

Interview with Sumaya Yusuf and Bibi Abdalla

Interviewed on [month and day?], 2004

Interviewed outside at the Brian Coyle Community Center

**for the Minnesota Historical Society
Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project
Andy Wilhide, Project Director**

Interviewed by Andy Wilhide and Hodan Abdibudul

Sumaya Yusuf - SY
Bibi Abdalla - BA
Andy Wilhide - AW
Hodan Abdibudul - HA

SY: I thought it was very important that she said what she said about the nursing homes, because I'm just going to reiterate it. Basically, you do need to take care of your parents. I feel like that's the one thing that is unique about the Somali culture, that we have so much respect for our elders. We take care of them, and we realize that that is *so* important. Like, okay, my father, yes, he's my father, and I have to obey him, but if his aunt says something to him that he's doing wrong, he's going to listen, even though he is older, and he has kids, and he has a family, and he's grown. If my aunt says, "You're doing something wrong," he's going to listen. It doesn't matter how old you get, you still have to listen to your elders. Even like your siblings, like all my siblings, they have to listen to me, because I'm the oldest sibling. If I'm wrong, of course, then I'm wrong. If I say something, they have to obey me because I'm the oldest sibling. It just works that way.

AW: Does that actually happen? Do you get Saida to listen to you?

BA: Actually, when she first came here, it was like that, but, now, we are more like friends than sisters. I yell; she yells; I yell; she yells. We get sick of each other. [chuckles] We go away, and, then, we come back again and we talk; starts all over.

SY: I think it's the same way. Like, my brother, when people see me and him walking down the street and they think he's my older brother. He looks older. He's, like, taller. But I'm the oldest one. Me and him, we've always had a close bond, like I've always been really close to my brother. To me, I look at him more as a friend than I do as a brother. He doesn't listen to me. If

I say something, he takes it into consideration, but I don't run around, like, bossing him around or anything. Yes, it's the same thing with our family.

BA: Me and Saida, it's probably there is a year apart between us. But, then when it comes to my sister Jumila, you know, she says something and the whole house is just...you know. She's like a mom to me. I respect her like I respect my mom. I remember one day, I just said something back and my mom, she didn't say anything, but her eyes just got big. It's the same as if I was saying that to my mom, you know. Never again, I don't even go that road.

AW: What about the little ones?

BA: The little ones, they look up to us like we look up to Jumila. We're like a mom to them, basically. If we say, "No," it's no. If we say, "Yes," it's yes. That's just the way it goes.

AW: Talk a little bit about...you think Somalis are losing their culture?

SY: I think Somali people are losing their culture. I'm not saying every single Somali teenager out there is losing their culture. I am scared that ten years from now you won't see the Somali language being spoken around that much. Like, I'm scared about that. Also, like, other cultures, they still, like, know about the history of their culture and stuff like that. If you think about it, I know a lot of teenagers aren't interested in finding out the history of Somalia—besides the whole civil war. Before the civil war, there was *still* Somalia. There was still history. There was still traditions and stuff like that.

Like, okay, just this weekend, I was watching a video, a wedding video, with my mother. They were doing this traditional dance that I have never seen in my life. I've seen like the normal traditional dances that Somali people do at weddings, but this one was completely different, and they were wearing completely different clothes. I was like, "Mom, what is that? I have never seen that." She was like, "Oh, it's just a traditional dance that they do in the north of Somalia." I was like, "How come I've never seen that? I've never seen that." I was just like, why don't we learn that, those traditional dances? That's what makes Somalia unique from other cultures, you know. Yes, we have the hijab. A lot of people wear the Somali hijab and a lot of people don't. The thing is the hijab, really to me, is not something that makes Somali people unique, because there's so many different Muslims.

BA: Yes, like Oromo and Somalis, for example, right now you can't tell apart. You know what I'm saying?

BA: Right.

SY: But I feel like those things, like the traditional dances that I saw in that wedding video or just little things that they did like that, that makes Somalia unique from other cultures. We don't see that in other cultures. Things like that, I know a lot of teenagers don't know about that. Besides the language and just like the history of Somalia, a lot of people don't know about.

AW: Are you saying the hijab might make the Somalis unique here in Minnesota where no one else here wears the hijab or a headscarf or anything, but if you look at it in the world, it doesn't make you so unique?

SY: It doesn't make us unique. There's Indian Muslims who wear the hijab. There's so many different kinds of Muslims. Islam is the second most popular religion in the world. Somalis are not the only Muslims out there. Wearing a hijab is being part of a Muslim. There are so many different kinds of Muslims from other cultures that wear the hijab, so that, to me, doesn't make us unique at all.

AW: You have more of a world view then?

SY: Yes.

HA: What about you? Do you think that they're losing their culture?

AW: Whoa. One more question for you. What makes Somalia culture unique then? What is unique about being a Somali person that sets you apart from Oromo, from everyone?

SY: Our language.

BA: Our songs.

SY: Yes. Poetry. A lot of Somali people don't know that Somali poetry is so beautiful. Like, half the time I don't even know what they're saying but... [chuckles] My uncle, he writes books and, like, volumes of Somali poetry, that he writes himself. We sit around and we read it. I think that's so interesting, like Somali poetry and what they talk about. Sometimes, it's funny. Sometimes, it's serious. Maybe there's Oromo poetry, but it's not in Somalian. So that's what makes us different.

AW: And the poetry is all about language?

BA: Yes, and then our poetry... Yes, our poems is kind of different. We tend to write our poems in a different way than, like, English literature or something like that.

SY: The way it's recited, too.

BA: Sometimes, you know, I'll try to listen to a Somali song, and I feel like I can't understand a word. It's like listening to Amharic or listening to a whole different language because I haven't got to that level of Somali.

SY: Same here.

BA: If you would have went to Somali school, that's where they would teach you that kind of Somali and stuff like that. I go to my sister and I'll be, like, "What is that word?" I just get sick

of it and just turn it off, you know? Who have you seen, like a Somali teen, that actually listens? There are few, you know.

SY: We have to keep that part of our traditions very important to us. I'll be the first to admit that... Like right now, this is the first time in my life that I'm actually...like, I want to be around Somali people. Everywhere we've lived, we were like the only family or we were one of the few families that lived there that were Somali. So I've never really gotten a chance to assimilate into the Somali culture, which I think is bad. I'll be the first to admit that I can't speak Somali as well as I would like to. I would *love* to learn. This program right here, it's helping me because I'm meeting Somali friends. Like, I've never had Somali friends. I have Somali friends now, and they're helping me out. I'm, like, proud to be Somali, and I'm proud to have this culture. I think this program has done a lot for me.

AW: It's getting you connected to...

SY: It's getting me connected to my culture. Now, I want to learn more; whereas, before, I was, like, whatever, you know. I thought of myself more as a Somali American. Now, I think of myself as more of a Somali person living in America. I think there is a difference.

AW: That's a very different use of the word assimilation. I always think of it one way: from Somali into American and you're going from American to Somali. Or Canada.

SY: Yes. So, now, I want to learn. Before, I never listened to Somali music. Now, I understand there is an importance why I should listen to it. Yes, you know, you listen to your hip-hop. You listen to whatever American music that you're into, but you have to realize that we are the generation that...

BA: We're actually losing it. The ones that used to sing are getting old and there is like few newcomers that are coming out. Maybe in Europe or in Somalia or in Australia, the Somalis over there are coming out with new singers. But here in Minnesota, if you think about it, and having the most, you know...

SY: There's a lot of Americanized Somali music now. It's great, but then it's also bad, because we need to keep that...we need to keep it so that ten years from now, we'll hear a song all in Somali. It won't just be Somali and English, know what I mean? I just want to keep that part. I'm always thinking, like, decades from now. How is the Somali culture going to be like? We are the generation that makes or breaks our culture and if we keep it or if we don't keep it. That's how I feel.

HA: What culture are Somali teenagers most assimilated to?

SY and BA: The African American culture.

BA: Definitely.

HA: Why?

SY: I think when Somali people came here, I mean, they're the other kinds of black people that are here. We're all black. So I think they could relate more to them because they are other black people.

BA: Not only that but then the places. It depends on when you first came here where did you live first?

SY: Yes.

BA: Who did you meet first? The people...

SY: If you were around more African Americans...

BA: The people we meet.

SY: ...you're going to relate more to that.

BA: Yes, the neighborhoods and the places we lived first were African American neighborhoods and stuff like that, so, yes, we adapt to that culture because we seen that first. That's the people that we went to school with. That's the people I learned English from, and you see a lot of Somalis kind of picking up more of the African American accent, you know because those are the people you see. Those are the people you interact with first. That's the first impression of America I got, you know. Actually, I thought that there was more African Americans that live here than Caucasian or white people because I was just surrounded more by African Americans.

HA: Did they take the negative about or the positive?

SY: Ummm... I would say that's a hard question. I'm a pessimistic person, so I always think of the negative things. Like the Somali people that are into the gang violence...there's not a lot but there are some Somali people that are picking that up. I don't want to blame it on the African American culture at all, but, I mean...you know, I don't want to say it because it is wrong. But I think there are Somali people, Somali boys, that have picked that up, that part of the gang violence. We've adapted to that.

BA: I think a lot of it comes because... I don't know. There is this pushing around between...like, African Americans who just push around the Somali guys. The Somalis tend to feel like they need to defend their right. Yes.

SY: Right, like the animosity between the two cultures, I think doesn't help. It's kind of funny how the Somali people have adapted to their culture, but, at the same time, there is animosity between the two cultures. The two cultures don't usually normally mix together. I think it's kind of ironic how a lot of the Somali teenagers have adapted to their culture, but then they don't get along with them. I think that's very ironic.

BA: Yes.

[End of the Interview]

Somali Skyline Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society

Transcribed by Beverly Hermes

Hermes Transcribing & Research Service
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55124
952-953-0730 bhermes1@aol.com