



Collection Information:

Item: Transcript of oral history interview with Nuur Mohamud, January 18, 2015.

Collection: Somalis in Minnesota Oral History Project.
Oral History Interviews of the Somalis in Minnesota Oral History Project.

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Nuur Mohamud
Narrator

Ibrahim Hirsi
Interviewer

January 18, 2015
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Nuur Mohamud **-NM**
Ibrahim Hirsi **-IH**

IH: This is Ibrahim Hirsi recording for the Minnesota Historical Society Somali Oral History Project. I am interviewing Nuur Mohamud in Minneapolis. The date is January 18, 2015. Nuur, first of all, thank you very much for the opportunity to interview with us. The first question. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

NM: I was born in Somalia, the capital, Mogadishu. Actually, I was born in a small city that's called Afgooye.

IH: Afgooye?

NM: Yeah. And I moved to Mogadishu like three years before the civil war. But then I flee to...

IH: So before we kind of talk about the civil war, can you tell me a little bit more about your childhood years? What can you remember when you were in Afgooye—the kinds of things you used to do and stuff like that.

NM: Actually, I was born in Afgooye, but I grew up in Mogadishu. I don't remember the most of my childhood in Mogadishu, but the only thing I remember was at three or two years.

IH: So you left Mogadishu when you were two years old?

NM: Three years old.

IH: Three years old, okay. So, when was it?

NM: I don't remember the date, but I think it was either '90 or '91. I don't remember. When would it be? Whenever the civil war occurred in Mogadishu, yeah.

IH: That was 1991.

NM: Yeah.

IH: So, from Mogadishu to where? Where did you go after Mogadishu?

NM: From Mogadishu, I went to the different refugee camp.

IH: In Kenya?

NM: In Kenya, yeah. That's where I was staying, in Kenya, with my family.

IH: Can you tell me a little bit more about life in the refugee camp?

NM: The only thing I can remember in the refugee camp was most people were refugees. I was younger, so... People were starving, so you can see their face. There was a walk more than a thousand, thousand miles from Mogadishu up to Kenya.

IH: So your family actually also walked from Mogadishu to Kenya?

NM: I remember my mom told me. I heard it. They say we took a truck from Mogadishu, then Kismayo [Kismaayo], and then Kenya. But actually I don't remember how was it.

IH: But you remember other people used to walk that. What else do you remember in the camps?

NM: Oh, the camps. I remember there was, like, a blue flag that says UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees].

IH: UNHCR?

NM: Yeah, UNHCR. Also I remember people helping other people, or helping other people also. Also I saw a lot of people saying, like, "We cannot go back to Somalia because of the civil war." And that time the civil war was very bad. But after like a couple years, I went back, we went to Nairobi.

IH: From the camp to Nairobi.

NM: Yeah.

IH: And was Nairobi the place where you spent most of your teenage years?

NM: Yes.

IH: Tell me a little bit more about your educational journey in Nairobi—if you went to *dugsi* [Quran school] or madrassa [Muslim school] or whatever you call it.

NM: Yeah, I went to *dugsi*, and then I went to like a private school. Yeah, my journey down in Nairobi, it was good. So life was awesome, was good also. I didn't complain that much when I was in Nairobi.

IH: Nairobi, they have a different language than Somalis, right? They have a different culture.

NM: Yes.

IH: Their...

NM: The challenge.

IH: Law enforcement, their police officers, a lot of people kind of complain about that. So what do you remember about it, and how was life like in Nairobi?

NM: Oh, first of all, life in Nairobi was like kind of a challenge for me, because I didn't know the Kiswahili [Swahili] language, Kiswahili. So the first I have to learn, because it's the only language you can go to school and learn. Most people talk in Kiswahili, so that was my challenge. Then I went to the school, the private school, so they will teach me Kiswahili and English, both languages. And then I had a lot of what's called the challenge in my childhood. And then I went to *dugsi*, which is to learn what's Arabic, the Quran. And the law enforcement, it wasn't that bad. I don't remember how was it, but it wasn't that bad at that time.

IH: Can you tell me more about your parents' background—you know, what they did, how many siblings you had.

NM: Oh, my background. Okay, the only thing I can remember is my mom, we had, actually, we have five.

IH: Including you?

NM: Yeah, including me we have five.

IH: So where are you in that?

NM: I'm the second.

IH: The second, second-born.

NM: Yeah, I was second. So I can't remember my parents, their siblings, so, yeah. The only thing I remember is my siblings.

IH: Yeah, your siblings. Okay. And how did you end up in the States? What was the process like?

NM: Actually, my mom, she came to the United States, and she used to work here and send the money to us. And what she did is she filled out a petition.

IH: Sponsorship?

NM: Yeah, sponsorship, our visa, and that's when I came to the United States.

IH: And when was that?

NM: It was 2005.

IH: And you arrived here with your family, with your siblings?

NM: Yes.

IH: And was Minnesota the first state that you landed?

NM: No, actually, it was in Chicago.

IH: Chicago.

NM: Chicago, and then I came here.

IH: So you lived in Chicago for how long?

NM: I don't live in Chicago. It was like only, like the first landing. Actually, I came to Minnesota straight.

IH: Okay, so Minnesota is the first place you lived in the States. So was it summer, was it winter when you first...

NM: It was winter. I remember it was in November, on the twenty-first of November.

IH: How did you feel when you first came here and it was that cold? What were your initial thoughts of the state or the United States?

NM: Compared to where I came—I came from Nairobi and it was tropical temperature—it was that hot. And then I came to the States, and it was cold, and it was the beginning of the winter. And when I came to the airport, it was cold, and I start complaining about it. I said, "I want to go back to Africa. So I can't stay here no more, because the weather's too bad." I almost cried every day.

IH: Because of the cold?

NM: The cold, yeah. And I said, "I want to go back to Africa because I don't want to stay here. It's too cold."

IH: And what was the reaction from your family members? What did they tell you when you told them about that?

NM: Yeah, my mom told me like, “You’re not going nowhere because you’re going to stay here.” And I said okay. So she told me to suck it up, and, okay, I did.

IH: So, obviously, when you were in Kenya you knew that you were going to be in the States one day, so what were you thinking about? What were some of your goals, if there were any that you said, “When I get to the States this is what I’m going to do, that’s what I’m going to accomplish.” What were your plans and goals prior to coming to the States?

NM: Before I came to the United States I had a goal. I said, “When you go to the States, so you need to accomplish all these goals.” The first it was my education. So I finished my high school, and I finished my high school, I got my diploma. And then finish my four years, but it didn’t happen. I just went to two years’ college, and then I’m done.

IH: So before we kind of talk about your college education and what happened after that, let’s talk more about your high school years. So you said you spent two years in high school?

NM: Yeah, it was two years.

IH: So, I mean, how was your high school in Minnesota different than the education you had in Kenya, and what were your favorite subjects in high school, and your general experience in high school?

NM: Okay, actually, there’s not that much difference—I mean, what I did when I’ve gone to Nairobi for high school and when I came to Minnesota for high school. But the high school in Minnesota... First of all, my favorite subject was math and science. So when I came to the state, the thing was I have another challenge. The one in Nairobi was the Kiswahili. Then I came here, so the first challenge was my accent. I had a big accent. And they said, “You need to go to school, you need to go back to school, and you had to ameliorate your English,” and I started doing that. So I do a lot of reading, writing. But then after a year or two years, then I accomplished everything for my English and then my writing, and then... Actually I went to Wellstone High School, and I had a lot of friends. They came from Somalia, they got the same status like me, and also like an immigrant. So we have a good connection with them, still have a connection.

IH: So the majority of the students who went to that school are immigrants.

NM: Yeah. It was like they are Spanish, Ethiopian... What’s called—they have different people, it’s diversity.

IH: And you liked that.

NM: Yeah, I did like that, because we exchanged a lot of experience between them, because I don’t know Ethiopian culture or the West African culture.

IH: And then after high school, when did you graduate from high school?

NM: I graduated in 2007.

IH: So what happened after that?

NM: And after I graduated from high school I went to college for two years college, Saint Paul Technical College.

IH: Why did you choose to go to Saint Paul Technical College?

NM: Because I still wanted to do my, like I want to still work on my English, because I don't want to go to four years college. So I said I need to go to two years college, still work on my English classes, so that's why I choose Saint Paul College. So I have to go step by step there.

IH: And how was your experience like in Saint Paul College?

NM: Also at Saint Paul College, I met like a lot of other immigrants, too. So it was good to have a lot of experience.

IH: Did you study any specific major or area?

NM: No, I was doing just general classes.

IH: Okay, generals. And then after Saint Paul, I know that you're in the navy. Why did you decide to go to that route?

NM: That was my first year at college, my first year on Saint Paul College. So what I did, I talked to one of my friends. He was an immigrant, but he was in the navy, too, and I talked to him about that. And they told me, like, if you are going to join the military, you're going to have what's called free scholarship for your school and everything. So then I had a lot of difficulties for money, because they told me like—you know, a lot of stuff. Because my mom, she was working a lot, and she was not making a lot of money, so I can't go to school. I want to pursue, I want to continue my education until my master. I talked to him about it, and then he convinced me a lot of stuff, and then I said, "Okay, I'm going to join the military." That's why I joined the military—only for my education, for my school. That's why I joined in, yeah.

IH: And when did you join?

NM: Actually, I joined in October 2009.

IH: Do you remember where you were first stationed? And if you can tell me more about your experience in interacting with other fellow military. What were the challenges that you had to face and the things that you liked the most about your general experience in the military in the, let's say, first couple of weeks to months?

NM: The first when I joined the military I went to the boot camp. That's what are called "sailorization." That means you came from civilian life, and you're going to military life, that

different life. So came from civilian life, going to the military life, they are big difference. So the first week, like the first three weeks, so you're going to have a lot of difficulties. So then you need to know everything, so you need to stand up and you have to do a lot of training. You do a lot of exercise, do a lot of stuff. It's not easy, but, yeah, we do the swimming, we do the firefighter, we do everything.

IH: And where were you trained at?

NM: It was Great Lakes, Illinois.

IH: So you did swimming, you did firefighters...

NM: Yeah, we do the swimming, firefighting, everything—like seamanship, any kind of...

IH: You said swimming ship?

NM: Seamanship.

IH: And then after that, for how long did you do that training?

NM: It is only three months. Then after that you're going to graduate and then you are going to go to what they call the "A" school. Then you're going to learn more advanced stuff.

IH: This is still in Illinois?

NM: Yeah, still in Illinois. So you need to learn a lot of stuff, a lot more detail, like a lot of other stuff, more detail. When we was in boot camp they just gave you like small detail, but when you're going to that school, then give you like more detail. They're going to explain to you everything.

IH: What exactly did you do?

NM: We just did the same thing, like we just repeat everything we did in boot camp. So we have to redo again, and then do the same thing. So then that's going to be the real one, so you have to do everything like in real.

IH: And then after that what happens?

NM: After that when you finish "A" school, then you have to graduate first. When you graduate, then they're going to send you to the fleet.

IH: They are going to send you where?

NM: To the fleet. So that means you're ready. So then you're going to go to the next station. So I went to Japan. I went on tour to Japan for three years.

IH: So you actually lived and worked in Japan for three years.

NM: For three years.

IH: How was life in Japan like? How was it different than the life in Minnesota?

NM: Actually, honestly, the weather was like, it was same, because in Japan it snows sometimes. But it's not that bad. Then you are going to see the different people, different, that diversity. But people in Japan, they are all nice, quiet, and peaceful. And also you can see, like when you see like their face, they are all smiling face. They're not going to hurt you, they're not going to do something like harm yourself. But there was a lot of good people. Yeah, I like it.

IH: Where exactly did they station you?

NM: I was in Sasebo, Japan.

IH: Did you live in the city? Or you had to live somewhere near the ocean, since you were navy?

NM: It depends. I was on the ship for my first year. For the first three years, you have to be on the ship. So I was on the ship.

IH: And you lived there?

NM: Yeah, because we had a different... Okay, the only ship, when we are going out to sea, so we have to be on the ship, because we're going to the middle of the ocean. Then you have to be on the ship. But when we were on the shore, so we have to live in the barracks, what they call like bachelor quarters.

IH: As a Somali person, a Muslim in the military, in the navy, how was your relationship with the other soldiers or marines or navies? If you could say more about that.

NM: Okay. Navy is like we have what they call, they basically—because we are different people, you can find different kind of people. So you can find black and white, you can find Hispanic, Arabic—different people. Because these are different people come together, it's a diversity. So we live under one thing. It was called honor, courage, and commitment. That's it.

IH: Honor, courage, commitment.

NM: Commitment, yeah. That's it, that's what we believe in. So then also we are all brothers and sisters, so no one's going to hurt the other person. One time when we leave and when we go out to sea, because we don't have a—we are a small family. So as a Muslim, I didn't see any challenge, because everyone has his own religion, so no one's going to bother you at religion. So you are free to do your religion, you are free to do your worship, everything. So it's like do your—everything, you are free to do your own. All your culture. No one's going to tell you, "You're this culture," and then they're going to say, like, "Hey, you do not belong here."

Because you're in the navy, you belong to the navy, it doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter your race, origin, country, or religion. We are all the same.

IH: Great. What did you do for fun on weekends or at times when you don't have to work?

NM: Actually, we have a lot of activities. So what we call like MWR—what's called morale, welfare, recreation. And so they have different—we play football, we play soccer, we play everything. So even you can go study, like you can do your college. No one's going to stop you doing your college, so you're doing college.

IH: So you can actually go take classes. Just like in any other job here.

NM: Taking classes. Yeah. The jobs is not that hard. It depend the people. Some people's all different. Some people say, "Hey, we're going to spend our time like doing other stuff." Some people say, "Hey, I'm going to spend my time doing my school, doing like any different thing." But people's all different. They're doing different things.

IH: And did you meet other Somali folks in the navy or in the military? Do we have enough? I mean, how many people could we say are in the navy or in the military that you know, that you met?

NM: I actually met like a couple. Like there's a female Somali, and I met like two guys. But the most, they join the marines and the army, yeah.

IH: So they're mostly in the marines and the army.

NM: Yeah.

IH: How many people would you estimate are in the marines or in the armies?

NM: Almost like—actually, I can't estimate, but I want to say like five percent.

IH: Of Somalis?

NM: Yeah, but you can say like that, yeah. It's actually a lot of people.

IH: That's a big number.

NM: Yes.

IH: And then you lived in Japan for three years. After that, where did you go?

NM: After I finished in Japan for three years, after I finished my tour in Japan, I went to Bahrain for another tour, for one year.

IH: Another tour for one year.

NM: Yes. So I was in Bahrain.

IH: And how did you like life in Bahrain?

NM: Life in Bahrain was like kind of good. It's hot.

IH: It was better than in Japan?

NM: No, it wasn't.

IH: It was not?

NM: It was like, okay, the temperature was almost like a hundred ten, a hundred twenty.

IH: That's very hot.

NM: It's very hot. And also it was a sandstorm, and also life was like... Life it wasn't that bad, but everything wasn't cheap. I mean it was expensive.

IH: So Bahrain was much more expensive than Japan.

MF: Yes. Compared to other Arabic countries, Bahrain was the expensive one.

IH: And for how long did you stay there?

NM: A year. Twelve months, yep.

IH: How were the activities that you did in Japan different than the ones that you did in Bahrain?

NM: The duties that I was doing in Japan and Bahrain was the same. The same thing, because I was still going to school, but I was continuing doing my school. I was working. No, actually, I was doing all my other activities. So it was the same.

IH: So you said that you were taking some classes. What were they? What kind of classes? Were they college-level classes?

NM: It was college-level classes.

IH: What major?

NM: I was cybersecurity.

IH: So are you still taking college classes?

NM: Yeah. I'm still taking from the University of Phoenix now.

IH: And your major is cybersecurity?

NM: Yeah. Actually, now I'm doing what's called—because I was taking to the University of Maryland, but now I'm doing what's called networking. So that's what I'm, because I'm doing two majors. I try to do two majors, so now I'm doing the networking at the U of M—I'm sorry, it's the University of Phoenix.

IH: And what inspired you to go to that field?

NM: Actually, I'm good with computers, so yeah. That's why. I'm taking online and still doing other stuff online. And then I'd like to do technology, like computers.

IH: And then after Bahrain, where did you go?

NM: After Bahrain I was in Norfolk, Virginia for hospital. It's called NMCP, Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, for six months.

IH: And when did you come to Virginia?

NM: July fourth. Four July.

IH: So from July all the way now, right now, about six months.

NM: Yes.

IH: And how did you like Virginia so far?

NM: Every time I came to different environment, so I have this challenge. But I came from Bahrain and I came back to the States. Because I've never been in a state like for four years when I came back here, so I got like a small challenge. But I overcame everything.

IH: What was that challenge?

NM: The challenge was, I mean, you can see the life when you are overseas, you have to adapt to another life. So when you came back here, you need to start another life, too. So that's what I meant, like it's a challenge to restart my life. That's it.

IH: And when you first joined the navy, you know, we don't have a lot of Somalis in the navy or in the military or the marines. And some people maybe are fearful about a Somali person joining this. So from your family and friends, were they supportive of your decision or were they like, "Oh my God, why are you doing this?"

NM: Yeah, I'm going to say like fifty-fifty. Some of them support me, but some they say, "Hey, why are you doing the military, because they're going to kill you. It's not, like, it's not safe." But, yeah, I have both sides.

IH: For your immediate family, what was their reaction?

NM: In my family, they got different reactions. Some, they says, “Hey, you’re good. And then you’re going to the military, so when you come back from the military you’re going to be a hard worker, tough, everything.” And some of them said like, “Hey, you’re in the military, so it’s not good for you. You start killing people,” which is not true. And they said, “How many people did you kill so far?” Kind of like different stuff, like catch an eye roll.

IH: How did that make you feel when some people go like, “How many people did you kill so far?”

NM: Actually, I don’t care, because I know who I am. So I’m in the military. Like, it doesn’t matter, because I defend this country, and then I defend my people. So that’s why I’m in my uniform. If they’re bad people, we have to punish every bad people. That’s it. Plus it’s not killing people. I don’t kill people, we don’t kill people. It’s like defend the other person.

IH: Right now we’re in a world where people seem to be very divided in terms of religion. You know, Americans versus Muslims. And now here you are, a Muslim person fighting for the USA, fighting for the cause of this country, defending this country. So when you see the news what’s going on—all these hate messages about Muslims. I mean, Americans saying that Muslims are evil and Islam is a violent religion, and then, you know, some extreme Muslim is saying that, “Hey, we’re here to kill America,” and all that. But here you are as a Muslim Somali person, fighting and even ready to die for America. So what does that make you feel whenever you see this kind of message through the mainstream media?

NM: I have heard all those, I see all these issues. So I hear all those issues about Muslims and also what they call the extremist people. So I am who I am, and I believe what I believe. I am a Muslim. I pray my five times. I do my worship. I’m very faithful. Then it doesn’t matter, because Muslim, definition of Muslim, it’s like—what do I call—something like people are like peaceful, it’s peace. We don’t have to kill other people without reason. So I’m a peaceful person, because that’s what my religion defines me. So I have to follow what my religion says. You have to be peaceful, so I’m going to be a peaceful person. It doesn’t matter what the other people say. It doesn’t matter what they tell me, like, “You are Muslim...” So only thing, I have to do my job. I have to do what—because we saw a lot of people, the bad people, extremists. I don’t think some of the things they believe are Muslim. But it’s kind of different, what I believe. So what a Muslim said. I read my Quran every day, so I saw the difference. So what I believe I’m going to follow whatever it says in the Quran, everything, and I’m going to believe what it says about my own religion. So then, the other side, being military as a Muslim, as a Somali, it doesn’t matter. I don’t have any issue. So it’s a work. I live here, so serving this country is like something better. It’s when I came because I went Somalia... Actually, I don’t have—my country is in a war situation, so there’s no way I’m going to go back to Somalia. So I’m going to stay here. It’s going to be my second country, so I’ll serve this country. It’s kind of an opportunity for me. So that’s what I believe here.

IH: Would you recommend people to also maybe be part of the military and the career that you're now pursuing, or you wouldn't recommend? I mean, would you make the same decision if you had an opportunity to restart where you started from?

NM: No, because right now I have a lot of experience now. So there's no way I'm going to start where I was before. When I joined the military I had a lot of experience. I saw a lot of like... So I can define right now what is the bad and what is the right, and then I can define everything right now. So joining the military, it gave me a lot of opportunity, a lot of experience right now. So I can give some, like, I can talk to other people to join the military, because I saw a lot of flaws in Somalis. They are almost like fifteen percent of them in jail. So why they are in jail? Because they didn't see like this opportunity. I mean, you can join the military for free. There is no money. So every time you join the military, they're going to give you like this opportunity. They're going to give you a skilled job, a lot of stuff. They're going to pay your school, so you're going to be out of the street, so you're not going to stay in the street all the time. So then there's no way you can stay like on the street. Or there's no way you can start drinking in the public or start doing some other stuff or drugs. You're going to get a good training, good experience, good job skills, everything, in the military.

IH: Right. And for how long do you plan to stay in the military?

NM: Actually, I didn't decide yet, but I extended for another four years now. So my contract is going to be end in 2017. But I don't know if I'm going to reenlist, like extend it another years, or I'm going to stop. So I didn't decide yet.

IH: Of course, you lived here for some time in Minnesota. You lived in other parts of the world. Where do you see the Somali community in Minnesota in the next ten, fifteen, twenty years?

NM: I'd say when I see Minnesota Somalis—okay, what it's called, Somali community in Minnesota—every community has the bad people, has the good people, so I want to ask the good people. If they keep continuing what they're doing right now, I can see they would go farther, then farther. So I see right now Somali community, they keep developing, they keep growing. If they keep doing this, they can get a lot of, like what's called a lot of stuff. Like they're going to stay, like they're going to have a lot of opportunity in this country if they start doing what they're doing right now. For the bad people, I mean like people on the street, I want to say like stop what they are doing, go back to your school, or do some other opportunity. So in this country it's just opportunity. So don't lose your opportunity. Stand up and do your stuff and make your career. So for the future of the Somalis who are in the community, I see like Somali grandfather now. I see most people now is going to be part of this American society, yeah.

IH: Good. Anything else that you would like to add to this interview?

NM: So I would like to add on this interview. I'm going to say, like, I'm going to talk to the young, the young generation. I mean, my generation. I saw all my people, like all my friends, ten, fifteen percent, they end up on the street. So I'm going to give some advice, tell them—so you have a lot of opportunity in this country. Don't lose your opportunity, and don't lose your faith. Keep doing what you guys do. I mean, stop doing what you guys are doing out there now.

So, that's not good. And then you need to stay away from the street. You can go anywhere to gain a lot of job skill, to gain a lot of experience. I'm going to give you some advice—to go back to school, to go back anywhere, to get more opportunities in this country and their life. So they have to think about their future, not like other stuff, kind of like a drug dealer. So stop what they are doing and do what you're supposed to do. And you have to see that other people are doing, your other fellow Somali. So go ahead and then do your... It's not late. You still have a lot of chance to do, so go ahead and do it, everything. That's how we can make only one Somali community and it could be united. That's what we can do. And we're going to be a part of this American society together, as a together.

IH: Great! Thank you very much for your time.

NM: Yep. You're welcome.