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**Musse Abdisalam Mohamed**  
**Narrator**

**Ibrahim Hirsi**  
**Interviewer**

**August 31, 2014**  
**Rochester, Minnesota**

Musse Abdisalam Mohamed      **-MM**  
Ibrahim Hirsi                      **-IH**

**IH:** This is Ibrahim Hirsi recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. I am interviewing Musse Abdisalam Mohamed in Rochester. The date is August 31, 2014. Musse, thanks for the opportunity to interview with us today. All right. We'll start the interview. So, Musse, tell me about your childhood years in Somalia.

**MM:** Thank you for having me. I was born in Somalia in 1980 in a town called Kismayo [Kismaayo]. Kismayo was located in the southern part of Somalia. Economically, I was raised in a stable family. I attended Islamic and regular school while growing up. I don't remember much about what happened there during my early childhood, because I left Kismayo before my early teen years.

**IH:** Was that before the civil war or after?

**MM:** I left right after the civil war started in 1991. I was around eleven or twelve years old at that time.

**IH:** Tell me about your family, your parents, and what they did for a living.

**MM:** My family consisted of seven people. My mom was a housewife and later became a business woman. My dad held numerous jobs. The last position he held before the civil war was a truck driver. Some of his jobs included exporting and importing products.

**IH:** So you mentioned that you left Somalia right after the civil war started. Can you tell me a little bit about what you were doing on the day that the civil war broke out?

**MM:** I was about eleven or twelve years old. I was in Islamic school the day that the war began. It was around lunchtime, and we were preparing to leave for lunch. I remembered hearing gunshots as the militias were entering the town, and people were fleeing for safety. I was frightened that we were going to get killed. However, I never really experienced some of the tragedies that other people experienced. I was really glad to leave Somalia right before it got worse.

But as for that particular moment, it was in the morning. I was in a *dugsi* [Quran school] class when we heard the gunshots. At that time I was being punished for not completing an assignment on time. I was tied to a tree. So it was unfortunate that at that moment the war had to start. Kids were running around frightened, but I was still tied. Then I heard more gunshots, and the teacher left us. Thank God, an older man saw me tied to the tree. He untied my ropes and let me go. Without the help of that man, I would have been killed or shot. The teacher left right away, and he escaped without dismissing us. He never came back. It was inhumane of him not to safeguard us. It was chaos.

**IH:** And was your punishment normal? Was that how the teacher treated everybody? Or was that just that day that he was punishing you?

**MM:** Actually, that was very normal. It was to the point where I never liked school because you were really punished harshly if you didn't do your homework or if you didn't read the Quran properly. I really did not accept that kind of discipline, so he used to really beat me hard. I remember that moment especially, because it was the day that the militias were coming in. I was fearful that bad things were going to happen.

**IH:** And then you went home?

**MM:** Yes, I ran home. My dad fled. He couldn't come back home from work, and so he had to leave. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. He was missing for a month before we found out that he was alive and was in Kenya. In addition, my mother was in Kenya, so we were living with my aunt. My older brother also left.

After that first day, the militias really started fighting. We didn't go to school or anything, because we had to stay home for our own safety. The militias were coming, attacking us, taking our belongings, and doing really harmful things. The good thing was that nobody in our family got hurt in the assault. But we were verbally assaulted, and we were told that we were not in that particular tribe. I remember seeing and hearing all of that. We lived in horror for about a month before relocating safely to Kenya. One night, we escaped by boat to reach Kenya and reunite with our mom and dad. Then we stayed in a camp in Kenya.

**IH:** And where did you go? You left Mogadishu?

**MM:** No, it was Kismayo. All this happened in Kismayo. After the war started, we stayed in Kismayo for about a month or two months before we left. We were sent some help. My mother was in Kenya, so she sent us some help. Again, we didn't know where our dad was, so we thought he had been killed.

Thus, we left Somalia and we took a boat to get to Kenya. We struggled during the trip because a lot of refugees were going at the same time. We were in the middle of the ocean for eighteen days before reaching Kenya. Then they took us to a refugee camp where we stayed for a couple of days before our mother came. After that we moved to Mombasa, and then we moved from there to a refugee camp, which was called Utange [Utanga], for a month or two months before coming back to the city.

**IH:** Tell me a little bit about the change from Kismayo to Kenya. How was life in Kenya different compared to life in Kismayo?

**MM:** It was a lot different. Of course, when you relocate into a new environment, you will experience differences. Some of the major differences were the language, culture, and the religion. I had to learn a new language and adopt a new culture. I felt very strange, especially in the refugee camp. The life that I was used to was not there. We would have to walk a long distance to get water. We also had to walk to the school. It was not an easy environment to live in. But at the same time, we were lucky at least to have survived and escaped from the war. But we struggled a little bit to adjust in the refugee camp in Kenya. We stayed there for about three to four months. During that time, I went to private school. I took English courses. Then my family relocated to Mombasa. It is a port town in that area. We stayed there for four years before coming here.

**IH:** And when did you come to the United States?

**MM:** I came to the United States in January 1996. I remember leaving from Nairobi to come here. There were a lot of differences. We were leaving an environment where the traditions, the culture, and the way of life were just completely different from the way of life in a country like the United States.

We landed in Madison, Wisconsin. In Madison there was not a significant Muslim or Somali community that could help us resettle. We worked our way out, and we had no other supports besides the Muslim community there.

**IH:** Do you remember specific challenges that you went through when you were in Wisconsin?

**MM:** Yes. The specific challenge we had was that we lived in a small town outside of Madison called Middleton. It's a small town. It's a white area where there are not minorities. In particular there were not any refugees before us. We stayed in Middleton about a year before relocating to Rochester.

**IH:** Tell me about your educational journey. You said that when you first came from Kenya you went to Wisconsin, and then you moved from Wisconsin to Rochester. So tell me about your educational journey.

**MM:** When I was in Kenya, I attended a private school. I had math, science, geography, and other courses. When I came to Wisconsin, I started eighth grade in middle school. I finished middle school in Wisconsin. Then when I moved to Rochester at the end of 1997, I started high school. I was in ninth grade. I finished high school in 2000, and I went to college at Rochester Community and Technical College [RCTC]. I got my two-year degree, and then I went to Minnesota State University, Mankato. I received my BA [Bachelor of Arts] in public health in 2007. Then I got married in 2008.

**IH:** Going back to your early years in Rochester, I am assuming that there weren't a lot of Somali people then, compared to now.

**MM:** Yes. When I came, there were a few families that were already living here. We were fortunate enough to have support from those families who were already settled here prior to us. They helped us resettle in Minnesota. We felt more welcomed because there was a Somali community here. However, there were some conflicts between people of different ethnicities.

**IH:** Who was doing that? The white people? Latinos? Who?

**MM:** Yeah, most were Latino and white people. First there were the Latinos and then there were the whites. In my opinion, I think this was because we were new to Rochester, and so people were trying to figure it out. The Somalis were also trying to really fit in. So doing that, they were actually confused. They were either hanging with the Mexicans or the whites. So there were a lot of clashes. And there were a few blacks that were moving here who were from Chicago. So the Somalis felt that they were targeted. A number of Somali students were kicked out of school or suspended because of some of the assaults and behaviors that were happening. Fortunately, I was not involved. But at the school that I was going to, you had a lot of those assaults that happened or were reported. Those cases happened. But as for me, I was really fortunate. I was not part of those gangs. Back then I was a really very quiet guy, and I was not really associating with any groups. There used to be groups back then.

**IH:** How did you feel? I mean, you were seeing all this. You ran away from violence, and then there's another kind of violence here in Rochester. What did that make you feel?

**MM:** It didn't really impact me a whole lot. I always believed that whoever you associate with is what you're going to become. So I didn't have a lot of friends back in high school. I was just doing my own thing and trying to get things done although those things were happening at school. I focused on my schooling and never got distracted from what was happening at that time.

**IH:** And how did you navigate the educational system here in Rochester? Did you have family members who helped you out?

**MM:** I was very fortunate to have a family that really supported me throughout my school years. I never even thought about dropping out because my family, especially my dad, was always in my way making sure that I finished high school. I had five siblings, and my older brother is the only one who dropped out of high school and never got a higher education. The rest of my siblings were able to finish high school, and some went to college. My dad was always saying that I should be a role model for the rest of my younger siblings. I think that support that I had, my passion, and my desire to get an education was just a positive thing. So I had to finish school. A lot of the students that I knew dropped out of high school.

**IH:** What did you do in college, and how did you choose your major?

**MM:** When I finished high school in 2000, I started college at RCTC. I really wanted to pursue and continue my education but didn't know what to study. At first, I wanted to study law enforcement. Then I wanted to study law and someday become a lawyer. So that was just totally different from what I ended up studying, when I think about it.

**IH:** And what made you feel that you wanted to become a police officer?

**MM:** Yes, I just liked that level of authority. I wanted to help the community. So I felt that in law enforcement or majoring in law, maybe I could help the community.

**IH:** And did you try doing that here?

**MM:** Actually, I started working as a youth counselor and mentoring youth. But that's not what I really wanted to do. But going back to your question of why I chose a different career. I guess, at that moment, as a young man starting college, it was different then. When you have all your friends studying and focusing on one area, you want to try it. So you have this passion and this passion is there, but your friends are saying, "Well, you should try this." It's a different career. You see it's a good career that you can take. So that really influenced me to change the direction of my career. Then I majored in public health. I also liked doing some work with the public, and health science was a really big thing in my heart. So I ended up taking the public health route.

**IH:** So you're a Muslim in Minnesota. Coming here, you probably have female family members who are covered and all that. I have interviewed people in the past, and they talked about women being assaulted because they're wearing the hijab [headscarf worn by some Muslim women], or men being assaulted because they had a beard. You probably were here in 2001 when the September 11 incident happened. Are there any specific cases that you remember that your family member or friend of yours in Rochester witnessed?

**MM:** Actually, I witnessed one case right after September 11. It was September. I think it was the twenty-first. I was driving in Rochester. There was a truck behind me with three Caucasian men. I thought they were going on their own way. I realized that they were following me, and they were honking at me. It was to the point where I had to pull over to a K-Mart parking lot. They were shouting "USA," and they were also shouting that I should get out of here, out of America. I didn't know what was going on, and then I got out of my car to talk to them. They pulled over at the same time that I pulled over. This was in the K-Mart parking lot.

I was upset that they were doing all of these things to me, and I didn't know what their motive was. But I walked towards them, trying to figure out what they wanted. They were all shouting at the same time, "You should get the 'F' out of here! Go back to wherever you're from, da-da-da-da." So I just listened to them, and then I said, "Do you have a problem with me?" And then I tried to talk to them. And they said, "Yeah, we have a problem!" I knew September 11 had happened, but I didn't connect the dots. I didn't know why they would do this until one person said, "You should go bomb your own place! Go back to your Osama bin Laden." Then I realized they were actually upset because of what was happening with September 11.

And so there was a lady that was walking towards the parking lot, and she saw us talking. She pulled over. She said, "What are you guys doing?" She was very helpful. She asked me if I needed help, and I said, "No, I'm fine. I don't need any help." She had apparently called the police. She saw that it was getting heated. So then the men realized that she had called the police, and they took off right away before the police came. And she came to me, and she said to me, "I'm sorry to hear this. But I should mention that I called the police. They're on their way." She was talking to me, and she was calming me down, asking me not to worry about it. "They're just upset." I didn't know what to say.

So the police came, and they asked me what had happened. So I just told them what happened, and they gave me their cards. First, one of the police asked me immediately, "Are you a Muslim?" And I said, "Yes." "That's probably why," he said. "They're just upset because of the September 11 attacks." But he gave me his number. He said, "If they ever try to do anything again, just call me or call 911. They will be able to help you." So that was the weirdest thing. It happened to me.

**IH:** We talked about education, and we talked a little bit about religion. So now we'll talk about your career. After college what did you do?

**MM:** Once I finished my bachelor's degree in 2007 and graduated, I left the country, went to Egypt, and got married. Then I came back here, and then I started working full time. I brought my wife here, and we have two kids now. I got my master's degree in 2014 from Saint Mary's University. I am fortunate to have a family that supported me throughout my education.

**IH:** What do you do for living currently?

**MA:** I am currently a program director at REM River Bluffs.

**IH:** All right. I'll ask some general questions now. We're almost done. What do you think are the challenges that the Somali community here in Rochester is facing?

**MM:** There are a lot of challenges. Particularly there's one big challenge that is facing our community, and that is the gap between the Somali families and the system. It's just huge. The gap within families, between the parents and the kids, is also huge.

One of the biggest barriers is that people are not really becoming part of the broader American picture. In another word, we not integrated enough. We tend to really strongly hold onto our culture and belief system. We don't allow any integration within ourselves and families. For example, if a son wants to marry or have a relationship with a non-Somali, it's so challenging and difficulty for the community to accept it. Parents are not really willing to accept relationships outside of the Somali culture. But I think no one should dictate who you want to have a relationship with.

**IH:** I'm from Minneapolis. We have a city council member, we have a school board member, we have police officers, and we have a lot of people who are contributing to the society in Minneapolis. Are you seeing similar stories here in Rochester?

**MM:** Not really. Even though the Twin Cities are making great progress towards the accomplishments of the Somali community, we have still have a lot of work to do. We need to be part of the American community and run for office. So, yes, we are making some progress, but it is slow. You're talking about just a few months, a year, or two years with the new developments where people are running for office now and holding higher management positions. It's a good accomplishment for the community, but we need to get involved more in areas such as law enforcement, schools, community events and activities, et cetera.

**IH:** I mean, isn't the community trying to get that? Or maybe you feel like the system is not open enough for them to get in?

**MM:** No, I think the community is not ready to integrate. I think the system is ready. Anybody can try. I believe this. Anybody can do something if they try. So I don't know if the community is even willing to try with anything that is outside their norms and culture. Some of the community members are not used to it due to issues like language barriers. They like to stay in their comfort zones, which can be challenge. Of course, community integration doesn't mean that you let go of your culture. But by becoming part of the American society, you are enriching yourself. For example, I work at the county, and I see a lot of the elderly Somali community. Sometimes you can't explain the basic things. They've been here long enough and haven't integrated.

**IH:** And how about the community members your age, people who went to college and high school here? Are they, at least, more open than their parents?

**MM:** They are more open, even though half of the people I grew up with dropped out of school. They started hanging out or started having kids. However, there are now a gradually increasing number of students who are graduating. In my opinion more girls are graduating then boys. This is where the gap or the cultural identity really comes in. These people came here as early teens, and they grew up here, and they're not either culture.

For example, I remember back when I was high school, one of my very good friends used to hate smoking. He dropped out of high school back in '99. I haven't seen him since 2005. I met him in Faribault. I couldn't even recognize him because he gained weight and looked different. He recognized me. He mentioned to me that a lot of things have happened to him. He was in jail for years and got out. And he asked me what I do now. I told him that I was married have two kids, completed my master's degree, and work at the county. He told me that he never finished high school, went prison for four years, got out, and he is currently on parole. He had a criminal history. He told me a number of things he had done.

**IH:** And last question. Where do you see the Somali community in Rochester five, ten, twenty years from now?

**MM:** I'm very optimistic and hopeful that better days are ahead of us. We will not stay in the condition that we are in now. Like I said, we are making slow progress, but some day we will be able to speed up. I think we have a lot of potential to do a lot of things. But one day will come



when we really will see a lot of Somali officials elected in the government agencies and higher positions in institutions. And we are already seeing the trend now. People are engaging and becoming part of the system. I think the number of graduates gives you an example. More kids are graduating now and going to college than ever before, and so I think it's very positive. So I believe, yes, we will be able to be in a better position than we are today.

**IH:** That is the end of my questions. Do you have anything to add?

**MM:** Thank you.

**IH:** Thank you.