were you in Mogadishu then, when the government collapsed?

[5:45]

AB: Yes. I was in Mogadishu when the government collapsed and the civil war broke and I was there until 1992. So that's 1992, that's when I fled the country and went to Kenya.

HG: Kenya. [scratching sound as he takes a note]. Get that quick. So, can you tell me a little bit about moving from Baidoa to Mogadishu? What was Mogadishu like before the civil war?

AB: Mogadishu is the capital of Somalia. My mom lived there before I even completed high school. I was living with my grandma. She raised me. So, Mogadishu was, in the coast of the Indian Ocean right there. It's got beautiful beaches and really nice long beach. as long

as your eye can see. And white sand, blue ocean. I remember, every Friday, we used to go to the beach to play soccer and swim. And, beautiful. And then, if you want to buy seafood it's right there. Very cheap. You can have seafood every day. It was not so expensive. But not many Somalis eat seafood. [laughs].

HG: Heard that.

AB: But I enjoy every single day. Eating seafood and it was inexpensive and then there's some boats there that you can rent with, and then you can enjoy the view of the beautiful sea and, in fact, we had a lot of tourism at that time. People mainly coming from Italy and Middle East used to come there and enjoy the beach. And also, the city. It was so beautiful. I mean, you go outside of Mogadishu, the city, and then you see the farming area. You can see all the different kind of fruits. Banana plantations, mangoes, and oranges, and you name it. Everything. Somalis, we had the beautiful and the best fruits that the country has to offer. And the life was so great and we had our own home, and my mom had a business and I used to work for her. And, that's the same time going to school, so my moving to Baidoa going to Mogadishu, my transition was not a difficult, because I already have family member living there.

[8:21]

HG: Can you tell me a little bit more about your family? So, your grandparents were in Baidoa—

AB: uh-huh.

HG: And your mother was in Mogadishu?

AB: Yeah, so we lived both city. And, that's why we were going back and forth always. But when the civil war broke, we lost everything. We had to, I mean, I used to move back and forth, you know, the two cities and then to see whatever is safe, but nowhere was safe when the civil war broke. The war spread out throughout the country and I never went to the north side of the country in my life. I always lived in the south. Mogadishu and Baidoa. Those are the two cities that I ever lived in my life.

HG: So, were you—you mentioned your family. Did you get married before leaving Somalia or did you get married in—

AB: I was married when I was in college in Somalia.

HG: College.

AB: Yeah.

HG: uh-huh. Gotcha.

AB: That was my, probably the second year in college when I married.

HG: Okay. So, you've mentioned the civil war, but what lead you specifically to decide to leave Somalia, or what led to you leaving Somalia?

[9:38]

AB: The reason why I fled Somalia was because we lost a lot of family members, including our own son. And, it was not safe for us to remain because every day you would see things that you don't like that is happening in front of you, that you cannot do anything about it. And so, it was very risky for us to remain there. Not knowingly whether we will be losing our lives. And also witnessing family members, loss of their lives every day. So, I think that was one of the biggest reasons why we left. And just to go anywhere that is safe, regardless. I didn't care where it was. I mean, whether Kenya, or Ethiopia or whatever country that would provide us safety, that's where we wanted to go. And so, in this case, you know, Kenya was much closer, and Ethiopia was also closer but the way that you're taking to go to those countries you have to choose which way is much safer to go. Kenya was a little bit safer to go to that land then Ethiopia, because I've seen a lot of people—we heard a lot of bad stories of people that went through that road that were killed.

[11:00]

HG: So, did you travel to Kenya then, like on, by land? Or air?

AB: Yeah. I traveled by land and that's how I get into Kenya.

HG: So, when did you approximately arrive in Kenya?

AB: It took me a couple weeks, because, you know the road were very rough. And also, some areas you have to avoid travelling, and so it took a couple weeks to get to Nairobi and also, we didn't have no passport or visa to get into to Kenya. So, we had to go to the border and sneak in through the border to get into Kenya. Yeah, it was not—I don't know how I did, but it was not an easy journey to go from Somalia to Kenya.

HG: I imagine.

AB: Yeah.

HG: So, were you traveling, was that with your family? Or a large group, or by yourself at first, or—?

AB: I traveled first myself with strangers that I didn't know who they were, but they were all Somalis, but I did not wanted to take my family with me, with that journey, because it was so difficult. And also, it's not one of those journey that you take your whole family because you never know what's going to happen, if your whole family will be killed. At least I wanted me to go first and then tell my family they can take the same road or I

could find a different way of travel. But in this case, I did it, and went to Kenya. But I did not want my family to go through that route. I had to figure out a different way. So, finally, I was able to get them from Mogadishu to Nairobi by plane, to join me there in Nairobi after several months after I went to Kenya. Uh-huh.

[12:51]

HG: So, what was life like in Nairobi. Were you living in Nairobi proper or—

AB: So, Nairobi, Kenya, we did not, I mean, we had to live with family members and friends. And, we didn't have our own homes, so we had to live with other people, and also, I was going back and forth with Nairobi and Mombasa. Mombasa is where the refugee camp was. When we came to Nairobi, we had to register with the UNHCR, to tell them we are refugees, and then they sent us to go to the camp in Mombasa. I did not want to live that camp because it was so crowded. Hundreds of thousands of people were living there and you don't have the opportunity to work or to do anything else outside of the camp. So, I chose to live in Nairobi, so at least I can provide to my family. The life was not easy. It was very difficult. We didn't have no documentation to stay. All we had was that refugee papers. Sometimes the Kenyan police will harass, or they will take you if they see you, you are in the city, they might take you back to the camp. But I was lucky, I did not have any of that issue until we got sponsorship to come to the US. So, we were able to go through that process and, I guess we were one of the lucky ones that were accepted. And that way, we were told we were going to Utah. So, we ended up coming to Utah in 1994.

HG: So, that was about two years in Kenya—

AB: uh-huh.

HG: And then '94 to the United States.

AB: Yeah.

[14:38]

HG: So, sponsorship. Can you tell me—some of the other people I've talked to have mentioned that too—can you tell me a little bit about that process of sponsorship?

AB: So, the sponsorship is, like if you have family members in the US, you'll contact that family member, then they will file paperwork for you and then they'll send it to you and then you go to the refugee camp and you say, "that I have this family member," and based on that you get your refugee status. So, that's how a lot of people who had relative in the US, get their refugee status to come to the US. At the time, the process, it was very thorough. You have to go through and process, and, background check and everything. And then, you will be matched with an organization who filed the sponsorship through

that relative. So, you'd be reunited with your relative, whatever they live in the US. So, in this case, we have relative here, and then we came to Utah.

HG: So, what were some of the most, I guess—word this better. What were some of the experiences, or challenges that you had coming to the United States? I imagine that's quite an adjustment.

[15:56]

AB: Yeah. I think, coming to a new country where you don't have friends. It's really challenging, and you don't know the culture here, the language, and the job market and you don't have a home. Everything was foreign to us. But where we came, at least we had some relatives, and also the agency who sponsored us. And also, we had some volunteers who helped us make the transition smoothly. As soon as we arrive in Utah, we had a home given to us. It was fully furnished, even there was some ready-to-eat food that evening when we arrived. So, that was the start. At least we didn't have to struggle finding a home or furnishings or food or anything like that. So, all the basics we were provided, and we had health screening. The children were all enrolled into public schools, and at the time, my children were young. They were not school age, but with the others, some of the family members that were with us who went to school. And then, we were also assisted getting our documentations: social security, Utah ID card and then so forth. So, within a month, we received all our documentation, basically. Within that month, though, we were been oriented about the life in the US and how to get a job, how to use the public transportation, how to go to the library, how to go to school, how to go to doctor's appointment. So, there's a lot of things that we didn't know that we were oriented about that month that we were waiting for our documentation and then as soon as I got my social security and Utah ID, I started working. My first job was working on a production line. I've never worked on a production line. My entire life I worked on business, and so that was the first time I worked for someone, working on a production line, but again, I was proud to do that, because I wanted to provide for my family and so I don't have to depend on welfare. So, I started working making minimum wage at the time. So, yeah. I think the transition was a challenging, but at the same time, we were making progress every day, learning the new environment.

[18:38]

HG: So, it sounds like you had a lot of agencies and help initially upon arriving, but was there anything that you or your family did specifically to deal with the challenges on a personal level? Or—

AB: I think there are several things. First, religiously, the type of food that we eat, it has to be halal. And especially the meat. So, there were no stores where we could buy halal food. That was the biggest challenge that we had. So, whenever we need meat, we had to go to the farmers in the area where we live and buy a lamb or a goat, and then we have to

prepare our meat according to our religion. So, that's one thing that we dealing with. And then, the place of worship was another thing. At the time, where we lived there was a small mosque. But we didn't have Fridays like you know, there weren't that many people to gather and to have a socialization and prayer. That was another issue. And then during the holidays also was an issue. We didn't have that many people to socialize from our religious community. So that's some things that we had to deal with to cope with it. At least for the first few years until the community grew and then have a bigger mosque, have stores that we could buy [coughs] the food that is halal. And then, at least I spoke some English, but my wife didn't spoke English. It was very, very, very hard for her to communicate. So, she had to go to school, have some friends, volunteer friends, come to home to help her teach English. And we didn't have no friends, so we had to make our own friends in the community where we live. So, I think all those things were a huge challenge. And then, there were no schools where our kids will learn the religion also. That was another thing that was really a huge challenge. So that we have to deal all that.

HG: So, was it mostly just, step by step, waiting for the community to grow? Or was there—

[21:01]

AB: It took us several years because we lived in Logan. Logan was very small community. We lived there for two years. And then, later we moved to Salt Lake City when I got the job working at Catholic Community Services. In Salt Lake City, at least the community was bigger than Logan. Even though the community was bigger, there was only one mosque at the time. The one on 7th East and 7th South. *Masjid* [mosque] al-Noor. That was the only mosque the city had at the time. But as more and more refugees to arrive, and also more students from Muslim countries to arrive, the community grew bigger, so there was a need that we need to have a bigger worship space. So, that's when we purchased this land in West Valley to build a new mosque and that was the community effort. Everybody contributed to the building of that new mosque. And then there was several businesses were opened as well, and I think it took several years to get to that level. But every time we see a need—we were kind of like, meeting and figuring how—it's kind of like building a new community. And it's not easy, but as a community we made all that possible. We didn't have a Muslim school. Later, Iqra Academy was opened. The Somalis as they grew here, there was a need that they need to have their own mosque. So, they rented two new mosques. And the same thing with the different other communities who were coming here. The same thing for the businesses. So, they opened stores. You know, restaurants and so forth. And, I think the more community grew, the more that we were meeting the need of our community.

HG: Thank you. So, follow up question on that. Can you tell me a little bit what it's like to be a Muslim in Utah? And how that compared coming from—'cause my understanding, Somalia's almost 100% Muslim. Then coming here to a different group, is that—

[23:12]

AB: I think one thing that I like Utah, is it was very welcoming. I mean, the community here they made our life very easy by welcoming us, not seeing us as strangers. Even though we're a little different [chuckles], but the different did not break us apart. It makes us closer, I mean, people were coming—I remember when I moved in, in this neighborhood, the LDS ward in my neighborhood, the bishop came to me and said, “hey, welcome to the neighborhood. What can we help you?” So, I told him, “we're from Somalia, we're Muslim.” And he was very, respectful of our faith and so forth. But, the neighbors, none of my neighbors are Muslim. I'm the only Muslim in this neighborhood. But, they're very respectful of my faith. And the same thing, I'm very respectful of their faith as well. And so, that make it easy for us, our life here, living. Otherwise, if people were hating who we are, then it would have made us really a challenge. So, I think that was one thing that made the transition really well, being a Muslim in a country that there were not that many Muslims. So, I think, I never had any issue. The work was very accommodating. Every Friday I go to mosque. I only work half day on Friday, so I can go to my prayer. Any time during the day that I need to pray, I have my prayer rug in my office. I close my office and I pray there. Whenever that we have food, we have parties in the office, people know that I am Muslim, they know what I don't eat, so they very accommodating of my needs, and I think people of Utah, very welcoming to every sector, whether it be at work place, in the worship areas, the interfaith. I like also the interfaith that we have here. Very strong. People come together and support one another. So, I think Utah has been really a wonderful place. I mean, the beginning was a little hard because we didn't have the place. But when we found our own place, and the community helping us and the accommodations that we were getting, that it made a really smooth transition for us.

[25:50]

HG: I'm glad to hear that.

AB: Uh-huh.

HG: Was it an adjustment to start such a diverse mosque? I was talking to Osman Ahmed and he mentioned the diversity of Khadeeja mosque. Is that—I'm assuming, was that an adjustment as well? Or was that pretty natural transition?

AB: So, I think, yeah. It's an adjustment as well. Because people coming from across the globe, you know. Even though we're all Muslim, but we have different cultures and so, that also we have to adjust to that culture as well. And make sure that people, we understand each other and, so forth. Because everybody has a different way of looking things, so we have to adjust to that to make sure that our differences doesn't divide us.

HG: And, do you have...sorry, trying to word this correctly. How does your role here at the mosque in West Valley compare with your role, maybe back in Somalia or attendance back in Somalia?

AB: It's completely different. I think when I was in Somalia, I was young. And I did not have any leadership role at that time because there was so many other leaders in our

community at the time. So, I did not needed to be in that role because I was young and working and school and so forth. But when I came here, we were it. We didn't have any other leaders to look upon. And so we had to step up to be in that role naturally. I think that was the different role that I play between Somalia and here. Because somebody has to do it here. Otherwise, if we don't step up, we don't expect anybody to be in that role.

[27:51]

HG: Would you mind elaborating a little bit on your responsibilities at the mosque?

AB: Sure. So, I—when I moved to Salt Lake City and we got involved, as the community was growing. So, as we were going to the mosques, and then we saw the need that we need to figure out the better expansion of our community, a few of us got together and created the committees to work in the mosques, and so everybody took different responsibilities. It's a voluntary work. I was in the committees at the beginning, and then later I was asked to serve in the board, and so I joined the board, and then later I was asked to become vice president of the community. I took that role as well, and then later I become a president for two years. All of us have to serve because it was a rotation responsibility. So, I served that. And then later someone else took the leadership, and then I'm still in the committee. So, even if you are not the president or vice president, you still have to do another responsibility. So, now, we have a committee. Each one of us have a role. I do all the social services. Making sure that people that have a need in the community, if there is—somebody need help with the rent, you know, somebody who's struggling paying their bills, or if they need food, or anything like that I help them connect with the resources that we have, or available in our community. And I was a teacher at one point, helping the kids to teach the Quran, and other things that they need to learn about Islam. Everyday when we go to mosque, every Friday, you know there is something. So, we all to have to step up and do something.

[29:51]

HG: Sounds like there's definitely enough [chuckles] keeping you busy there.

AB: Yeah. Yeah. On top of that I have my own, [chuckles], my work as well [laughs].

HG: And family, and—

AB: Uh-huh.

HG: [unintelligible]. So, what are some of the most rewarding aspects of your moving here to Utah, or the United States?

AB: I think, first for my moving to Utah, it's just basically I wanted to have a safe place for my family. And, I think doing that when I came, and I've seen the level of assistance that I receive and my family that we get. The most rewarding thing was that I wanted to give back. To get involved in the community in every aspect I can. You know, one thing is

this volunteering that I mention, working in my community to help grow the community, and build all the infrastructure that we need. And then, in my work, also. The reason I took this job was because this is the agency that helped me and my family to come to the United States and also help us settle, and when there was an opportunity come to work in this agency and to help others, I took the job immediately, and it gives me the opportunity to serve others that are in need, and so it was the most rewarding job that I've ever had. And almost 23 years now, I've been working in this job. And every day, I think one thing that I like the most and that I see, when you help somebody, and you change their life. And every day I see that. I see the families that we help, the kids growing up, going to college, somebody having a better job, somebody becoming contributing members of a society, and I see all that. And then, everywhere I go, I see somebody that we assisted you know, and now we make a difference in their life. Like, for example, yesterday I attended, in Ogden, one of our refugee family we resettled in Ogden was receiving Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, [Haden chuckles] we're giving them a home. Brand new home. So, I was witnessing that and I saw the joy and happiness in the families that we brought from the refugee camp and we bring them here, and now their American dream becoming a reality. That's the most rewarding thing that I see every day, and I live with it.

[32:33]

HG: You know, that really does sound wonderful. I can't imagine a job that would be more rewarding than being able to do that.

AB: Yeah. Absolutely.

HG: So, do you think that Salt Lake is the final destination for you and your family? Do you see yourself moving anywhere in the future?

AB: You know, we lived twenty-five years here in Utah. Almost half of our life. And I don't think I have any other plans to live elsewhere. This is home for us. This is the place for us. I mean, this is where our kids, born and grew up and went to school. We have all our families here and I have a lot of friends, and I don't like the weather. [both laugh] The snow. [more laughter]. But—

HG: Yeah.

AB: —I have to adjust it. I lived this many years, and I think this is home for us. I don't have any plans to live elsewhere. No.

HG: Cool. So, do you stay in pretty good touch with the Somali community here in Utah?

[33:41]

AB: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're a very small community. We communicate, we have events together. We see every day. We eat together, we worship together, and we talk to each other every day. So, yeah. We're a very close community, and we have very close communication and relationship.

HG: And how about back in Somalia? Are you in pretty good contact—do you have family over there still, or—?

AB: Yeah, I contact my family in Somalia as well. Social media is great way to communicate with people. And then, I try to go there, at least, whenever I can as well, and still not safe, but when you have family, you still need to see your families.

HG: Oh. So, you've been able to return then?

AB: Yes.

HG: Since then?

AB: Uh-huh. I've been going once and a while to visit my families there.

HG: Yeah. Cool. So, thank you so much for your time and your interview, Aden. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences or your services that you've done here or just anything that we haven't discussed as much as you would have liked?

[34:51]

AB: I think one thing that is important is that we as a people who came here, as a refugee in the United States, I think it's an important, people to know that we had our own lives in our countries, and we have beautiful country, peacefully grew up, and then later, those that don't want, created our countries into a place that people had to leave. Cannot stay. So, this millions of people that were forced to flee their home countries, and didn't have a place to go back to. So, for the United States, giving us this opportunity to come to the US, to rebuild our life, to make our home here, we're so much appreciated that. And we could not have had this life, if the United States had not given us this opportunity, so this is something that our community here need to know that. We appreciate we're part of this community. And the same thing, you know the pilgrims who came to this country, who escaped religious persecution, or wanted to have something better for their lives, that's the same thing that we wanted. And, we wanted to contribute. We wanted to give back. I think, religion shouldn't divide us. Nationality shouldn't divide us. We're all American. This is all our America. It's nobody else's America, not a specific group belongs to America. Anyone who lives in this beautiful country, have a responsibility to defend this country, to enjoy the peace and prosperity of this country, and that we're all contributing to. I think that's the message that I wanted people to know, that I think this hatred that is going around, that is not what America is about. America is a beautiful country where everybody can have the freedom to come here, to enjoy the freedom that America offers everyone. You cannot find this freedom anywhere else in the world. I think America is

great because of our diversity. We need to embrace our diversity. And I think we can all live side by side. We're all brothers and sisters, regardless where we came from, and I just need people to know that.

HG: Thank you. I think that's a wonderful message to get across and thank you for all your contributions.

AB: Uh-huh.

HG: I think it's very clear that you do a lot to contribute to—

AB: Yeah, thank you. Appreciate it.

HG: —the community, and faith, and just America, so thank you very much, Aden.

AB: No problem. Thank you.

HG: So, just closing off, it's been August 10, [2019] I'm Haden Griggs, interviewing Aden Batar in his home.