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Review of From Somalia to Snow: How Central Minnesota Became Home to Somalis by Hudda Ibrahim

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***From Somalia to Snow: How Central Minnesota Became Home to Somalis.* Hudda Ibrahim. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2017. xxxvi, 283 pages : illustrations, map. ISBN: 9781592987788**

When I first started studying the Somali diaspora I searched for books to fill the void in my understanding of Somali culture and life. I tracked down a wonderful book that discussed basics of Somali culture, politics, and life. That book, *Somalis in Minnesota* by Ahmed Yusuf, provided a sense of the Somali experience and helped me understand the journey from Somalia to the state of Minnesota. Although Yusuf's book didn't offer the sort of interpersonal detail in Hudda Ibrahim's book *From Somalia to Snow*, Yusuf's book was extremely helpful. Together these books offer those interested in the Somali-American experience an important perspective on an often misunderstood community.

As a political scientist with a deep commitment to understanding the situation of marginalized groups, my career has focused on helping policy makers think more thoroughly about their power in urban America. When I started my research on Somali political, economic, and social incorporation I had a lot to learn about Somali culture. Although I could use my academic training to do data analysis on the situation of Somalis, I was deeply reliant on getting to know Somalis personally, developing trusting relationships, and conducting in-depth interviews. Doing this without considerable understanding of Somali culture was a glaring liability. Fortunately, I became close friends with several Somalis who helped me understand the cultural, social, and religious norms of the community. I was ultimately able to write my own book, *Somalis in the Twin Cities and Columbus: Immigrant Incorporation in New Destinations*. Had Hudda Ibrahim's book been around when I started my research in 2012 I would have had a better understanding of the Somali-American experience before engaging in my fieldwork.

For non-Somalis who want to learn more about our new American neighbors, Hudda Ibrahim's book is a must read. The book is well written and organized in sections designed to help the reader comprehend how Somalis arrived in the United States, their status as citizens, their religious traditions, and a range of other factors many other Americans misunderstand. It provides practical details to help non-Somalis understand questions they might be too uncomfortable to ask. In the sections that follow I examine some of the reasons this book makes such an important contribution.

Understanding Diversity within the Somali-American Community. There is great diversity within the Somali-American community. Ms. Ibrahim discusses intergenerational differences among Somalis in a way that enables the reader to see differences between first and second-generation Somali-Americans. She helps the reader understand the difference between those who came from Somalia as refugees and the hurdles they experienced as they started a new life in the United States. She also illustrates how young Somali-Americans, especially those born in the United States, often view the world in a different way from their parents who had much different experiences.

Ms. Ibrahim also discusses clan identity and different interpretations of this issue within the Somali community. While conducting my own research I largely avoided discussion of clan issues for several reasons. First and foremost, I didn't want to assume that distinctions in

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Somalia would necessarily reproduce themselves in the United States. Secondly, these issues are extremely complicated and I was well aware that my expertise was in the area of political incorporation – not Somali culture or identity. Ibrahim’s book lays out how kinship matters for some and not others in a way that draws on her expertise and personal experience.

Importance for Non-Somali Service Providers, Employers & Students. For public and private sector employees who work with Somali communities, this book provides some important practical information. In my book I discuss the importance of having Somali police officers. Beyond the trust the Somali community has for these public safety officials, the officers help their colleagues understand the Somali community. Ms. Ibrahim’s book provides a comprehensive resource for non-Somalis who work with the community. It would be wonderful if this book were required reading for police officers, for example, especially those without Somalis co-workers.

I was particularly pleased with the way Ms. Ibrahim explained what healthcare providers need to understand about Somali culture and experience in order to provide the best possible care. Concerns about the use of interpreters, cultural ideas about medicine, and issues some Somali women might have with male healthcare workers were laid out in an easy- to- understand manner. Again, Ms. Ibrahim is careful to explain that the diversity within the Somali-American community means that not all Somalis feel the same about these aspects of healthcare. However, her discussion is important because it offers the possibility of culturally sensitive healthcare for those who feel alienated.

Other professionals, such as bankers, would also be wise to read this book. Ms. Ibrahim addresses one of the major issues I discuss in my own book, the need for more culturally sensitive models of lending. Somali home ownership rates are alarmingly low. Because home ownership is one of the main ways Americans build equity, the low rate of Somali participation is a concern. By explaining the complexity of Islamic compliant loans in simple terms, the reader comes to understand some of the struggles entrepreneurs and potential homeowners face in the United States. Her analysis also makes clear the need for foundational business courses for Somalis who wish to understand how to run a successful business in the United States.

A common issue I encountered in my research had to do with employers complaining about workplace bathrooms having “water on the floor” due to Somali employees. Ibrahim’s book describes Islamic cleansing rituals, or *wadu*, in a way that helps the reader understand the issue. Without Ibrahim’s book I was forced to ask a Somali friend to explain why Somalis were being blamed for water on a bathroom floor. After I understood *wadu*, it became abundantly clear that employers need to provide workplace bathrooms that accommodate their Muslim employees. Although it’s impossible to be sure, some of the employer complaints likely stem from misunderstandings about the reason for the “water on the floor.” This is a concrete example of how Ms. Ibrahim’s book provides practical information for non-Somalis with a desire to find answers to questions they might be too uncomfortable to ask.

For elementary and secondary teachers who wish to better understand the culture of their students and parents, this is an excellent resource. The scholarship on student success emphasizes the importance of collaborative relations between families and schools. Having

teachers who take the time to understand the cultural background of their students would go a long way toward ensuring Somali-American students have the support needed to thrive.

The book is also written in a way that a high school student could easily follow. Having young people understand Somali-American culture holds the power of bridging the cultural divide we often face in our country. As I was reading *From Somalia to Snow* I kept thinking about how helpful this book could be for young adults in states like Minnesota, Ohio, Maine, Tennessee and Virginia – all states with sizable Somali communities. Because our next generation has the power to make the world a better place, it makes a lot of sense to have them read a book like this one. In this respect, a series of discussion questions at the end of each chapter designed to stimulate meaningful and productive discussions could be added to the next edition of the book.

From Somalia to Snow is an outstanding book. However, even the best book can be improved in subsequent editions. As noted in the previous section, discussion questions at the end of each chapter would be helpful for readers who wish to discuss the book with others or in a group setting. The postscript should also be included in the text of the book in future editions. In fact, a full chapter on Somali-American terrorist links could go a long way in clarifying the reality of the situation. In my own book I attempt to shed light on misconceptions about Somali-Americans in terms of terrorist connections. I also explain that the actions of one person should not implicate others from that racial or ethnic community. Ms. Ibrahim might remind the reader that the overwhelming Somali-American community is as peaceful and patriotic as any other American racial or ethnic group.

References

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