

Identity and Sense of Belonging of Young Somali Men in a Western Context: Case Studies from Melbourne and Minneapolis

Yusuf Sheikh Omar

I. Introduction

Since the beginning of human existence, people have been on the move (Berry et al. 2006). However, the movement of ethnically and culturally diverse migrants across continents is a relatively new phenomenon and has been on the increase (Binder and Tosic 2002). This movement presents both challenges and opportunities for refugees, migrants, and hosting societies alike (Berry et al. 2006).

As a result of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled from their homeland seeking refuge and shelter in different countries and continents including North America, Australia and Europe. This article explores the experiences and perspectives regarding identity and belonging of young Somali men now living in Australia and the United States, and who are caught up between very different cultures.

A significant number of Somalis arrived in Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program and the Family Reunion program, particularly during the period between 1991 and 2001 (Clyne and Kipp 2005). According to the 2011 Australian Census data, the number of people who identified as being of Somali descent was 9,589, and 54.8 percent lived in Victoria as 98.8 percent of the Somali-born population in Victoria live in metropolitan Melbourne (Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship 2013; Omar et al. 2012: 10–11).

According to the US Immigration Department records, the first Somali arrivals entered the USA in the 1920s in search of education and employment (Shio 2006: 23) and the first Somali refugee entered

the USA in 1986. By 2004, the Somali refugee population had increased to 56,000. Similarly, the number of Somalis who entered as immigrants steadily increased from 1985 to 2004, reaching more than 35,000 people. The most recent estimates of the total population of Somali-born persons living in the USA ranges from 150,000 (Shio 2006: 14) to 300,000 (Sonsalla 2003: 12). Some of these immigrants were highly skilled.

The foundation of this article is on my PhD that I completed in 2011, where I investigated and compared the experiences of young Somalis living in Australia and USA. Since then, I have undertaken further reviews around Somali youth identity and belonging in Western contexts and included perspectives and experiences from Somali youth in some European countries as well.

I will first present my methodology, socio-demographic characteristics of the participants and community profiles in both Australia and the US. After that, the main findings on identity formation will be presented. Finally, the article ends with conclusions.

II. Methodology and Participants' Socio-demographic Characteristics

This study is informed ethnographically. This type of research is particularly well suited for studying “hard-to-access groups” such as refugees and immigrants, or groups resistant to survey methods (Hudelson 1996). The study was primarily carried out in two field sites, Melbourne, Australia and Minneapolis, USA. Twenty-six young men aged 16–25 were interviewed.

This study was carried out in two stages. The first stage comprised a pilot study. The researcher spent one month each in Minneapolis and Melbourne in 2007 scoping the issues relating to integration. The second stage involved a total of twelve months of formal fieldwork spent in Minneapolis and in Melbourne in 2008–2009 investigating in depth the integration experiences of young men. Primary data was mostly gathered through interviews, which are best suited to Somali oral culture. Data sources included audio-recorded unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups and field participant observations.

I began my analysis early in the research process, which gave me time to reflect on and discuss the topic of research with participants. Moreover, I transcribed the interviews myself, which gave me the opportunity to analyze interviews individually and then to analyze

cross-case data comparing their similarities and differences. I then coded and categorized interviews under certain themes.

The total number of young men participants in Melbourne was 13. All participants except two of the young people were born in Somalia. One was born in Australia and the other in Saudi Arabia. Their age ranged from 16 to 24. These young men had lived in Australia for an average of 11 years. Six out of thirteen participants were studying at the time of the interview; one was studying at university, one at Technical and Further Education (TAFE), one at English as a Second Language (ESL), and three at high school. Two of these students had part-time jobs at the time of the interview. Seven out of thirteen were not studying at the time of the interview, and five of these seven who were not studying had full time jobs and two had part-time jobs.

Also in Minneapolis, the total number of young men was 13. All participants were born in Somalia. Their ages ranged from 17 to 25. In terms of lengths of residence in the USA, all of them except two young men had lived in the USA for between seven to sixteen years. In terms of education, all of them were studying full time or part time either at high school, college or university. Five did not work, three worked during summertime and school holidays, three worked fulltime, one worked part-time and one worked as a volunteer.

III. Youth Identity

Hyphenated Identity

Hyphenated identity is a term that “references the multiple socially bound features that individuals use to think about themselves” (Cheng 2004: 216). Hyphenated identity is a dual identity that invokes questions concerning which side of the hyphen the person belongs¹ to (Sharobeen 2003). The identity of Somali youth in Western countries is complex and multi-layered.² These youth show “an elusive identity” (Ibrahim 2008: 236), or what Bruce Collet has called “a sense of fluidity within their identities” (Collet 2007: 149). The identity of individuals and groups is shaped by factors such as: their ethnicities; cultural backgrounds; individuals’ past experiences; gender and age; the new context; faith and values; physical appearance including skin colour; the condition in Somalia; current global phenomena; and policies and practices of the receiving countries (e.g. Open Society Foundations 2014b: 36).

Because of all these different factors that mold and shape who we are, it is difficult to determine ones' identity definitively. For example, when I asked a young man whether he preferred to associate himself with Somali or American culture, he replied:

Well, you are missing one. There is one [that] we created. That is American and Somali culture, in the middle, in a way... (a young man from Minneapolis).

The great majority of young participants in this study and in other studies conducted in Europe indicated that they have dual identities—one that is linked to their background and another that is associated with the new environment. It is a mixture of an old identity that is part of their existence within their families and communities whilst the new identity is becoming part of their existence in the new society (Ibrahim 2008). However, information gleaned from interviews suggests that as time passes, their identities become increasingly shaped by the cultures of the settlement country because of their daily interactions while their interactions with their parents' culture steadily diminishes. This can be accompanied by a gradual loss of their original culture.

Next generation is gonna be different... no one is planning to go back to Somalia. When they have kids, [and] when I have kids they will not be speaking Somali language basically... Most likely, most of them will forget Somali culture and will stick with American culture, whatever like black, white and they act like them (a young man from Minneapolis).

As some young participants revealed, the process of cultural shift leads to cultural intermingling, which can result in periods of cultural confusion and exclusion from both cultures: the culture of origin and the culture of the receiving country. This view has been confirmed by a study undertaken in Helsinki: "The second generation may also feel excluded both by Finnish society and those in Somalia because of their own transnational sense of belonging and lack of a more rooted cultural understanding" (Open Society Foundations 2013: 35).

Cultural Identity—Imaginary and Practical

Cultural identity is a shared collective cultural memory which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Cultural identity reflects the common historical experiences of a particular society

(Hall 1990: 223). According to some participants, cultural identity can be divided into two main forms. The first is the imaginary identity. A study about identity and belonging among Somali refugees in the UK and Denmark seems to endorse my findings as it reports that:

For the majority of the young Somali people interviewed... the role that Somalia plays in their identities is more abstract [because] they have little or no personal memories of their homeland. Rather their knowledge and understanding of Somalia are second-hand (Valentine et al. 2009: 237).

The second form is the identity based on a solid understanding of Western cultures, which I refer to as a *practical* or *realistic* identity in terms of meanings and practices. The imaginary identity refers to the Somali cultural background, whereas the realistic identity is based on the current new culture. The practical/realistic identity is acquired through everyday interaction with Westerners in their respective countries such as Australians, Finns, Swedish, Americans, and so on. For instance, a young man from Melbourne states:

I prefer my [Somali] culture... because that is my culture, that is my pride... If I prefer somebody [else's] culture, then I have nothing... because I believe you should follow your own culture, rather than sort of pretending something you're not.

This statement shows the imaginary identity constructed on this young man's preference of Somali culture over Australian culture, which he describes as "somebody else's culture" —he prefers to feel proud to be a Somali rather than pretend to be Australian. However, he admits that practically he is an Australian, saying:

This [Australian] culture, I grew up in, you know!... but my [Somali] culture is first priority for me... my passion is for my culture... [In] everyday life, I am basically Australian, [so I am] half-half, Somali and Australian (a young man from Melbourne).

Similarly, a young man in Minneapolis said:

I am Somali... I don't see myself as an American. I know where I came from and who I am [but] I use and pick up American culture you know. You see how I dress right now... I say what is logic[al] to me. You know, I say, American culture is logic.

Global Identities: Religious and Ethnic Identities

Islam appeals to young Somalis in the West because it provides a sense of identity and what they view as universal guidelines on how to interact with other people and how to describe themselves in multicultural societies (Shepard 2005).

My identity right now is a better Muslim insha'allah. And I wanna spread the word about Islam. I used to be a hypocrite, but I am now really concentrated on getting message [from] Allah. No more with another identity (a young man from Minneapolis).

Islam is a universal religion. I believe I am in [an] international religion. I can carry it with me anywhere. Everywhere you go, Islam goes with you. I was Muslim in Somalia, I am Muslim in Australia... Today we have good attachment [to] our religion especially after September 11... After September 11, [the] mood has changed... Before that, Muslim were not talked about... Media talks about Muslims every day now, and that is why as a Muslim... you get angry sometimes. You watch TV say[ing] bad things about Islam... (a young man from Melbourne).

The same was found by a recent study in Sweden titled "At Home in Europe, Somalis in Malmo." The study underlined that religion plays an important role in the life of most Somalis as Islam always seemed to represent comfort and security: "Younger [Somali] generation in Sweden has taken religion to a new level. [They]... are looking for knowledge in a way that the older generation did not. They want to know why and what, they are searching the international arena, they are building bridges to other Muslims" said a young woman in Sweden (cited in Open Society Foundations 2014a: 54–55).

Young Somali male participants in both Australia and the USA assumed that Somali culture and Islam are two faces of one coin. "I would prefer Somali culture because I am a Muslim" (a young man from Melbourne). For instance, some of them thought of the hijab as Somali women's cultural and traditional dress, while others stated that it is part of the Islamic dress code but not Somali cultural dress. As a result of this confusion, some indicated their preference for Somali culture over other cultures, believing that the Somali culture is actually an Islamic culture.

I am from Somalia and [in] saying I am from Somalia I am assuming automatically they would get I am a Muslim too. So people in other

cultures say that they are first Muslims, then they... name their nationalities. But for me, is more likely to say I am a Somali... hoping that they would know that Somalia is a Muslim country (a young man from Minneapolis).

Somalis are Muslims 100 per cent, even [if] some of them may not practice Islam, Somalis have one culture which is Islamic culture (a young man from Melbourne).

The young participants describe their transnational relatives as identity makers. Some men felt strongly attached and identified with countries in which many of their relatives and Somali communities live. For instance, many young Somalis strongly identified themselves with the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, Kenya, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

My aunt lives in America... When I am talking to my relatives in America I feel I have something in America, when I talk to London I have something [there], you know, I have [a] relative and when I go there I feel home you know, and I live in Australia, and came from Somalia (a young man from Melbourne).

Some respondents from Australia and USA felt that speaking English contributed to shaping their identity. Most participants in this study speak English as the first language and therefore felt that they belong more to English-speaking societies than to non-English-speaking ones. Speaking a language also means acquiring and understanding the culture and the way of life of the society that speaks that language. A young man from Melbourne articulates this:

When you live in English-speaking society [it] is easier for you, like living in Australia and speaking English as second language... I think I have more attachment to London, America or Canada because if I go there, I am gonna [feel] free... And if you go to other countries [where people don't speak English] you can't understand. The language is very important... France is next door to England [but] I will [feel] Aussie or English more than French because I don't speak [the French] language.

The Mainstream as an Identity Maker? Exclusion and Inclusion

The mainstream perception of young Somalis as outsiders is a critical factor identified by young Somalis in shaping their identity and sense

of belonging. Four young people in Melbourne expressed the view that frequent questions from other Australians, such as “Where are you from?” remind them of their origins and make them feel a stronger sense of belonging to Somalia and not to Australia. As a young Somali man in Melbourne put it:

I was born in Melbourne... however that doesn't make you an Australian. People always consider where their fathers and mothers came from. White people may ask you where are you from? If you say I am Australian they say oh! Where did your parents come from?

Here in Australia, people ask where are you from, and that pushes you back. Once my friend at work asked me and I deliberately answered I am from North Melbourne. They said we didn't mean that. We meant your country. This question always reminds you, your background and country of origin (a young man from Melbourne).

Though it cannot be generalized to all young men, none of the young male participants from Minneapolis mentioned this during interviews. The difference between Australia and the US in this regard could be explained by the fact that black skin color is very common in the US and as a result, young Somali men, especially those who dress like African Americans and acquire an American accent, may not be asked such questions, because they are thought to be African Americans.

In fact, the sense of being African is stronger among those in the US than among their counterparts in Australia. This can be explained in part by influences of their different milieus. Many Somali young men in America are practically and theoretically immersed in African American culture through daily interaction with it. My findings accord with Bryce-Leporte's research (cited in Bigelow 2008: 28):

The boys, they behave like black Americans, because of the skin colour... skin colour is the main factor... I prefer mixture of both... You take positive things from both parts. [With] Somali culture you get a lot of negative parts like tribalism and so on. Americans have a lot of good culture and good stuff, but also have bad side (a young man from Minneapolis).

... [it] more has to do [with] living here [a] long period of time...? You... eventually dress like the people, talk like the people, you know it is inevitable, it is like nature you know... when you wake up you hear and you see, what is different you know? (a young man from Minneapolis).



**Figure 1. Young Somali men in hip-hop dress (Minneapolis).
The researcher is second from the left. Source: Author's register.**

In Australia, Somali boys face their own challenges in acting like Australian youth while they do not feel they are Australian. One young man participant said, “When I am with Aussies I do what they are doing—you know—in the same way, but inside me, I don’t feel the same way. But when I am with Somalis, I do what they are doing and I feel inside me, the same ways they feel.” Shepard (2005: 169) confirms this view and explains that how young Somalis in the US act is different from “who they are.”

Outsiders in the Country of Origin: “Dhaqan Celin”

Dhaqan celin literally means “returning to culture.” Similarly, *dhaqan celis*—which is a noun—refers to “a person who is being returned to culture” in order to be culturally rehabilitated to a Somali way of life. Somali migrant parents are worried about their children’s quick adoption of the new culture, fearing that it may lead to the loss of Muslim and Somali culture and to assimilation to a culture that is perceived by Somalis as “corrupt” Western culture (Tiilikainen 2011: 77–78). To

avoid this, some parents send their children back—particularly boys who have dropped out of school or are involved in drugs or other crimes.

From what I am seeing Somali kids lose their culture like as time goes on and on and on... from the Somali community what I hear they shall want to go back because of their kids... They don't want their kids lose their identity. Most of them they send their kids back for what they called "*dhaqan celin*," then they [families] come back because they need safety and social security in Australia (a young man from Melbourne).

However, the majority of young Somalis who were returned by their parents to Somalia can be "made to feel out of place by local [Somali] people" (Valentine et al. 2009: 238). Their clothes and non-Somali language cause them to be seen as outsiders. Similarly, a study conducted by Ilse Van Liempt found that: "Some [Somali youth] had visited Somalia during a summer holiday or went on some sort of re-education trip where they wanted to submerge themselves into Somali culture. During these visits, however, many came to the conclusion that they felt they did not belong there" (Van Liempt 2011: 578).

A young man in Melbourne, who had been sent back to Somalia for "rehabilitation," said that while he was in Somalia, he felt homesick for Australia because the environment was so different to the Australian environment in which he grew up, and he found it difficult to cope with the unfamiliar challenges he faced (Omar 2011). Conversely, one can hardly meet a young Somali person who grew up in the West and who feels homesick for Somalia: as they have not grown up in Somalia, they haven't grasped its culture practically and therefore, do not feel that attachment and identification.

Another example, Amran Said, a young Somali woman living in Melbourne who was returned to Somalia in order to improve her understanding of Somali culture and language composed a poem entitled "*Dhaqan celis*" and she read it to the Somali youth conference held at La Trobe University in 2009. She described her experiences in Somalia and how she was made to feel an outsider by being called an Aussie and teased because of her broken Somali language (Omar 2011). She said:

I went back to Africa a few months ago
Man, the conversations
They were really slow

Hand gestures and sign language were the order of the day
It was so frustrating, since I had so much to say

...

Daqan ceelis wad oo bahantahay (you need to be returned back to culture)

Is what they respond with, whenever I try

The caay (teasing), they come up with

Bisinka (means in the name of Allah but in this context is like shocking),
it's enough to make a grown man cry

...

I laugh and smile at their good natured teasing

I take the put downs, even though on the inside I'm seething

I was once even told that I looked like a fool

Next time they tease me and call me an Aussie

When I speak my broken Somali

And they roll their eyes and qosool (laugh)

I'll tell them I'm Somali

boqoolki iyo boqool (hundred by hundred) (Omar 2011).

Clan Affiliation

When people ask what tribe are you from? I don't really answer that, I would say I am Somali. Those asking mostly are elders. I don't even believe it should exist... I believe the only reason that Somalia is not stable is really tribalism (a young man from Melbourne).

Belonging to a clan may remain "an idea... but without actual genealogy—a list of names" (Luling 2006: 483). Similarly, Eleni Oikonomidou's (2005) study, which focused on constructing academic identity in exile among Somali female high school students, noted that young Somali women did not identify deeply with their tribal heritage. The participants in Oikonomidou's study said that they did not feel comfortable with clan affiliations. The reasons for these negative attitudes to clan affiliation varied, the most cited reason being perceived negative role of clans in the civil war and destruction of Somalia. Previous research in the USA confirmed this (Langellier 2010). The participants also believed that negative effects of tribalism have fragmented Somali communities in the USA and Australia. Interestingly, the sentiment of "not being proud to be Somali" was expressed by most young men, showing how deeply these young people have been affected by what they describe as "nonsense clan warfare":

I don't believe in tribes. My mum do[es], my parents do, older families, they do, but the little ones, they don't care... so to me that culture is not necessary. One of my friend[s]... like a month ago was killed [in Minneapolis, USA] for which tribe he is... so, I don't believe that. It is violent. The fact we are all Somalis, all Somalis look alike, but they are saying that guy is [from] that tribe. I am [from] that tribe and stuff like that. So, I don't believe in tribes (a young man from Minneapolis).

In Somalia there is tribal culture... Every different tribe wants power, greedy for money, so they don't want to share with the rest, they just wanna share with their own people (young man from Melbourne).

The continuation of clan divisions based on domination and injustice, and beliefs about the inferiority of some clans, weaken young Somalis' sense of "Somaliness" and of belonging to Somalia. In Lidwien Kapteijns and Abukar Arman's (2004) analysis, the damage to "Somaliness" will challenge young Somalis in the diaspora to develop a positive Somali identity.

IV. Conclusion

This article explored factors influencing the identity and belonging of young Somalis in Australia and USA. Almost all participants from both countries were of the view that they were caught in between two very different cultures: the Somali culture on one side and the culture of Australia and USA on the other side. The study found that young people are forming their own complex and multilayered, hyphenated identities, cultures, and lifestyles, which cannot be classified as a "pure" Somali, Australian or American culture. These multilayered identities are shaped by various factors including the culture of origin, skin color, and new cultural contexts.

Also, the identity formation and belonging of young Somali men in Australia and USA have been influenced by Islamic religion that provides them a sense of universal identity through which they belong to a global community of Muslims. Additionally, the respondents expressed the formation of transnational identity and identification with countries in which their relatives live. The belonging to African American culture was strong among young men in USA who practically engaged and intermingled in it daily. Some participants from both countries also believed that the role of Somali culture in shaping the formation of their identities was more imaginary compared to Aus-

tralian and American cultures, which were more practical and realistic due to everyday interactions. Attitudes and policies of the governments of Australia and the USA, and mainstream societies also influence greatly the identity and sense of belonging of these young men.

Furthermore, the role of *dhaqan celin* or cultural rehabilitation was explained by participants from both countries to provide cultural engagements in Somalia and at the same time, it could make some young people feel like outsiders in their country of origin due to inadequate Somali language skills, and exhibiting western lifestyle perceived by locals as corrupt culture against Somali Muslim culture. Some young participants from both cities argued that as time passes, the culture of coming generations would be shaped greatly by the culture of the settlement country and will lead to the gradual loss of Somali culture and language.

Regarding tribal identity and belonging, almost all young male participants from Melbourne and Minneapolis know their clan names, but the majority of them said that they pay no attention to clan issues. Furthermore, many young men in this study from both countries perceived the tribal system as corrupt, unfair, negative and destructive and therefore they were uncomfortable about relating to their clans. Finally, most young Somali men interviewees in both countries assumed that Somali culture and Islam are two faces of one coin and to be a Somali means to be a Muslim.

Yusuf Sheikh Omar is a Global Advisor for Global Reconciliation. The author may be contacted at omar3032@hotmail.com or yusuf.omar@globalreconciliation.org.

Notes

1. Belonging is a deep connection to a particular society and acceptance of its common values, cultural features and common life style. It is a feeling of being respected and given opportunities available for everyone in that society (Forman 2001: 47–48).
2. Dictionary of sociology defines identity as “the sense of self, of personhood, of what kind of person one is.” Sociologically, identity is fluid and changeable and therefore new aspects of identity can be acquired as time and context change. However, the primary identity is acquired in early childhood. Education, occupation, group membership, moving from place to another and so on can shape ones’ identity and belonging. Additionally, globalized modern societies provide more sources, situations and multiplicity of life styles producing more complex yet flexible identities (Abercrombie et al. 2006: 190).

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