

Somali Oral History Project

Interviewee(s): Imam Yussuf Abdi

Others present: Omar Osman

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Interviewer: Haden Griggs

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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, **YA:** Yussuf Abdi **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.

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

[00:01]

HG: Okay. So, it's November 16, 2019. I'm here at the Medina mosque with Imam Yussuf Abdi, and Omar Osman is here helping me out. Thank you so much for your time, Imam Yussuf.

YA: Thanks.

HG: So, we're just gonna hopefully cover a little bit of your family history, and your experiences coming through to America, and what you've seen here. So, just first off, can you, for the recording, tell me your full name and birth year?

YA: My name is Imam Yussuf Abdi. My first name is Yussuf, last name is Abdi. And I born 1985.

HG: 1985? And, can you tell me a little about the work you do here in America?

YA: So, in America, I do as the Imam, I work with the community. You know, my position is Imam, at the same time also, but I like to do more than that. Like, I like to help the people. Those who are less fortunate, I like to help the youth, I like to help the community. And not only as a Muslim community, but every community, so that's what I do, day and night.

HG: Reach out to everyone.

YA: Yeah.

HG: And I've really seen that [Imam Yussuf laughs], thank you so much for the reaching out. I've attended a bunch of different mosques, and I've really appreciated your reaching out to me, and helping. So, when did you arrive in the United States?

[1:18]

YA: I came US, 2005.

HG: 2005. And before that, where were you born and grow up?

YA: I born in Somalia, Kismayo. And then, we left when we are young age, and then we move to Kenya.

HG: Okay.

YA: So, we used to live in the refugee camps.

HG: Okay.

YA: So, Ifo refugee camp.

HG: Ifo?

YA: Yes, yeah. So, we spent there, almost like, I would say, fourteen years.

HG: Fourteen?

YA: In the refugees, that's where we went to school, we studied there, school, and then until high school. And then, by the time, almost when I'm finishing high school, I come to USA.

HG: Okay.

YA: Yeah.

HG: So, Kismayo, it sounds like you were pretty young when you left, so it might just be family history but—

YA: Yes.

HG: —what led to your family leaving Kismayo?

YA: Somalia, is just like—our family is the same as other families. We left because of civil war. Civil war when Somali broke, so everybody, they ran away. They ran away and they go to different places, wherever they can. And our neighbors was Kenya, and that's how we come to Kenya.

HG: How did you guys make it to Kenya?

YA: So, Kenya, when we move from Somalia, I was very, very young. So, even I don't remember that much.

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: But, what I remember, is that we left from there with my grandmother, and then we came to Kenya. And then I remember that day, I was young. But I remember, that we came with a big, big car. Like, with a pile of people [laughs]. Like bunch of people, yeah.

OO: Yeah, the car. Big, what they want to call?

YA: It's kind of, you know, semitruck?

OO: Truck.

YA: Yeah, but it's open for the people, they cannot travel with.

[2:51]

HG: Okay.

YA: So, then, everybody was so populated, like everyone, everywhere is the people. Like, people are jumping to there. And then we came, you know, to Kenya, through the city called Amuma.

OO: Amuma.

YA: Yes.

OO: Which area?

YA: It's close to Dadaab.

OO: Dadaab, okay.

AI: Yeah. And then after Amuma, then the UNHCR, they took our family, and the other people were fleeing, and then they took us to the Ifo refugee camp.

HG: Ifo refugee camp?

YA: Yeah, and that's where we stayed there, and we spent a lot of time over there [unclear on recording].

OO: Which city the Ifo?

YA: Dadaab camp, they call Dadaab camp.

OO: Yeah?

YA: But they, also, Ifo, it's the kind of, the refugee camp, so they call Ifo.

OO: Yeah.

YA: So, they have Ifo, Dagahaley, and they also have Hagader[a].

[3:41]

OO: Okay. So—

YA: So, Ifo, we live Ifo, you know, all my families, and we stay there until we get resettlement to USA.

HG: Okay. So, is Ifo part of Dadaab then?

YA: Yes.

HG: Is that—okay.

YA: Yeah. Dadaab is the main...

HG: Main, big camp?

YA: It's not the camp, but it's where the United Nation and UNHCR and all other organizations, where they are settled. And then, but they have also village called Ifo, Dagahaley—

HG: Oh, okay.

YA: Yeah.

HG: Gotcha. So, you said you were there for almost fourteen years. So, what was it like growing up in Ifo?

[4:15]

YA: You know, Ifo, it's still—I cannot forget. The reason is that's where I took all my young age. When I was very young, like you would like to play in the community, mingling with your friends, you know? People whom you are neighbors. All these stuff. It was beautiful life over there. Except, because it's a refugee camp also. Right? But you know, like, as young, it seems good when you're young. By the time you get a little bit, adult, Ifo, it's a place where there's not have opportunities.

OO: Yeah.

YA: Right? Then, now, you can look for where I'm gonna go, you know? That's how we end up to come to USA.

HG: And how did you get resettled to the USA?

YA: So, it's USA, there's a lot of ways that, because they give like sometimes, for the refugees, you know, to protection, okay?

HG: Right.

YA: You apply because you don't feel too safe, you don't feel safe to live in the camps also.

HG: Right.

YA: Right? For many reasons, so then, once you applied, and for protection, if you can't find any opportunity, the Western countries that way, you can find security, and—yeah. Then, you try. And then we get it, USA. And then we are so happy to come here.

[5:35]

HG: And you said you got there in two thousand what? To the US?

YA: 2005.

HG: 2005. Awesome. So, what was it like coming from Ifo to the United States? You'd have been twenty years old? Right? Where did you guys first arrive?

YA: Yeah, I was nineteen actually. Yeah.

HG: Nineteen? Where did you guys first arrive in the US?

YA: We came, first time, when we came from Ifo to USA, we came through California.

HG: California?

YA: You know, that's the Bay area. Silicon Valley.

HG: Okay, so Southern California?

YA: Northern. Northern California.

HG: Northern California.

YA: Yes, yeah.

HG: Okay.

YA: So, we live there, me and my family, and although we have bad English background, because we went to school over there and we understand English, our English [turns to Omar], right? So, that what makes us easy, even us for to right away to adapt with the community. Right? So when we came to USA, yeah.

[6:23]

HG: Okay. And how long were you in California?

YA: So, California, I was like, I will say almost, you know, seven years...yeah.

HG: Okay.

YA: And then Utah.

HG: And what was it like adapting? 'Cause, Ifo, were you guys able to work much in Ifo, or was it a lot of—

YA: So, this like, if you say, what do you mean, adapting?

HG: So, in the refugee camp, from what I've read and heard from other people. Like, the UNHCR gives you some food, and then there's different kind of business and that—

YA: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, living in the refugees camp, it's terrible. Because, over there, people—look, like for example, when I'm here in America, when I wake up in the morning, I know I'm going to work, or I'm going to school, or I have a plan in my life, okay? Making the shape of my life, right?

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: Over there, somebody's making [unclear, probably 'the shape'] of you. Because, you cannot go back to your country.

HG: Right.

YA: Right?

OO: Yeah.

YA: And you cannot travel in the Kenya, because they don't also allow you to travel.

HG: Right.

YA: Unless you have—you are a citizen of Kenya. Right?

HG: *kitambulisho?* [resident card]

YA: [laughs] Exactly, yeah.

OO: He knows it.

YA: They will not allow you that. And then also, the other thing, there's no, in the morning when you wake up, there's no place to work.

HG: Right.

YA: Right? I remember even, they not even allow you to build a good business.

HG: Right.

YA: Like even, I know some people, they start to establish, you to be firm, to grow, some kind of—to become farmers.

OO: Yeah.

[7:52]

YA: So, then, they destroyed! Kenya, they say, “we don’t allow the refugees, you know, to do these kind of things.”

HG: No opportunities there.

YA: Yeah, no opportunities. So, then now what? You have to wait, you have to wait. UNHCR, who is working hard so much for the refugees—We appreciate that. Because when I came to America, I learn a lot about UNHCR. And I have seen they are doing a lot of good work for humanity, right?

OO: Yeah.

YA: Helping them, this, this, right? So, thank for them. But, the food, they get it, it’s just organization.

HG: Right.

YA: So, non-profit organization. They go and ask donors to help. And then, that’s all they provide people—

OO: Yeah.

YA: Right? But that one, it’s not, they can’t—it’s not sufficient for everybody.

HG: Right.

YA: Right? They will not get the good quality food, first. They will not get enough food, right? And then there’s no nutritions there also. People are, sometimes somebody like, when you see them—People are very, very thin, because out of, no nutritions. In America we gain weight, we have a lot of things, right?

OO: Yeah, [chuckles] *alhamdulillah* [praise be to God].

YA: And now we go to the gym just to lose that weight [all laugh]

OO: *alhamdulillah*.

YA: Can you imagine?

OO: Yeah.

YA: How over there, people are losing weight—

HG: Just trying to stay alive there.

YA: Yeah. Yeah.

[9:01]

HG: And I guess that's my question, is coming from where, you know, not a lot of opportunities, not a lot of able to plan, and then coming, like, what was it like to be working in America? What was it—

YA: Every when I sit down in the morning, I setted my goals, okay? *Inshallah* [God willing], you know, we believe God, right? And we believe everything comes from God, but also God, he command us to plan it.

HG: Right.

YA: To plan your own, and then you trust him. You ask him to make easy for your plan, right? So, if you fail your plan, then still, you have hope. You got to do another thing, right? But, in a refugee camp, it's tough, there's no plan for that.

HG: Right.

YA: If you want to travel, you cannot travel. If you want to work, you cannot work. If you want to do something, nothing else, just what you do? Just sit in the house, and wait every month for food. But human being, God created. Sometimes when you remember these thing—

OO: Yeah. [unintelligible as Imam Yussuf and he speak simultaneously].

YA: it makes me feel very disappointed.

OO: —still like, I should have had to say like a zero grazing.

YA: Yeah.

OO: It's like an animal, you surround with your fence—

YA: Yeah! Yeah!

OO: You don't go outside. [laughs]

HG: Nowhere to go, huh?

YA: Yeah.

OO: Zero graze means you eat the— [laughs]

YA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I think that kind of life should be—and sometimes, when also you hear now, you see how before, like America, they were accepting a lot of refugees to come in US, right? But now, when you see people are being locked over there—

HG: Yeah.

YA: —and now the opportunities they gonna get here, so, it's limited. So, it's also another tough. Right, ya?

OO: Yeah.

HG: Yeah, it's hard.

[10:21]

YA: Yeah, very hard, yeah.

OO: Yeah.

YA: We pray for them, to God make easy for them.

OO: Yeah.

YA: But we never forget that life. It's what's amazing, life. Because it makes you to be grateful! Right? Because what you have now, you have this life! In America, you have this, this, this. Makes you very grateful, and humble also.

OO: Yeah.

YA: It makes you humble to appreciate all these things. Yeah. Sometimes, I encourage people to travel back [to] Kenya, then see, it's still that life.

HG: What it's like there.

YA: Yeah, yeah.

HG: So, was anything tough though, coming here, like transportation, or like, you said you know English before you came, or getting a job, was any of that difficult as a refugee?

YA: No, actually, it was not hard for me to get job here. Although, it was, first time when I came, it was a little bit different, because of the culture and because of the language barrier. But right away, we adapted. Because we already some kind of, you know, English, you know, background, and that's a good thing. We went to school over there. So, when we came here, then right away, I went to school, I study, I went to the college, and then I have also a college degree. I have IT.

[11:27]

HG: So, what brought you from California to Utah?

YA: So, actually, [laughs], when I was—Kenya, I have one thing in my mind. It's called passion. So, I love to help people. That was always my dream. My dream to come, when I come to America, was not just work only for myself. Or only focus for my life. But I was thinking that how can I be a nice person, and then make better in the world. [call to prayer starts in the background]. So, I look, and I love in my religion, Islam, right? And I said, I try and I study, work hard, you know? And then I say I want to help. And the easiest way to help is that you have to become a leader. Imam for your community. And then that's how you're going lead. That is my main concern. So, then after, when I came to California, I was working, and going also, studied school, and also I was taking from my classes. Although I went also Islamic school in Kenya.

HG: Okay.

YA: That's where I memorize the Quran, that's where I did a lot of work in Kenya. So, when I came here, I never settled, that I keep studying, right?

OO: Yeah.

YA: Until, I get what I want, *alhamdulillah*.

HG: Awesome. So, you came specifically to Utah to be an Imam, huh?

YA: Yeah, and actually, I was temporary Imam in Vegas.

HG: Vegas, okay.

YA: Because, Vegas, I stayed a few months. And the reason was that they don't have any Imam, so one brother, he connected me to be temporary Imam there, and lead the *Salat* (prayers) and lead the community. So, I did that after I finish and then they found someone, so then I say, "I'm going back to my—" the day I made plan to go back, one of my friend, whom I knew him, who come to Utah, he stopped by in Vegas, and I met him in the *masjid* (mosque). And told me, "no, no. You not wanna go back to California. I wanted to go to Utah, because there's a lot of Muslim community there. And not only that, there's new immigrants, Somalis like these, they need help. Because their youth are going away from the religion, and [unclear in recording] also, they're ending up the drugs, they're ending up in the jail, so, you help them. Go and there! You do a lot of impact why you want to go—" He convinced me to do this, and then until, I came here.

[13:43]

HG: Wow. So, did you, help start this mosque then, or was it here before you came?

YA: Yeah, and this mosque, what happened, by the time I made the plan, he told me to come, because he knew this mosque was established that time, but it was closed. Like, it was not open for all the—

OO: all the activities.

YA: Activities, yeah. Yeah, it's not open yet, yeah, he knows that, he was here. So, it was not open for all the activities now we have. And, it was to be closed, and needs—So, Islamic society, Khadeeja mosque, they are one who established *masjid* first.

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: And then, the brother, he called them and he says, “I have the Imam, if you guys want to hire him to be Imam and then, because he's going back to California.” So then they called me, say “we need, we need, please. We want him to come.” And they called me, and that's why I came. They booked my ticket, and I came here, they had an interview with me, and right away they told, “Now, we need you to be here.”

HG: Awesome, so—

YA: That's how I came here. And then when I came here, and then we established the *masjid*, and then finally, they said, “Imam, you know, now you are capable to run the *masjid*, so we give to you, so you make your own board members, make these things, and run the *masjid*.”

HG: Awesome.

YA: Yeah.

[14:47]

HG: So, you went from California, to Vegas for a little bit—

YA: Yes, yeah.

HG: —and then they brought you here.

YA: Yeah.

HG: Awesome. So, this is one of the things I've been trying to figure out for experiences. What is it like living in Utah compared to California or elsewhere? As a Muslim or as a black person?

YA: You know, that's a very good question. In Utah—I love Utah, really. Even I tell my kids all the time, that in case, if I die, or something happened, never move from Utah. Stay in this city. [Omar laughs]

OO: *Inshallah.*

YA: And the reason I say that, Utah is a city where I would encourage all the Muslims community in America to settle in Utah.

HG: Really?

YA: Yes. Because it's a place where we found a lot of welcoming. How people they get. They will come from the community, the governors, everywhere. Everywhere we go in Utah, they are—and we share a lot of things also. A lot of common we have—

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: —especially the Mormons. We have a lot of common. Like, they don't drink, no alcohol. We worry about that, we don't drink also alcohol.

OO: And gambling.

YA: Yeah, we don't gamble, right? It's not allowed for our religion, we don't do that. So, when I'm in California. it would be very hard for my son or my daughter, to convince them, don't drink, don't alcoholize that. But once they come here, and they see there's no alcohol in the stores, nothing, they only sell limited place, right? So, they also think, they say, "Oh, know what? We have to keep our religion."

[16:05]

HG: So, the greater environment is compatible with your guys's, huh?

YA: Yeah, the environment, yeah. Nowadays, the environment, that's what we care about. We care about the environment. And Utah also is growing now, it's not as the before. But, it's doing a lot of good job.

HG: Awesome. Do you have time for just one or two more questions?

YA: Yeah.

HG: We've covered a lot. So, what is it—so this is going to be for students, high school students, especially, here in Utah. So, is there anything you'd like for them to know—

YA: High school?

HG: Yeah, high school.

OO: The high school students.

YA: Yeah, so, the high school students. I teach high school students. They come to me. I am the Imam, and some of them, they come here, and I teach them the Quran. I teach them good behaviors, the good manners, I pray with them. A lot of high school, I call them as homies. Like, homies means like, we are really—

HG: tight? [laughs]

YA: Right? Yeah, we die for each other, right?

OO: Yeah, it's like put like sometimes friend, but it's more than brother.

YA: Exactly, yeah. [Omar laughs]. Which means they have so much confidence with me, even more than their mom and dad.

HG: Okay.

[17:12]

YA: That's the point they reached that even sometimes they share with me, something they don't want to share with their mom and dad. That makes me also very happy, like when I see a young youth, he will share with me things—

OO: Uh-huh.

YA: —that even he's scared to say his father.

OO: Yeah.

YA: So, then he put me, like in a top person, right?

OO: Yeah.

YA: So, I would know their mindset, I know what they're thinking, and I know that they're going through a lot of challenge. Especially, this time of age.

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: Like where, the social media, everything are. Yeah. So, I would encourage the youth, the high school. I will say them, “you have a lot of chances. You have opportunities. Maybe you are not in the refugee camps. Maybe you born in the USA, everything is available for you. So, when you have something—you have everything, you have to be grateful. You have to be thankful. And you have to work hard. And remember, that have to try to make impact. That people who are less fortunate. Think outside the box, never think about yourself, but think how can you make impact. You can do a lot of things to help humanity. People are waiting you. People are waiting your help. God has given you a lot of good things, and we have, in America, we have a lot of good things. We have a lot of

things, why we can be thankful to God, so we have to utilize and use it and be grateful to him, and then, at the same time, work hard, study, make your goals to accomplish, and stay away all the bad people. Bad friends.” Because I know some of the youth whom I used to encourage them, what happened, they end up to jail. Because with drugs, because of some kind of bad people that influence them. And some even, they died! I know some of the youth that who have been shot. Because of the bad friends they maked. Right?

[18:54]

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: So, they have to be careful. There’s one saying that, in Arabic, and this said by the prophet, Mohamed, he says, “*al-maroo’ ala din a khalili*” he says, “the person, he will be the religion of his friend.” Okay, your friend is a good person, who encouraged you, who tells you do to good. He gonna motivate you, right? He’s gonna give you. If your friend is bad, you’re going to become very bad. So, try to make good friends. We need friends. Nobody can stay in the world without friend.

OO: Except without friend, yeah.

YA: But you have another option. Make good friends.

OO: Yeah.

YA: And connect it to your community.

HG: That’s a good message for them. And then, just I guess, a final question. Are there any specific challenges here in Utah, for the Muslim community that we should be aware of, that me as a non-Muslim, we could do to make things easier or better for everybody?

YA: So—

HG: Especially students.

[19:43]

YA: Yeah, students. First of all, we don’t have any issue in Utah. Maybe in other states, yes. But Utah, we don’t have not any issue. But you know what, I will tell, in school, you see Muslims who will go to school, who will study with you, who will come there, maybe especially our sisters, like we call the women, the Muslim women we call sister. The girls, young girls, who are going to high school, those who are going to university, they have the *hijab* [head scarf], you know?

HG: Uh-huh.

YA: You will find that they are Muslim. So, that means, if you see a woman who is wearing the *hijab*, she's trying to be a good person, okay? Because she's trying to practice modest, right?

OO: Yeah.

YA: So, if you see, be okay with her, she's not a terrorist, she's not ISIS, [laughs] she's not doing any bad.

OO: Yeah.

YA: It's just for her religion. She want to be a nice person, be okay, *inshallah*, and we all have one vision, and one mission in this world, is to be a good human being, and good, better while obeying the God. And also, at the same time in our religion, Islam, tells us we have to obey the law of the country. Okay? In USA, we came so now we have to obey the law. We should not be break the law.

[21:07]

HG: Okay, so just, better understanding of where you guys are coming from and all the works.

YA: Yes, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

HG: Thank you, for all the work. Is there anything else you want to ask, Omar, that we haven't talked about? Or—

OO: No, they talk a lot today, [Imam Yussuf and Haden laugh] *ma shah allah* [God has willed it]. We say thank you, no?

HG: Yeah, thank you for—

OO: For having—

YA: Thank you so much for the interview, my friend. I know you did a lot of good job. You come all the time, and you have been learn a lot of things.

OO: Yeah.

YA: So, this what we want, everybody to mingle each other, you know?

HG: Yeah, yeah.

YA: Yeah, and to be friends and to be brothers.

OO: Yeah, for me, I want to say, like add something. It's like anything, like non-Muslim, Muslim, to try, the non-Muslim, to be more friend—

YA: Yeah.

OO: The Muslim, and the Muslim to be friend—

YA: Our mosques are open for them, you know?

OO: Yeah, more—

HG: Interfaith friendship?

OO: Yeah, that is interfaith. [everyone talking at once, words hard to separate]

YA: Yeah, our mosques are open for them. We're not hiding anything.

OO: And then the people, when they come first day, when long of time, we don't have like, living with the white and the black. Or refugee and white people. Like even the Mexican. For us, we say is white too. 'Cause we don't know different.

YA: Exactly, yeah.

OO: Huh?

YA: So, they don't understand who's the white or who's—

OO: So, again, you need to attract to ask, because we come, us, maybe I'm one, but the students, like maybe a class, you have like twenty student.

HG: Might be shy?

OO: For me I'd be shy to— [laughs]

HG: Yeah.

OO: —to go to ask name or to need something, or to need help. But them, is a lot. They're gonna come, to be more make me more free, make me more easy.

HG: Yeah. While still respecting, of course, your beliefs, and being a good friend. Awesome. Thank you. Thank you for the interview, Imam Yussuf. And just for all the service and the welcome you've given me. I've really enjoyed getting to know the community better. So, we'll just sign off. It's November 16, we're at the Madina *masjid*, I'm Haden Griggs, I've been interviewing Imam Yussuf Abdi, and here with Omar Osman.