

“This place is a working place— not a mosque”

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Introduction

In the past five years the number of Somali refugees to the United States has risen drastically. Because of the civil war in Somalia, there are over 15,000 Somali refugees in Minnesota today. Since most people in Somalia are Muslim, their arrival has added to a religious minority in Minnesota and all over the United States. Despite increasing religious diversity, the United States is still overwhelmingly Christian and Christians in the United States are not well educated about the practices and beliefs of Islam.¹ Neither the Somali Refugees nor the Americans were prepared to be confronted with a new culture other than their own. They were not prepared for the changes and conflicts that were inevitable when the two cultures were crossed. Because of this, problems have arisen. The practices of Somali people have already changed and will continue to change.

Most Somali people are Sunni Muslims.² This does not mean that they all practice their religion the same way, but it does mean that their Muslim faith makes them a religious minority in America and more specifically in Minnesota. The average Minnesotan does not know much about their religious practices except for what the media may focus on. We notice the women wearing veils in public; we hear about the horrors of female circumcision. United States newspapers draw attention to the differences between American women and Somali women and make gross generalizations about the practices of Somali Muslim women. "Realistically," the World

¹ According to the *World Almanac and Book of Facts 2001*, the number of Muslims in the North America is 5,780,000 compared to the number of Christians in North America, which is over 258,770,000. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (Mahwah, New Jersey: World Almanac Books, 2001), 692.

² The Sunni school of Islam is the majority branch of the Muslim population of the world. This school of Islam allows human reasoning, which is considered by some to be "un-Islamic." The Sunni school of Islam is based on the interpretations and teachings of early jurists and the four great law schools. The Sunnis are

Press Review reports, "no woman is likely to get a job in the U.S. if she insists on wearing her veil at work." It also says, "Most of the husbands are already unhappy that they will have to let their wives work." Many of the men, the article observes, have never cooked a meal and may have more than one wife.³ An article in the St. Paul Pioneer Planet, an offshoot of the St. Paul Pioneer Press, focuses on the Somali custom of female circumcision. It observes that even if America made a law against female circumcision, many families would still have their daughters circumcised.⁴ While this may be true for many Somali Muslim people, the constant focus upon these particular issues in the media minimizes what non-Muslims believe to be true about Somalis. Although these are issues within the Somali communities and will continue to grow as issues if not addressed, these are not the only aspects of Islam that are important in the lives of the Somali people. These are all observations that Americans may make about Somali Muslim people, but the differences lie much deeper, in the religious practices. Somalis, like other refugee groups, are struggling to survive in their new country: not only economically, but also are struggling to survive spiritually and culturally.

Both men and women are affected by moving to the United States from Somalia. This thesis will focus on Somali women. Being immersed in a sea of new beliefs and ideas has challenged the faith of many Somali women. The educational system, employment, and the varied aspects of American culture have all played a role in the changes that have occurred in their faith and practices since coming to the United States. All immigrant groups undergo a type of acculturation when coming to America. This

considered "the People of the (established) Custom and the Community." Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 191-192, 306, 395.

³ Harald Willenbrock, "The Dream," *World Press Review* 45 (March 1998): 28.

thesis focuses on the changes that the Somali Muslim women in Mankato have undergone already and what will happen in the future.

Coming to the United States is a complete disruption in the life of a Somali woman. It is difficult for anyone to understand what she is encountering in the United States. When a Somali woman walks down the street of Mankato, she is very noticeable to those she passes. There are many variables that set Somali women apart from most people in Mankato. The first is skin color. Since Somali women have dark skin, they stand out in Mankato. However, Somali people have different facial features from that of the majority of African and African-Americans in the United States. There is a history of oppression of non-white people in this country. This oppression still exists today and includes new communities such as the Somalis. Also, because they do not look like most African-Americans, they suffer from prejudice from other Africans and African-Americans.⁵ In the United States, for the past hundreds of years, it has been true that many people oppress the newest group of immigrants. Since the Somali people are some of the newest, this prejudice affects how people treat them on a daily basis. The next variable is their religion. Since Somali people are mainly Muslim, they are of a religious minority in Mankato. Because of the practice of modesty that Islam requires, Somali women dress in traditional Somali Muslim clothing that includes wearing a scarf

⁴ Kay Harvey, "A Mother's Dilemma," *Pioneer Planet*, <http://www.pfc.org.uk/news/1999/mdilemma.html>. 4 March 1999.

⁵ In my interactions with the Somali community as well as the African-American community in Minneapolis, I have found a lot of tension between the two communities of people. The African-American community is often times not welcoming to Somali people in their communities. In one situation, a Somali family moved to a primarily African-American area. The harassment by the African-American community got so bad that the Somali family had to move. The children were taunted and the adults were hollered at and made fun of. When a few of the African-American individuals were asked why they were so mean to the Somali family, they replied with answers including, "They are strange," "They smell," and "They dress funny." Other replies spoke about the language barrier and that the Somali people were taking jobs and housing from the rest of Americans.

covering their hair. This is very different from the way most Americans dress and makes Somali women stand out.

The next factor is that they are women. In America, there is a long history of oppression to women. The gender of the Somali women plays as much as of a role, if not more, as in the lives of all women in America.⁶ Another variable is the language barrier that the Somali Muslim women are encountering. The fact that they do not speak English instantly sets them apart from most Americans. People notice them speaking a different language and cannot interact as easily with these women. There are a few more variables that play a role in why Somali Muslim women stand out in Mankato, but the main ones are skin color, religion, gender, and language. These odds that the women face are obstacles that the average American does not encounter.

Thesis Statement

Since coming to America the religious practices of Somali Muslim women have changed and will continue to change. By looking at the background and experiences of Somali women and programs already in place in other areas focussing on these issues, one can find possible outcomes and accommodations that can be made in order to make space for the religious practices of Somali Muslim women in a primarily non-Muslim society.

⁶ I have done other research on issues dealing with women in Islam. I am not covering the issue of the oppression of Muslim women in this thesis. For more information about the role of women in Islam, see Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's book, *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

Research Method

Because most Somalis in the United States have come quite recently, very little research has been done on the effects of the move to the United States on Somali women. Local newspapers, journals, and other media have done some stories on Somalis in Minnesota, but in-depth studies have not been done. To my knowledge, this thesis is the first time anyone has researched this particular issue in Minnesota. Therefore, I am focusing on the practices of Somali Muslim women in Mankato, Minnesota; while these observations are no doubt pertinent to Somali Muslim women in the United States as a whole, no attempt will be made to make generalizations about them.

Research on the religion and lifestyles in Somalia will be used as background knowledge to be compared to how Somali women are living in Minnesota. Written research on Islam will provide a background to the practices and beliefs that Muslims generally follow. Interviews with Somali Muslim women in Mankato, Minnesota will provide information about how Somali Muslim women are living and practicing Islam in America.

Methodology

This thesis will begin with a background of the country Somalia and how the Somali people live in their country. A description of Islam will follow. This includes the beliefs and practices of Muslim people. Next there is an overview of the Somali Muslim women interviewed and their educational, employment, and family backgrounds. The next part of the thesis will be broken into external and internal stresses on the practices of Somali Muslim women. This includes how the practices of the women have changed

since coming to the United States. A section on the Yemeni Muslim community of Delano, California is then used to compare their experiences to the experiences of the Somali Muslim community in Mankato. This leads into suggested accommodations that both the Muslim community as well as the non-Muslim communities has to make in order to create a space for the practices and beliefs of the Somali Muslim community in Mankato. This thesis ends with an overview of what was discussed in the body of the paper as well as giving final thoughts on the thesis.

This thesis started unfolding long before I began doing the writing and book research. This paper began a year and a half ago when I first met a Somali woman named Lul Said Ahmed. She began to tell stories of her life at home in Somalia as well as her experiences in America. She learned of my interest in Islam and Somali refugees that I had developed from my research of Muslim women in India. Lul helped me develop my topic for this thesis from the interests that I explained to her. She educated me through discussions, resources, and allowing me to take part in religious and cultural holidays and events. I spent many hours with the St. Peter Somali Girls Club and began friendships with some of the women and girls in the Somali community in St. Peter and Mankato. Through these interactions and relationships, my knowledge and interest of the Somali refugee experience in Minnesota grew, and I began to understand many of the issues surrounding their new home in Mankato. Because of my interactions and relationships with the Somali community, I was able approach my interviews and research from a level of trust that I had developed within the community. This thesis has helped to put the knowledge I have gathered from my interactions in a framework and

context in which to more deeply understand the effect that moving to the United States has had on Somali Muslim women.

Background on Somalia

Located on the Horn of Africa, Somalia has a population of almost seven million people, of whom about twenty percent live in cities, the majority living in the capital, Mogadishu. The rural population lives in one of two types of villages. Permanent villages consist of about five hundred mud huts with thatched roofs, generally built around a mosque for worship and prayers. Temporary, nomadic villages comprise about five to ten families, who live in portable huts. These families create prayer spaces wherever they are.

Both men and women work in Somali society. Women do more of the house and family work, while men do the money-earning work. Although women do most of the work with the children, men help the women with religious education, especially instruction in the Qur'an and other religious teachings. Somali women have never worn the veils that other Muslims around the world wear. The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims. In Somalia, Islam dates back to the thirteenth century and was revitalized in the nineteenth century. Since the revitalization, many Muslims have started following a more orthodox Islam and are more likely to use moral grounds to criticize the government of Somalia than they used to. Although the Somalis believe there is a difference between a *wadaad*, or *imam*, and a person who is concerned with worldly

matters, there is no other formal hierarchy in the religion. The wadaad does receive respect from his followers but no hierarchy of clergy exists.⁷

Somalia currently has no central government. The country has been in a civil war since the overthrow of Siyad Barre, their former leader's regime in 1991. Since the war began, over nine hundred thousand Somalis have fled the country. Many Somalis have come to America as well as neighboring countries to Somalia to find safety and shelter. Many went to refugee camps in neighboring countries and then traveled to the United States.

In the past five years, more than fifteen thousand Somali refugees have resettled in Minnesota and they continue to arrive. The rise in the Somali population in Mankato has added to the Muslim population there. The most populated areas of Minnesota are Minneapolis, Rochester, Owatonna, and Marshall. In the Minneapolis public schools, the number of Somali students has tripled in the last three years. One school is even filled with a fourth Somali students. Mankato is close following these. Due to the recent changes in the immigration policies, numbers will likely increase because permits will be allowed for family reunification.⁸

Islam and Islamic Practices

Muslims believe that there is only one god and that god is called *Allah*. Allah is all-powerful and the creator and controller of the earth. Nothing and no one is equal to Allah. The worship of idols or any other gods is not allowed. No images are created of

⁷ John Middleton and Amal Rassam, *Encyclopedia of World Cultures: Volume IX Africa and the Middle East* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1995), 315-318.

⁸ The Minneapolis Foundation, *Immigration in Minnesota*, (Minneapolis: General Mills, 2000), 3-4.

Allah. That is why mosques are decorated with geometric patterns rather than human imagery. There are ninety-nine names for Allah in the Qur'an; each name describes one characteristic of Allah. There is not a hundredth name, because that symbolizes the unknown dimension of Allah.⁹

Muslims believe that Allah has sent prophets to communicate the life that Allah requires. Because humans forget and destroy what Allah wants for them, it has been necessary to send more than one prophet. The Qur'an mentions twenty-five of these, such as Jesus, Moses, and David of which most Christians are familiar. The last of these is Muhammad. The message was written down by Muhammad and has been passed on through the words of the Qur'an. The messages that have been recorded from other prophets may have been appropriate for the era in which they were written but are now only partially appropriate and understood because of changes that have occurred in society since then. Because Muhammad is believed to have succeeded at recording the complete revelation of Allah, Muslims follow his words and messages.¹⁰

The word *Islam* means "to submit." Islam calls for Muslims to live a life of submission to Allah. There are five key beliefs called "the five pillars of Islam." They are the signs of an attitude and set of beliefs that one always has. These pillars may look as though they are "all that Islam is", but they are simply gestures of what a Muslim is supposed to know and believe every second of every day. These gestures, since they are the way Muslims express their religion and beliefs, are of great importance. Without

⁹ Elizabeth Breuilly, *Religions of the World: the Illustrated Guide to Origins, Beliefs, Traditions & Festivals* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997), 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

practice of these five pillars in daily life, beliefs mean nothing. These pillars are what chiefly constitute Islamic practice.¹¹

The first pillar of Islam is *Shahāda*, which is one's declaration of faith. This means that one believes that there is only one god and that God is Allah and Muhammad is Allah's messenger. Muhammad is the only one to whom Allah's message was fully revealed. Muhammad is not divine, though, but rather very human. This is a difference between how Jesus is viewed by Christians and Muslims view Muhammad. This declaration is practiced in daily prayer and displayed on the buildings and homes of Muslim people. Arthur Jeffery explains the six conditions that must be observed in order to be an effective Muslim. The *Shahāda*, "(1) must be repeated aloud; (2) must be perfectly understood; (3) must be believed in the heart; (4) must be professed till death; (5) must be recited correctly; (6) must be professed and declared without hesitation."¹² Islam is a public religion. This differs from how many Christians practice their religion in America. It is accepted by many that Christians pray silently and with other Christians. It is important to Muslims to practice their religion in public, so that all can see the public aspect of it. Muslims hope that the declaration of faith is the first thing a baby hears and the last thing a dying person hears.¹³

Salāt is the second pillar of Islam. It requires Muslims to pray five times a day: before sunrise, after midday, late afternoon, at sunset, and during the night. It is very important that the prayer is done as close to the correct time as possible. The

¹¹ The "Five Pillars of Islam" are covered in most books about Islam. The information for the "Five Pillars of Islam" in this paper is gathered from three sources: Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Society in Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994); Arthur Jeffery, *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion* (Indianapolis: the Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958); Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994).

¹² Jeffery, 155.

prerequisites for prayer include: 1) purification— Muslims must wash their hands and feet and rinse their mouths and ears, 2) proper covering of the body— from the knees to the navel for men and the entire body except hands, faced, and feet for women, and 3) they must remove their shoes, kneel down in the direction of Mecca, and bow so that the forehead touches the ground. Although people often pray in a mosque, this is not required. *Mosque* comes from the Arabic word *masjid*. This means a “place of prostration” and does not require a building for this. Muhammad prayed alone in his front yard. Although one can do the prayers alone, it is suggested that prayer is performed with others. If there are more than one person praying together, one of them must act as the *imam*. Since there is no ordained clergy in Islam, any Muslim can act as an imam as long as that person is familiar with the procedures being performed. In areas where Islam is the majority, the call to prayer is announced by an imam over a loudspeaker and may interrupt radio and television broadcasting.

The prayer refers to the Qur'an and includes the Shahāda. The call to prayer begins by saying four times, “God is most great.” This is followed by many statements said twice. The first one is, “I testify that there is no god but God.” Next is, “I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” This is followed by “Hurry to prayer,” and “Hurry to success.” Before the early morning Salāt, one says, “Prayer is better than sleep.” The call to prayer ends with “God is most great” and “There is no god but God.”¹⁴ After the call to prayer is complete, the Muslim begins the actual service of prayer. It is almost the same as the call to prayer but is said much lower and more quickly without the pauses that occur in the call to prayer. The performance of the Salāt

¹³ Denny, 118; Fluehr-Lobban, 23-24; Jeffery, 155-157.

¹⁴ Denny, 120.

gives the Muslim the sense that they are participating in the heavenly journey of Muhammad. This personal journey is called the *mi'raj*. Often men and women pray in separate areas so that they do not disturb each other. Because the focus during prayer is completely on Allah, Muslims believe the mixture of men and women would take away from that focus. On Fridays, an imam, the Muslim religious leader, will often lead the prayers at the mosque as well as preach a sermon often based on a religious text and social or political issues.¹⁵

The third pillar of Islam is the *Sawm*. During the month of Ramadan on the Muslim calendar, Muslims must fast from sunrise to sunset. All adult Muslims are expected to participate, except in the case of health concerns. *Sawm* celebrates the revelation to Muhammad by Allah. A sign of maturity in an adolescent is their decision to fast for the first time. It is left up to the individual to decide when to start. Different groups of Muslims use different levels of strictness on how they practice this pillar of Islam. Some individuals will not even chew gum during the day. Others have a looser interpretation of what *Sawm* should entail. If one intentionally breaks the fast by taking part in sexual relations, which are forbidden, a sixty day fast is required where the Muslim is required to give the equivalent of feeding sixty people is required. If one intentionally breaks the fast by eating or drinking, the person can renew one's vow and abstain from food and drink for the rest of the day and add one day on to the end of the fast. If a person unintentionally breaks the fast, they are excused and can carry on as usual. It requires spiritual discipline and emphasizes the importance of human dependence on God. It makes people remember the poor and hungry and the pain that they feel. Although the fast may be difficult at times due to the pains of hunger and must

¹⁵ Denny, 120; Fluehr-Lobban, 25-27; Jeffery, 162-163.

be taken seriously as a time of learning and humbling, Ramadan is also considered a time to celebrate with others. During the nights, families and friends gather to eat and sing. This time is for celebration with their community.¹⁶

Zakāt, the fourth pillar of Islam, is almsgiving. All Muslims are required to give money or food to other Muslims who are in need. Charity, which is also encouraged for Muslims to do often, is different from *Zakāt*. *Zakāt* is an obligatory almsgiving that is similar to a tax in the United States. It is payable once a year and is based on one's earnings. In Muslim countries, the government may levy a religious tax of two or three percent of one's income. Other Muslims give this without having the government controlling it. When a Muslim turns sixteen, they are expected to begin giving it. The giving of the *Zakāt* is not to be considered a favor but instead a gift from God. Muslims consider *Zakāt* a gift they give in the name of Allah. Therefore the giver must not feel proud and the receiver must not feel embarrassed. This helps for both the receiver and the giver to keep their dignity. There are other kinds of almsgiving also. For instance, at the end of the Ramadan fast, the cost of one day's food is given to those in need.¹⁷

The last of the pillars of Islam, the Hajj, is the most difficult for a Muslim to perform. The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia along with a series of worship and prayers. Mecca was the location where Muhammad served as the inspired head of religious sect. In Medina, Muhammad transformed the small Muslim group into a major world religion. Here he was an unchallenged ruler for many years. Since these places were of great importance in the life of Muhammad, Muslims are expected to make this pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. When one arrives at the

¹⁶ Denny, 126-127; Fluehr-Lobban, 28-32; Jeffery, 192-193.

¹⁷ Denny, 124-126; Fluehr-Lobban, 32-33; Jeffery, 184-185.

holy places, one must say the words, "Here I am, O God, at Thy Command! Thou art without associate."¹⁸ This once again reminds them of the one god they believe in. Muslims believe the Hajj has the power to heal. If someone is ill or grieving the loss of a loved one, one may perform the Hajj in the hope of healing and comfort. Older people sometimes perform the Hajj in preparation for death. No matter what the reason, Muslims value this spiritual adventure. It is a symbol of the worldwide unity of Muslims.¹⁹

Somali Women Interviewed

With this brief overview of Islamic beliefs and practices, we can now apply these to help understand the practices of Somali women. First, however, we must consider the background of the women interviewed. The four women I interviewed were from different geographical areas of Somalia and different backgrounds.

Faduma Abukar (hereafter, "Faduma") is a forty year-old married woman who lives with her husband and their eleven children. Her twelfth child died in Somalia. She went to school in Somalia for eight years and worked as a shopkeeper. Since coming to America in 1996, she has been a daycare provider. Faduma explained the strictness of which she practiced the five pillars of Islam in Somalia. She spoke in depth about how she prayed at home and how the prayers were done in Somalia. She diligently prayed five times a day at the correct times. This was easier for her in Somalia because she was able to hear the prayer broadcast in her neighborhood. She also explained how her family

¹⁸ Fluehr-Lobban, 34; Denny, 73-74.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

and friends would gather in the evening for meals during the month of Ramadan. This is one of the things she most misses about her life in Somalia.

Haweia Gama ("Haweia") has been in America for only eight months. She was a maid in Somalia; here she works at a factory. At age twenty-eight, she is married but has no children. In Somalia she went to school until sixth grade. Since Haweia is so new in the United States, all of the changes she is encountering are very new to her. She expressed sadness and fear about the weakening of her faith and explained how back home there were many opportunities for Qur'anic schooling and classes for adults as well as children. She appreciated being able to learn more about how to be a "good Muslim."

In 1997, twenty-two-year-old Marian Omar ("Marian") came to the United States with her husband and three children. In Somalia she had no schooling and no job. Here she works in a factory. In Somalia, prayer would be announced on loud speakers and Marian explained that about ten minutes later, people would all gather to pray at the mosque. Marian believes that the most important part of her Muslim practices in Somalia was the sharing she did with other Muslims. This was shown in her descriptions of the celebrations of Ramadan as well as the gathering for each prayer time.

Lul Said Ahmed's ("Lul") background is much different from the other women. After growing up in Somalia, Lul went to college in the United States and then returned to Somalia. She has a Master's Degree in Agricultural Education and worked for the United Nations with women's development in Somalia. Now she is forty years old and is a job counselor and an advocate for the Blue Earth and St. Peter Somali communities. She is married and has one son. Lul followed the requirements of all five pillars very

closely when she lived in Somalia. Lul speaks passionately about her Islamic beliefs both in Somalia and the United States.

All four women currently live in Mankato, Minnesota. These women were very willing to participate in this interview because they are encouraged that people are interested and willing to listen to their stories and concerns. It gives them hope that people want to know what bothers them and what needs to be done in order for them to be able to practice their religion like the Muslim religion requires. They also recognize the importance of educating non-Muslims about their religion and their experiences interacting with non-Muslims. They receive encouragement from other women to participate in discussion groups but many times they do not tell their husbands. This may be because their husbands would not support them but also because their husbands often do not care or understand their desire to tell others of their experiences.

Prayer and Cleanliness

Most Americans do not know or understand the practices the Islam religion requires. Because of the misunderstanding of Islam and the prejudice that occurs to religious minorities, Somali Muslim women often are not allowed to perform the practices that are an important part of their religion. Lul explained in her interview that more awareness of Islamic practices is needed among non-Muslim Americans. Many Americans have never even talked to a Somali person. Lul is working to inform more members and employers of the St. Peter and Mankato communities about the beliefs and practices of Islam.

Because prayer is such a fundamental part of Islamic practices, it is important to the women to be able to practice Muslim prayer as they have always practiced it. This has been difficult for many women in America though. For example, Somali women are often not allowed to take time to pray at work. Marian explained that at her job in Mankato, they refused to let her pray. Her job in St. Peter, however, allows her to pray during breaks.

Lul spoke to the head of Human Resources at one company and explained Islamic practices to him. She discussed the importance of the Salāt and how the women are used to performing it. She provided information about the various Muslim holidays and practices to him. Lul says that she asked the head of Human Resources to pass on the information to the rest of the employees at the company and Human Resources employees at other companies, but she believes that he never did. This company still allows its workers to pray only on their breaks and does not allow the women to change their break times to the appropriate Muslim prayer times. They also do not allow the women to do the appropriate washing before their prayers. Instead of allowing them to wash in the bathroom, the women must bring a bottle of water and wash off their feet, face, and hands outside the building. This is to avoid water getting on the floor of the bathrooms. It was also requested of the Tachtronic Instruments and Great Papers companies in Mankato that if a group of four Muslims were working together, they could take turns praying closer to their actual prayer time. The companies, however, refused this request and informed the workers that they would be fired if they tried this.²⁰ Haweia explained that she knew three people who were fired from their jobs last year

²⁰ Personal Interview with Lul Said Ahmed on 4 March 2001 in Mankato, Minnesota.

because they insisted upon praying. She said that one company executive explained to her that, “this place is a working place— not a mosque.”²¹

Because Lul works as a job counselor primarily for Somali families and individuals, her workplace is more willing to learn about and make space for her Muslim practices and lets her pray at work. Even with this openness to learn, misunderstandings still arise about her Muslim practices. Lul explains that everyday she would place a paper cup in the bathroom to use for washing because cleanliness is so important in the Muslim religion. Each time she would enter the bathroom, the cup would have been thrown away. Finally Lul confronted the woman who was throwing her cup away and explained to her that the cup was used for washing her body after using the restroom. The woman then understood and quit throwing the cup away. The explanation helped make the workplace more knowledgeable and accepting of the practices of Islam and prayer.²²

In Somalia, the imam would announce when prayer was supposed to begin on a loudspeaker that could be heard throughout the community. He would announce with the call to prayer. He would also start the prayers for the people and announce what the prayers should be about. Television shows would stop, and some shops would close. In the United States, Faduma explained, it is easy to forget to pray. These announcements of prayer time that occurred in Somalia do not occur in America. Sometimes neighbors will call each other to remind them of prayer time, but otherwise families and individuals are on their own to remember. Haweia explained that even if you did not go to a mosque to pray, you were able to hear it in your home.

²¹ Personal Interview with Haweia Gama on 4 March 2001 in Mankato, Minnesota.

²² Ibid.

All of the times for prayer are different in America also. Because of the position of America to the sun, the hours for prayer are all new. Also, because most Americans are not Muslim, meetings are sometimes scheduled during prayer times. When this occurs, the women must miss their prayer times.²³ This does not allow the women to perform their prayer with the importance in which they believe it deserves.

The Hajj and other Muslim Holidays

The Hajj has been difficult for the Somali women to complete since coming to America. Although the Muslim community understands when circumstances do not permit some people to perform the Hajj, it is still important for Muslims to do it since it is one of the five pillars of Islam. All five pillars emphasize doing the actions that Muhammad showed them during his time. The Hajj is the journey that Muhammad did, so it is important for the Hajj to be repeated by Muslims. Lul explained that companies made it difficult for the Muslims this year. In order to get the visas and other paperwork needed to travel to Mecca, travel agents required they get the visas through their agencies. This made it difficult because it raised the cost to a price not many people could pay. Some people went through Canadian travel agents to complete the Hajj because it was less expensive to not use the agencies in the United States, but others had to stay home.²⁴

Although most businesses and institutions allow people to not work on important Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, they do not do the same things for important Muslim holidays. The Eid-ul-Fitr occurs at the end of the thirty-day fast for

²³ Personal Interviews with Abukar, Said Ahmed, Gama, and Omar on 4 March 2001.

²⁴ Ibid.

Ramadan. It marks the beginning of the new Muslim calendar. At the Mankato and St. Peter celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr, there was a break after the first prayers, so that many of the working Somalis and some of the schoolchildren could leave for work and school. In Somalia, schools and businesses would have closed for the day. The adaptations Muslims must make to the United States holiday schedules do not allow for them to fully celebrate days that are very important in their religion.²⁵

Children and Clothing

The changes in practices of the Somali Muslim women are most evident when they talk about their children. Marian, for example, explained that her daughter's "hair is naked" and that her daughter wants to wear shorts. This greatly upsets Marian and many other women. Dressing modestly is emphasized both in the Qur'an and in Islamic communities. Although Muslim communities from around the world have different definitions of what it means to dress modestly, it is very important in the Somali Muslim community. Most female Somalis believe that dressing modestly includes a skirt, a loose blouse or shirt, and a scarf covering all of their hair. Of course there are exceptions within the Somali community also, this is the general practice of the women from Somalia. When attending Eid-ul-Fitr, this modest way of dressing was required for non-Muslims as well as Muslims. Because this is the Somali definition of modesty, Marian refuses to let her daughter wear shorts and not cover her head. Unfortunately for Marian and her daughter, Marian's daughter is surrounded by other children who do not dress as

²⁵ [Islamic Community of St. Peter and Mankato], * Celebration of Eid-Fitar. Minnesota State University, Mankato, 5 March 2001.

she does and do not follow the practices that she does. Therefore the children feel pressures to look like the other kids.

Faduma explained that the girls used to wear dresses in Somalia but now they are wearing trousers like the boys. Her daughters were supposed to wear dresses for the Eid-ul-Fitr holiday, but they refused. At the religious celebration, they were wearing jeans and tighter-fitting t-shirts with their hair slightly covered. This greatly upsets Faduma, because of the emphasis that Islam has on dressing modestly, and in Somalia modesty meant that girls wore dresses. Although Faduma and the other women were reluctant to show their anger and embarrassment, the embarrassment that Faduma feels is evident in the way she speaks about this change. As she spoke, her eyes stared at the floor and she became very agitated. This showed how difficult it is for Faduma to accept this change to trousers and other clothing that does not fit her definition of modesty.

Jonathan Friedlander explains the experience of a Yemeni Muslim community in America in his essay titled, "The Yemenis of Delano: A Profile of a Rural Islamic Community."²⁶ He speaks of an experience that another Muslim immigrant group had after settling in a rural community in California. After coming to America, the Yemeni women were isolated in their homes because of language and employment barriers. Therefore, they had to depend on their children as a connection to the larger Delano community. The men in the families started growing angry because the children had begun to rebel against their parents due to the pressures of American culture. The men often blamed their children's discipline problems on the mothers and thought that the women were being too lax instead of recognizing the difficulty of the situation. In one

²⁶ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 423-444.

case, an older cousin murdered a young girl when she rebelled against her family and their culture. The cousin was able to flee to Yemen and many members of the community still believe he was justified in this murder. Although this is an extreme case of generational conflict and is not directly about the Somali community, it does show the severity in which many Muslims view the importance of their Islamic practices and culture.²⁷ The frustrations that the Somali mothers express are the same discipline problems as the Yemeni community complained of when they came to America. As one Yemeni man explained about his daughter that was born in America, "I can't teach her to speak Arabic. It's very difficult for me because I'm the only one. If I talk to her once, she forgets what I tell her. She's watching TV and hanging around with kids like her, talking with her mother and grandparents in English. She doesn't know anything else, only English."²⁸ This is a fear that the Yemen community shares with the Somali community. Although their experiences are not all the same, they have had similar frustrations and experiences as immigrant groups.

Although the women did not speak about it or even mention it, female circumcision of young women within the Somali culture is apt to be an issue highly debated now and in the future. With so many of the young women in physical education classes and using public locker rooms, it is likely that female circumcision will become public knowledge. It is also likely that women will start to refuse this procedure from their parents. When this happens, the women will search for legal aid to support their denial of this custom. This is not, however, an issue that the women in Mankato spoke about at this time.

²⁷ Ibid., 431-432.

²⁸ Ibid., 441.

Qur'anic School

Marian worries that her children will be different from her in ways other than style of dress. Her children as well as the other Somali children will not be raised with the intense Qur'anic schooling they would have had in Somalia. They are interacting with many children who are not Muslim. Parents worry that their religious practices have been and will continue to be affected. In Somalia, the Qur'an was the first thing the children learned, and then they received other schooling along with the Qur'an. In the United States this is the opposite. All children go to school in the United States but not all of them attend Qur'anic school.

Faduma worries that since her children do not speak English as well as the other children and are not as educated in the United States school system, the non-Muslim people around her children will influence them in negative ways. She worries that they may be influenced to dress differently, act differently, and to participate in activities such as drinking that the Muslim religion thinks are wrong. Faduma did not even know if her children were allowed to pray in Mankato because they do not talk about it. This worries Faduma and Marian since they place Islam as the center of their lives. If they cannot relate to their children and keep their children from being influenced, they worry that their children will not have Islam at the roots of their beliefs and the center of their lives.

Lul, on the other hand, is determined that the students around her son will not affect him. She insists on educating him extensively at home about the Qur'an so that he will know what he believes and why he believes it. She believes she will raise her six-year-old son without letting him be influenced by non-Muslim people. But Lul points out

that her fluency in English and constant interaction with all types of Americans makes it easier for her to interact with her son than it is for other parents who do not understand the American culture or English language to interact with their children. Lul will be able to relate to her son's experiences as he gets older also due to her experiences going to college in America and now living here.²⁹

None of the women interviewed identified any positive changes that have occurred in their religion since coming to the United States. The women were reluctant to say that their beliefs have changed though. Faduma said, "My beliefs have not changed. It is not difficult to do practices: just a matter of time." Although Faduma said this, all the women gave many specific examples of changes that have occurred. Their reluctance to discuss the changes as a whole comes from their fear of being seen as a "bad Muslim." The Somalian women struggle to keep their beliefs and practices at the center of their life and feel embarrassment if they let people know that they have been affected anyway. Although many of the changes are not ones that they could have prevented, they still do not want to be thought of as bad Muslims. Haweia explained in simple terms, "It seems that the faith is getting weak here."³⁰

Religious and Educational Leadership

The women interviewed believed that the Somali Muslim community would be better if the Muslim community in Mankato would unite. The separation of the Muslims in America affects many practices of the Islamic religion. In Somalia, the children would

²⁹ Personal Interviews with Abukar, Said Ahmed, Gama, and Omar on 4 March 2001.

³⁰ Personal Interview with Gama on 4 March 2001.

have gone to Qur'anic school as well as secular schooling. Children are raised with knowledge of Islam, the Qur'an, and how to live a faithful Muslim.

In Mankato, these opportunities for their children do not exist. Recently, the Muslim community started Qur'anic classes for children for two hours on Saturdays; it is housed at a local school. As welcome as this new effort is, however, it does not replace the Qur'anic schools in Somalia, where the children would have spent as much time as they did in their secular schools. In Mankato, Muslim parents bear almost all the responsibility to teach their children about Islam. There were also more opportunities in Somalia to continue learning about Islam for the adults also.

At the Eid-ul-Fitr celebration and prayer, the Imam, who was from Egypt, led prayer in English. Only about five of the forty women at the prayer understood English, so they were not able to learn from the message he delivered. Since they did not understand what the Imam delivered, this did not help the women continue learning about the Qur'an. The disunity among the Somali community has not created an atmosphere in which Somali leaders have emerged within their community. Leaders within the Somali community would be able to better lead prayer and further their education of the Qur'an. At this point, the Muslim community has not united enough to start programs that foster a continuing learning environment.³¹

The Sawm and the Zakāt

For Muslims, the celebrations during the month of fasting called Sawm and after the fast is over are among the most important parts of the fast. In Somalia, the whole

Muslim community would gather to spend time in celebration and prayer, but in the United States, it is not as special. Haweia explains that Ramadan does not have the same worth here as it did at home. Instead, people spend more time alone and concerned with themselves. The grouping and visiting and sharing that characterize Ramadan in their homeland do not occur in the United States. When asked why she misses Ramadan in Somalia, she said of her experience in the United States, "We are missing sharing, you see." This is because the Muslim community is not connected to each other as intimately as it is in Somalia. When asked how her employers felt about her fasting, Marian explained that she does not tell them when she is fasting. She would not want them to think it would affect her work.³²

Since coming to America, many Somalis send their Zakāt to family in Somalia. They do not give to those in the Mankato community. There are two reasons for this. The first is that people are more financially stable here than in Somalia. Many have jobs and are recipients of welfare money from the United States government. The standard of living is also higher in the United States and so the lower levels of financial income that exist here are still higher than those in Somalia. The second is that they do not know their community here as intimately as they did in Somalia. They would know the needs of their community in the United States if they would unite. The Zakāt is only given if a family can afford to give. In Somalia it was more common and easier to give food from one's own farm, but Somalis living in the United States tend to send money back to Somalia.³³

³¹ [Islamic Community of St. Peter and Mankato], * Celebration of Ed-Fitar. Minnesota State University, Mankato, 5 March 2001.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Obstacles in Achieving Unity

The Somali Muslim community faces a number of obstacles to achieving unity. The first is the background of clan groups in Somalia. The clans were enemies in Somalia and have carried some of that hostility to their interactions in the United States. When the Somali people first began to arrive in Minnesota, they all tried to help each other. As the population began to rise, the tensions of the enemy clans also began to resurface and create problems.³⁴ This keeps certain groups from uniting as Muslims. Another obstacle is the absence of mosques. In Mankato, there is now a mosque, but it is available only on Friday nights. There are mosques in Minneapolis and St. Paul, but they are not close enough to attend often. In Somalia, mosques were on almost every street. Here, there is not a space available for Muslims to gather. They do not have the money to purchase a mosque. For the Qur'anic school, a public school classroom is being rented to the Muslim community. The students of the Qur'anic school have to pay to use the classroom. Some families cannot afford the cost. Therefore, not all of the children are learning about the Qur'an.³⁵

The Yemeni Community of Delano, California

The future of the Somali Muslim community of Mankato is unclear. The experiences of other rural Muslim immigrant communities in the United States may shed some light on several possible outcomes. Jonathan Friedlander describes the experience of such a community in his essay titled, "The Yemenis of Delano: A Profile of a Rural

³⁴ The Minneapolis Foundation, *Immigration in Minnesota*, (Minneapolis: General Mills, 2000), 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

Islamic Community.”³⁶ The Yemenis settled in Delano as refugees because they could find jobs working in the fields. Starting out as new poor immigrants, the Yemenis have made a place for themselves in the Delano community. They have good jobs and much support. They actively support both their Muslim community and the wider Delano community.³⁷ This has made it easier for them to create space in which to practice their religion.³⁸

The Yemeni community began praying individually and communally at the labor camps. They built temporary mosques in which they prayed their Salat, because they could not afford and did not have resources to build permanent mosques. It was difficult for them to uphold the cleanliness requirements for prayer, due to their jobs in the fields. After five years of temporary tent mosques, the Yemeni community has now built their own Yemeni Association Hall and a mosque for the larger Muslim community.³⁹ They have an Imam who leads the people in prayer. The Sawm also created changes for the Muslims. The people who worked in the fields needed to eat during the day in order to do the physical labor they were doing. As the Muslims have gotten different jobs with better working conditions, they have been able to follow the fasting guidelines more strictly. The Yemeni Association Hall is a place where the community can gather to celebrate the fasting in the evening and at the end of the fast. The lack of a place to gather and celebrate was a problem that the Somalian women pointed out in the Mankato community. Unfortunately the Yemeni community has not yet been able to establish

³⁶ *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 423-444.

³⁷ See Friedlander, 433-434 about the struggle they fought after a Yemeni man was murdered in the area.

³⁸ Friedlander, 433-434.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 435-437.

classes to teach Arabic and Islamic education. For now, these areas are still taught by individuals in the home.⁴⁰

The move to the United States delayed the Hajj for many Yemeni people. Some could not go because of the expense, and others were required to attend work meetings in Delano during the time the Hajj is supposed to occur.⁴¹ With their changes in jobs and higher leadership positions they have attained, they are more able to complete the Hajj. In Yemen, the Muslims were able to give their Zakāt to help fund educational and religious institutions but in America, they have spent more of the money on helping new families.⁴² Friedlander explains, "The potential for strengthening the social network of disparate Yemeni families and individuals exists in the environment of the Yemeni Association hall, which affords Yemenis a place to assemble and practice Islam as a congregation."⁴³

Although the experience the Somali community in Mankato is having is unique to them, there are some similarities with other Muslim communities that have settled in America. The advances the Yemenis have made as a community hold out hope for the Mankato community, that if they take similar actions, they may also become more unified and able to provide a community for their children to be raised Muslim.

Accommodations for the Mankato Community

In order for the Mankato community to make space for the practices and beliefs of the Somali Muslim women, both Mankato and the Muslim community must make

⁴⁰ Ibid., 437, 442.

⁴¹ Ibid., 438.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. 441-442.

accommodations. The Council on American-Islamic Relations has created *An Employer's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices*, "designed to assist employers in formulating and implementing policies that will help create a culturally-sensitive workplace environment. It will also serve as a guide to religiously-mandated practices of Muslim employees."⁴⁴

The first area the booklet addresses is the requirement of cleanliness and prayer. The worker should be able to wash in a restroom sink. No adjustments are needed in order to provide a Muslim with an adequate place to wash. Two of the Somali women interviewed were not allowed to wash at their workplace. A Muslim simply requires a quiet, dry, and clean place to pray. It need not be a separate room, but it cannot be a bathroom. It should be a place where others do not walk in front of the person who is praying. During prayer time, the Muslim should not be required to respond to phone calls or conversations unless there is an emergency. If an emergency occurs, a Muslim will stop praying and respond. The time required for the washing and the prayer is about fifteen minutes, which suggests that employees should be able to pray during breaks or meals. Muslims should be able to schedule their breaks in order to have them fit a prayer time required in Islam. For instance, retail employees usually work from ten o'clock in the morning until six o'clock in the evening. Therefore, the Muslim employee would need to pray at noon, afternoon and sometimes the sunset prayer at work. The Friday congregational prayer lasts for about forty-five to ninety minutes. This is when the Muslim community gathers at a mosque for a noontime prayer and sermon. This can fit

⁴⁴ The American-Muslim Research Center, *An Employer's Guide to Islamic Practices* (Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 1997), 1-10.

into a Muslim's schedule with a slight shift in the lunch break. Extra time missed at work can be made up at the end of the day.

The month of fasting that Muslims participate in does not require that a Muslim stop working. The employer must know that although Muslim employees will not eat at lunchtime, they will need to eat after sundown. The time of a lunch break might need to be adjusted. If a job requires traveling, the Muslim is exempt from the requirement of fasting. Muslim employees may choose to use their vacation days in order to complete the Hajj.

There are also a few misunderstandings about Islam that the booklet covers. Muslims may not be willing to shake the hand of a person of the opposite sex whom they are not related to. This is a matter of modesty, not to be taken as an insult. When approached by unrelated members of the opposite sex, Muslim men and women may avoid eye contact, looking at the ground. This is not a sign that the person does not want to communicate, but instead a teaching in the Qur'an. Muslims will avoid attending social functions where alcohol is served. An employer should not require them to attend any alcohol related social events or to serve any alcohol since this is a teaching in the Qur'an that Muslims are required to follow. After non-Muslims learn about the Muslim religion, both communities will better understand each other.⁴⁵

Accommodations for Somali Community

Besides the accommodations that the non-Muslim Mankato community needs to make, the Somali community must also make accommodations. All the women interviewed emphasized that the Muslim community needs to unite for many reasons.

The community could help remind each other of prayers and have a community to pray with to solve the problem of forgetting prayers. If more Muslims surrounded the children, there would be less pressure for them to change to be like non-Muslims. Older students could tutor younger students if they were having trouble, and adults could tutor other adults in language and job skills.

Muslims could communicate about which companies are most willing to accommodate Muslim religious practices, and the community could band together to fight against injustices done to them because of their religion. The community could support each other emotionally, financially, and spiritually. They could encourage each other in their religious practices and help each other to grow spiritually. Muslim community educational groups could be set up to encourage continuing education of the Qur'an. This would also encourage the parents to continue to teach their children. Lul explained in her interview that her family used to slaughter a goat in Somalia during Ramadan and give the meat to the poor. Since that is not very easily done in America, she was worried about how she would complete the sacrifice. Because she communicated her concern with a few other families, she was able to unite with seven families to purchase a cow to slaughter. This example demonstrates the possibilities the Somalian community could have if they would unite and communicate.

If the Somalian community becomes united, they may be able to use their Zakāt money to buy or build a center for Somalis or a mosque. In Delano, California, unification helped the Yemenis go forward with the Yemeni Associate Hall project. A space for the Somali community to gather could also be used for Qur'anic schooling, as well as a place to go for information pertaining to English as a Second Language classes,

⁴⁵ Ibid. 1-10.

educational classes for refugees in America, and other educational and social events that would help unite the community. Celebrations and prayers could be held in this space.

The building could also offer classes for the general public to learn about Somalian culture, food, language, and Islam. Classes could be offered in this space for employers and how to make space in their businesses for Muslim practices. Computers could be put in the building to give access to those families that cannot afford them in their home. This would give them access to information about the Qur'an on the Internet and also allow them to read Somali and Muslim newsletters and newspapers. This would help both children and adults continue learning about their homeland and the Qur'an.

The Somalian Women's Association (SWA) in Minneapolis has many services that help to unite the Somali community. The SWA offers services that include immigration assistance and advocacy, computer skills, help with employment, advice on issues of health, counseling services, and assistance with finding an apartment. Along with these services, the SWA also give the Somali community space to celebrate their religion and culture. They are planning to open a child-care center run by Somali women to ensure that their children are being influenced in positive ways with Muslim values. This would help children to not be influenced by non-Muslims and the negative aspects of American culture such as drugs, gangs, and alcohol.⁴⁶

The Somali community in Mankato should view these ideas carefully in order to follow an example of programs already working to make the adjustment of coming to America easier for Somali Muslim women and their families. This, in turn, would enable

⁴⁶ Jen Thaney. *Tools to Survive* (St. Paul: "The Minnesota Women's Press", Vol. 14, No. 23, February 3-16, 1999), 1, 19.

the women to raise their children in a positive and encouraging Muslim way, as well as being able to foster their own Muslim beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

After looking at Islamic practices and the educational, employment, cultural, and family background of Somali Muslim women, one can view the changes in the religious practices that Somali Muslim women have undergone since coming to the United States. These changes have had a strong impact on the way the Somali women feel about their new home. During the interviews the women expressed fear and disappointment of how their practices have changed and expressed wishes to improve their situation in Mankato. They made suggestions of ways both the Somali and non-Muslim communities can accommodate the new Muslims in their city. Their hope is that space can be made in their lives and the Mankato community for them to participate in their Muslim practices.

From comparing the Somali Muslim community in Mankato to the Yemen Muslim community in Delano, California, possible outcomes are exhibited if the Somali and Mankato community makes the same type of decisions and efforts as the Delano community did. This community can also be viewed in a way that allows the Muslims to see what has and has not worked in Delano. There are some other religious minority immigrant groups that could be examined in future research. These can help to envision a plan by which to work with the community.

By looking at the Somalian Women's Association in Minneapolis and the guide to Islamic practices created for employers, the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of

Mankato can get ideas of possible accommodations they can make in order to create space for the Islamic practices of their new neighbors—the Somalis. By looking at programs like these, they can implement programs that have worked for other communities with similar experiences.

Most importantly, the Mankato community, Muslims and non-Muslims, need to work together in this process. After viewing the Somali Muslim women's practices in Mankato and listening to what they had to say, we can see that there are two distinct areas that need to work on the situation. The Muslim community needs to make accommodations that include uniting and working together to raise their children with the Qur'anic knowledge that Islam deems as important. They must also make adjustments that allow them to live in a society in which they are a religious minority.

Accommodations also need to be made by the non-Muslim community also. These include educational institutions and places of employment as well as everyday interactions with Somali people. Although many people might be reluctant or not interested in the Somali community, efforts need to be made by as many people as possible to live in a way that allows both communities to have space for their religious practices as well as their own culture. But to think that the practices and culture will not change is unrealistic. Because the Somali Muslims and other people of Mankato are living in the same community, it is inevitable that the two communities will affect each other and changes will occur within each culture due to their experiences with the other. The women interviewed did not say that they wanted to create their own space, in which only the Muslims would live and interact. Instead in all of my experiences with the Somali community, I have repeatedly heard the thought, "I just want to be part of the

Mankato community.” Often my Somali friends have expressed their desire to be friends with all different types of people- not just other Muslims. Although the women find it extremely important to continue their religious practices and culture, they do want to interact with the larger community and become part of it. In my interactions with community action groups in Mankato, non-Muslims have expressed their desire to get to know their new neighbors and learn from their new friends. Through these relationships and partnerships, both communities will learn how to better accommodate and appreciate the differences and similarities between the two groups.

Although the accommodations needed to make space for the religious practices of Muslims directly benefit the religion of the Somalis, it also will affect the non-Muslim community. If employers make some accommodations for their Somali workers, their workers will be more pleased with their employers and therefore do a better job at their work. If Muslim children are taught more about why their family is Muslim and why they do the practices that they do, they may take more pride in their religion and background. They also may be more likely to withstand the pressures of the non-Muslim students and be more willing to interact and teach the other kids about their culture.

With the numbers of Somali refugees in the United States and especially Mankato rising everyday, it will become only more common for non-Muslims to work with, go to school with, and be neighbors to the Somali Muslim community. Because of this, it is important for non-Muslims to understand the religious practices and beliefs of the Muslims. Through this, we can make space for their religious practices as well as expand our knowledge and appreciation for this new community. Accommodations need to come from both communities in order for this to occur. These changes require effort but

are not impossible for the Mankato community to succeed at. If both communities continue to dialogue and explain their needs, both communities will benefit.

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