GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

MODIFIED MUSLIMS: UNDERSTANDING SOMALIS IN ST. PETER

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1. INTRODUCTION

"To Somalis, whoever and wherever they are."[1]

For some Somalis, "wherever" is St. Peter, Minnesota, and the rural Minnesota town has become part of their courageous tale.

This story tests America's reputation as a place of refuge. Somalis qualify as minorities several times over—in terms of race, creed, and circumstance. These black African Muslim refugees contrast startlingly next to white Christian, sheltered, St. Peter citizens. Settling amid such dissimilarity poses more challenges for Somali refugees who have already seen years of trial.

Jamila Said[2] and her seven children have lived in St. Peter for about six years, making them the first, as well as longest-standing, Somali residents in town. Retracing her path from Somalia to St. Peter, Jamila often pauses to repeat a single phrase: "I don't like to remember."

The Said family's story begins in the East African land of Somalia. Jamila's children were born into a Muslim identity integrating religion into culture. This story continues with the Somali civil war beginning in 1991. Jamila asserts that there was no choice but to leave her country. Families fled to camps in Kenya, not knowing if they'd ever return. Jamila remembers the illness and separation that plagued the sanctuary of the camps with tears in her eyes. Children died of disease as a result of poor sanitation

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[1] From the dedication page of Somali refugee Nuruddin Farah's memoir recounting her experiences of global displacement in *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (London: Cassell Publishing, 2000).

[2] All references of Jamila Said of St. Peter, MN, were collected from interviews by author, 15 April 2005 and 23 April 2005, St. Peter.

and poverty; Jamila lost a baby. And like many other women, she received word of her fallen husband.

At this point, refugees began to disperse to Europe, North America, and Northern Africa. Minnesota offered its refugee services and many Somalis agreed to the invitation, and in 1999 Jamila eventually chose to plant roots in St. Peter.

Africa as a continent is said to "produce more refugees than healthy babies"[3]; it is crucial to pause and emphasize the solemnity of the situation. The story of these Somali refugees cannot be over-dramatized. One Somali emphasizes the effects of being globally displaced, which run psychologically deep:

> I think that their [Somali refugees] attitude is the self-justification of the doomed. Hence a special recovery package of self-esteem, a self-regeneration that had better concentrate on those who were too young when they left the home country, whose memory was not directly affected by what took place there. We're working on that, and are optimistic that we'll get there.[4]

Immigrants complain of being seen as "refugees first, black Africans second and Somalis last."[5] The lack of local racial and religious diversity as well as a general lack of awareness for the history of Somali refugees aggravates this generalization.

Furthermore, the challenges that arise for Somalis as Muslim minorities in America introduces a particularly pressing concern:

> The issue is not simply that of being a minority in a country whose inhabitants are primarily members of another faith; Muslims in many areas of the world experience that status. America presents a unique situation insofar as it is publicly committed to the separation of religion and state yet guaranteed the right to worship to members of all religious groups and sects within its borders.[6]

Accustomed to practicing Islam in a culture promoting Islam, Somalis in St. Peter instead find Christianity the prevailing public religious influence. Though America boasts of a

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[3] Ibid., 191.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 190.
[6] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 18.

policy of separating religion and government, American social norms clearly correspond with general Christian doctrine.

However, the Islamic diaspora reaches to almost every region of the world, where Muslims have adapted their lives to non-Islamic governments:

> Islam is a complete way of life embracing beliefs and devotional practiced within a larger context of regulated social relations, economic responsibilities and privileges, political ideals, and community loyalties. Muslims inhabit at least two cultural spheres, the one they were born into and nurtured by and the one acquired as Islamic identity.[7]

When Somalis move to St. Peter they embrace the rural Minnesotan cultural sphere. Their new challenge becomes to balance this sphere with their Islamic identity.

Somalis come from a "very close-knit society in terms of religion and daily life," explains Hamid Yunus,[8] a Muslim community leader in Mankato, Minnesota. Yunus stresses that for Somalis, Islam "is inseparable from culture." When cultural context changes, Muslims inevitably reflect that change in their religious practices.

As a consequence of living in rural St. Peter, Minnesota, Somalis practice an increasingly American form of Islam. The Somali Muslim family unit (the traditional place of learned religious, moral and cultural values), experiences modifications through daily life specifically effecting gender roles and inter-generational relationships. Further, St. Peter's isolation from larger Somali communities combined with a lack of local consideration contribute to the vulnerability of St. Peter Somali Muslim practices.

Through examinations of interviews and anecdotal observation, this paper shows the experiences of local Somalis as they attempt to balance the world of St. Peter with the world of Islam, showing that rural, homogenous St. Peter culture more profoundly alters

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[7] Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community*, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1987), 6.

[8] Hamid Yunus, director of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) of Minnesota State University-Mankato and a leader at Dar Abi Bakr Muslim Center, interview by author, 2 March 2005, Mankato, MN.

Somali lifestyles than urban, diverse communities. This paper also suggests that a general local lack of knowledge about Somalis and Islam affects the assimilation of these refugees, advocating for an active pursuit of consciousness of our Somali neighbors. Understanding the religious challenges faced by the local Somalis can lead to this deeper awareness of our new neighbors.

Goals of the Study

Primarily, this paper maintains that Somali life in St. Peter adjusts more radically than life in larger Somali communities based on the hypothesis that isolated Somalis are more likely to stray from their customary familial roles as outlined by Muslim doctrine. In demonstrating this thesis, I will first explore the Islamic history of Somalis. Then I will explain the specific realities of the Somali story in St. Peter, assessing how this town's culture prompts changes in Muslim life. Next, I will argue that a local general lack of awareness contributes to the departure of local Somalis. Finally, I will suggest that education familiarizing host communities such as St. Peter with Somali culture is as integral to the process of immigrant assimilation as education familiarizing Somalis with America.

Secondarily, this paper chronicles my efforts to become aware of my Somali neighbors. It represents one citizen's exercise of actively seeking a holistic understanding of her community's diversity, and will hopefully serve as a motivating model to promote further consciousness of this issue.

Existing Relevant Research

Nonprofit organizations have recently directed research towards bringing awareness to Minnesota's four main current immigrant groups (Hispanic, Hmong, Russian, and Somali). However, the scientific data available is limited to the Metro Area; only several university papers offer any glimpse of immigrants in rural areas. Rural Somali refugee study has attracted even less attention.

The Wilder Foundation, a nonprofit health and human services organization based in St. Paul, published a scientific survey of immigrants, titled "Speaking for Themselves: A Survey of Hispanic, Hmong, Russian, and Somali Immigrants in Minneapolis-Saint Paul," which claims that studies of this type are "rare for logistical reasons," pertaining to the "feasibility of random sampling of immigrants in a large urban area, and of large-scale interviewing in multiple languages."[9] Another analytical report, prepared by The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, embarked on the "Somali Community Needs Assessment Project."[10] Both of these undertakings focused on the Twin Cities urban Somali community, and however valuable they may be in obtaining particular cultural statistics not available elsewhere, they do not address the specificities of immigrant life in rural Minnesota. In *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis tackle three regions of the country, one being the Midwest. Focusing on trends of Muslims across

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[9] Paul Mattessich, *Speaking for Themselves: A Survey of Hispanic, Hmong, Russian, and Somali Immigrants in Minneapolis-Saint Paul* (St. Paul: Wilder Research Center, 2000), 18.

[10] Mia U. Robillos, *Somali Community Needs Assessment Project* (Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 2001).

America until 1987 (and therefore not including Somali immigrants), the study offers an extensive and interesting methodological explication about Islam in America.[11]

Non-scientific analytical studies expressly pertaining to rural communities exist in a few cases of student research. "Somali Immigrant Settlement in Small Minnesota and Wisconsin Communities" traces the course of Somalis from Africa to the rural Midwest, suggesting variables that may cause Somalis to settle in rural verses urban communities.[12] "Building Community Among Immigrant Populations in Rural Minnesota" suggests ways to create and manage immigrant communities, as well as to build awareness of the presence of immigrants.[13] Finally, Diane Lynne Heitritter emphasizes the relevance of studying the Somali family through her dissertation for the University of Minnesota, titled "Meanings of family strength voiced by Somali immigrants: reaching an inductive understanding."[14]

Though this issue is beginning to attract more attention, a need for more knowledge about refugees residing in rural Minnesota exists.

Method

Certain characteristics of this study and the St. Peter Somali community made it difficult to research as thoroughly as intended, including:

1. Transient tendencies of local Somalis, dissolving any chances of an exact population statistic, and therefore an accurate analysis of the scope of the issue;

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[11] Haddad.

[12] Jessica Schaid and Zoltan Grossman, *Somali Settlement in Small Minnesota and Wisconsin Communities* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: University of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2004).

[13] Gail Marie Miller, *Building Community Among Immigrant Populations in Rural Minnesota* (St. Paul: College of St. Catherine, 2003), 4.

[14] Diane Heitritter, *Meanings of family strength voiced by Somali immigrants: reaching an inductive understanding*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1999).

2. Evidence of a recent dramatic reduction of Somalis in St. Peter, resulting in a smaller pool from which to draw information; and

3. Lack of time to seek out majority of existing Somali population in order to prepare controlled, statistical data.

This paper uses existing statistical data about Twin Cities Somali immigrants combined with local information gathered through interviews, observation, and other investigation to determine the particular effects of St. Peter on local Somali residents. Scientific surveys such as those undertaken by the Wilder Research Foundation and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs assist in formulating questions relevant to Minnesota Somali immigrants in general and then serve as a basis for comparing information collected about local Somalis.

In order to attain access to the Somali community, I needed to identify a series of cultural brokers who were either part of the community or were trusted friends. This portion of the project proved most complicated. My first step involved speaking with a prominent man from the Mankato Muslim Center, Hamid Yunus, mostly Pakistani in ancestry. Though not a Somali himself, Yunus knowledgably introduced me to local Muslim behaviors, and specifically, his observations of local Somali Muslims. However, he was not able to direct me towards a Somali living in St. Peter.

I considered making my own independent contacts through participation in the St. Peter Community Center's Adult Basic Education's (ABE) English as a Second Language (ESL) tutoring program. Although this initiative has led to interaction and friendship with local Somalis, I decided that interrogating my new friends about their

faith under the auspices of an English lesson made me uncomfortable. All references to my tutoring experiences are therefore anecdotal.

Finally, through a chain of references and an eventual introduction, I met Jamila Said, the first and longest St. Peter-residing American-Somali. Her seven years in the area contributed to both her comfortable demeanor and her impressive mastery of the English language. Jamila's perspective of St. Peter's influence on the changes in her family, as well as her knowledge of other families' experience in town provides a conclusion for the final chapter of the Somali immigrant's story.

For most Somali immigrants living in St. Peter, Minnesota, life in the Midwest comprises just one more chapter in the chronicles of their turbulent lives. Will this new chapter be another of trial and persecution, or will the conclusion finally present itself in the form of refuge and autonomy?

2. SOMALIS AND ISLAM

Many Americans harbor a negative connotation surrounding the religion of Islam. In American society, Islam has been associated with the destruction of American lives and property occurring on September 11, 2001, the ongoing involvement of American soldiers in the conflict of a predominantly Muslim Iraq, and the Palestinian suicide bombings directed towards American-aligned Israel. Many more Americans lack a working knowledge of the history and cultures of Muslim communities, let alone are familiar with the nuts and bolts of Islamic doctrine and beliefs.

Ironically, an integral connection between culture and religion emerges as one of Islam's most emphasized principles, making it impossible to understand Muslims without understanding Islam. Therefore, the first step towards eradicating my ignorance of St. Peter Somalis obviously required clarifying my knowledge about Islam.

Somali History and Religion

Clearly, the Prophet Muhammad's Arabian ancestry and Somalia's proximity to Arabia provides a logistical starting point for Somalia's conversion. However, the reasons for Muslim migration from Arab lands to Eastern Africa add complexity, as

> The early Muslim migrants to Somalia...were initially motivated by the desire to bridge Islam overseas; but since the economic and climatic conditions of the migrant's homeland were poor and harsh, they were also motivated by the desire to strike it rich in a land of opportunity. Furthermore, the emergence of Islam itself in Mecca, and the establishment of the Islamic state in Medina, generated tremendous tension between the followers of Islam and the pagan Arabs. Hence, newly converted Muslims victimized by severe persecution were advised by the Prophet Muhammad to migrate.[15]

[15] Mohammed Haji Mukhtar, "Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction," Ed. Ali Jimale Ahmed, *The Invention of Somalia* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 4.

Interestingly, Muhammad, the prophet of Islam who received the recitation of the Qur'an, was directly involved with the emigration of first generation Arab Muslims to the eastern horn of Africa:

> As persecution of Muhammad and his followers became severe, Muhammad sent a number of Muslims across the Red Sea to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. Muhammad and some of his followers enjoyed the protection of powerful clansmen in Mecca, but other followers did not have such security.[16]

In effect, East Africa was a place of refuge for the first Muslims, who were immediately received well, as the "religious refugees" were given "hospitality and protection."[17]

Somalis practice Sunni Islam, named after the sacred Sunna, which chronicles the "custom of the Prophet Muhammad, that is, his words, habits, acts, and gestures as remembered by the Muslims."[18] More liberal than Shi'ite Islam, which looks to descendent members of the Prophet's family for authoritative leadership, Sunni Islam promotes a philosophy of communal leadership. The vast majority of East African Sunnis are Shafi'i Sunnis. Named after the legal scholar Muhammad al-Shafi'i, this school considers the use of consensus and analogical reasoning as legitimate methods to interpret Islamic law, after the authority, of course, of the Qur'an and the Sunna. Shafi'i advocated for an "intermediate position between rigid traditionalism and too free rational interpretation of the law."[19]

Specific idiosyncrasies in Muslim practices and beliefs have demonstrated to be both uniting and separating factors. Somalis collectively practice Shafi'i Sunni Islam and play "a unique role in the history of Islamic Africa: As the only country in the whole

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[16] Denny, 27.
[17] Ibid., 28.
[18] Ibid., 133.
[19] Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 32.

continent whose population is virtually all Muslim,"[20] Also, "there is a strong belief that Somalia's ancestors descended from the household of the prophet Muhammad, so that all Somalis belong to the Hashemite stock of the Qurayshi clan. Again, this would seem to be another factor bound to boost Somalia's sense of common nationhood."[21] Somalis take this idea one step further, however, because, "unlike the rest of Sunni Muslims, they regard the household of the Prophet Muhammad with special honor, particularly the fourth Caliph 'Ali and his wife Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet."[22] (This preoccupation with the Prophet's descendents suggests a direct contradiction with Sunni philosophy.)

Upon closer examination, motivation for this contradicting notion becomes clear. Somalia's logistically convenient nature caused Arabs to bring Islam to Africa, but Africa will always remain a mere conquest of Arab Muslims, not the land that gave birth to the religion. The fact that the Prophet Muhammad was Arab and the Qur'an is in Arabic gives immediate status to Arabs in the Muslim world. Thus, Somalis "felt the need for the prestige that comes from an identification with Arab ancestry. They absorbed individual Arabs who provided them with new tribal lineages whose names were adopted as the tribal eponyms."[23] This concern over ancestry has proved divisive, causing a rift between the northern nomadic peoples and the southern stationary peoples.

Particularly, Somalis from the north felt inadequate. An assessment of the geographical and economical shortcomings of the northern region include:

> 1. The region's closeness to the enemy territory (Arabia), which forced dissidents to migrate further south;
> 2. The region's lack of urban centers to accommodate the newcomers;

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[20] Mukhtar, 1.
[21] Ibid., 2.
[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Ibid., 15-16.

> 3. The region's lack of natural harbors, and the hazards related to sailing on its coast; and
> 4. The region's lack of a viable income.[24]

These unattractive qualities resulted in an influx of Arabic migrants to the southern urban areas and a tendency for northern peoples to emphasize any Arabic ancestry, myth or reality, in order to enhance the reputation of their clans.

Dialogue regarding the nature of Somali clans, affiliated with Islamic history, has produced two ways to approach the issue. First, some scholars liken a clan to a "social club ... Implicit in this view is the notion that clan represents a primordial identity, or, as Edward Said would put it, 'the first intelligibility' of a group. Clan, in this school of thought, is depicted as if it were static."[25] Proponents of the second approach instead argue that a clan is a "dialectical nature of reality in which the social/political relations which nurture the kin corporate system are continually challenged by new realities."[26] Clan organization has proved influential in Somalia's history. Even though "Somalia gained independence in 1960, unifying the formerly Italian south and the formerly British north (or British Somaliland),"[27] this sovereignty failed to override fierce clan alliances.

> Despite its ethnic and religious homogeneity, Somali has a history of disagreements among its six major clan families. In Somalia, with an arid environment and limited natural resources, people have long been forced to depend on their clan for survival. This situation of dependency created strong clan ties which later developed into political allegiances along clan lines...[28]

Civil war officially erupted in 1991, when rebel forces overthrew government leader Siad Barre, affiliated with a southern clan, after he repeatedly favored his own clan members in government. After the coup,

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[24] Ibid., 20.
[25] Ali Jimale Ahmed, "Preface," *The Invention of Somalia,* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995) xi-xii.
[26] Ibid., xii.
[27] Schaid, 8.
[28] Ibid.

> Anarchy overtook Somali in 1991-92. More than 300,000 Somalis were killed in the war, or from the famine that resulted from militia confiscation and blockage of food. U.S. forces intervened in 1992 as a part of a U.N. peacekeeping force, but soon took sides in the clan car by hunting the most powerful Mogadishu militia leader, Mohamed Farah Aidid. After losing 18 troops in a 1993 Mogadishu battle with Aidid's forces (popularized in the movie *Black Hawk Down*), the U.S. forces withdrew. Refugee camps in Kenya became flooded with Somali refugees fleeing the violence and famine.[29]

The pilgrimage to St. Peter involved a stop in a refugee camp for both sides of the conflict.

One young woman's account of fleeing her home at a moment's notice calls attention to the urgency of danger experienced in the war-torn country:

> "We just escaped," she said ... at Mombasa's Utange refugee camp, "leaving our beds unmade, the chairs in our dining rooms upturned, our kitchens unswept, our dishes in the sinks, our future undone. We ran as fast as we could, not bothering where we might end up, in the country and among the displaced, or out of it and among the stateless refugees fleeing. We fled, locking up our family house as though we were going away for a weekend trip in to the country. Afraid of what might occur to us if we stayed on, we didn't question the wisdom of our decision to leave." [30]

The emergency situation eventually got the attention of America around 1995. By the time it became seriously involved in the refugee process, most urban Somalis who wished to leave had already done so, and rural nomadic Somali communities were beginning to take advantage of refugee programs. This factor contributes to Minnesota's current challenge in determining accurate population statistics.[31]

It was only after the refugees dispersed to far corners of the world that they were able to find physical security. In the new reality of American life, clan affiliation no longer constitutes reason for conflict. In fact, Minnesotan Somalis agree that local Somalis aligned with northern or southern clans show no animosity towards each other.[32]

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[29] Ibid., 9.
[30] Farah, 2.
[31] Yunus.
[32] According to Jamila Said and Amal Dennis.

Islam, Culture, and Shari'a

A group of women are gathered in a classroom at a midwestern community center for an English as a Second Language (ESL) session. When two older Somali women abruptly walk out of the room in the middle of the lesson, the instructor doesn't even blink. The women have gone to pray, and for them, the observance of ritual prayer has priority above any lesson that might be missed. Though a much younger Somali woman does not leave to pray, she shrinks away from a bingo card that has been laid down in front of her filled with English words that are to be matched with pictures held up by the instructor. She views the activity as a type of gambling, forbidden in Islam. This scenario exemplifies the constant effort necessary for Somalis to live as both members of an American community while simultaneously staying connected to their Muslim faith.

The elder Somali woman was conducting Salat, a ceremonial worship ritual that is a required part of Muslim life. The Five Pillars of Islam represent the Muslim compulsory rituals, beginning with Shahada, the confession of faith. Next is the Salat, which ritualizes worship inspired by the Shahada. These ceremonious prayers traditionally take place five times a day, staggered from dawn to dusk. The next pillar, know as the Zakat, requires that all Muslims pay a tax that will be collected and distributed to needy community members. As the fourth pillar, the Sawm mandates fasting during the holy month of Ramadan from dawn to dusk. Finally, the Hajj commands a pilgrimage to Mecca, the city where Islam surfaced. The obligation to fast can be compromised to accommodate pregnant women, children, the elderly, and the seriously ill, and the Hajj is only required for Muslims who have the financial means to

travel to Mecca. The Five Pillars of Islam undoubtedly begin to provide structure for daily life.

For Muslims, separation of religion and culture proves philosophically illogical. Defined literally, Islam means submission to God. When interpreted, this implies that all human actions should be made with God and God's will in mind, "combin[ing] faith and action in everything they do," and, "as a result, Muslims find it hard to accept the distinction that Western cultures make between a person's religious life and the rest of their life," and Muslims believe that "not only individuals, but also the institutions of society should serve Allah."[33]

Though theoretically life might be easier for Muslims in predominantly Islamic societies, where religious plurality would not challenge Islamic principles, many Muslims find themselves living in secularized countries. Some long-standing Muslim communities, such as Turkish Muslims, chose secularization. In comparison, Iraq's recent democratization could be considered a forced change. Other Muslims migrated to or were converted to Islam in North America and Europe. Here their minority status faces the Western world's so-called secularism, which in reality exists as a sort of patriotic Christianity that manifests its dogma in most societal spheres.

Wherever the location, Islam provides all Muslims with a type of law spelling out proper action that can usually be practiced without legally interfering with other governmental legislation:

> Muslims constitute a great variety of cultures, all of which conform in one way or other to the ideals and practical requirements of the Shari'a, especially its two most authoritative sources, the Qur'an and the Sunna. There is an Islamic culture that transcends local cultures. In the process, local cultural influences, which always exist,

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[33] "Islam: Introduction," *Religion and Ethics*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/, (4 April 2005), 2.

> contribute greatly toward making the Umma [the worldwide community of Muslims] the richly diverse yet spiritually unified community that it is.[34]

This spiritual unity manifests itself wherever Muslims are found; now that St. Peter has become part of the Somali diaspora, Somalis attempt to balance its foreign culture with the constant presence of Islamic spiritualism.

Somali Muslims have the universal sustaining tool of Shari'a to guide daily living:

> As for Islam, ... it has established its social system on a firm basis which ensures communal and societal cohesion and elevation. And it secured for the man and woman true happiness which befits the dignity and honour of humankind...[35]

The "clear and straight path," Shari'a law derives from the Qu'ran, the Hadith (the chronicles of the Prophet Mohammad's life used as an inspired model), and interpretations of law by scholars. True Shari'a practice completely depends on motivation, because it is impossible to hide false intentions from God.[36]

Shari'a law describes a way of life that is supposed to promote "compassion, kindness, generosity, justice, fair play, tolerance, and care in general ... all the rules of Shari'a are towards those ends."[37] The law includes penalties for thieves, adulterers, and murderers; instructions for marriage and divorce; and information about food and clothing. Some of these laws are considered by non-Muslims as "archaic," and some of the Western world associates Shari'a with subjugation, especially in regards to seemingly brutal punishments for crimes, like stoning a woman to death for presumed fornication. The literal context of this punishment within a community seeking to promote justice,

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[34] Denny, 16-17.

[35] Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, *The Social System of Islam* (London, Al-Khilafah Publications, 1990), 78.

[36] "The Sharia: An Introduction," *Religion and Ethics*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/, (4 April 2005), 1.

[37] Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood, "Sharia: A Practical Guide," *Religion and Ethics*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/, (4 April 2005).

tolerance, and fair play illustrates the law's objective, as the following example involving a thief illustrates:

> [These are] the usual criticisms of Shari'a—that it is so cruel in regards to execution, flogging and cutting off hands, [and] totally ignoring all the extenuating circumstances that would lead to these penalties not being applied ... Their [Muslims] point is that cutting off the hand for theft is a very powerful deterrent—Muslims care less for the callous and continual thief than they do for the poor souls who are mugged and robbed and hurt by the thieves. The Middle East is certainly not full of one-handed people ... What we have lost here is the horror of dishonour that true Muslims still have. They would do anything rather than offend Allah ... In Shari'a law, if a thief could prove that he/she only stole because of need, then the Muslim society would be at fault and made to supply that need, and there would be no hand-cutting. [38]

The idea of striving to maintain honor, as described above, can be both a deterrent for a Muslims to commit a crime as well as a motivator for Muslims to keep others from committing crimes.

I experienced the effects of this particular aspect of Shari'a while studying in South Africa during the fall of 2004. I spent most of my time in downtown Durban, the second largest city in South Africa, and a picturesque example of Nelson Mandela's "Rainbow Nation." Not only does the city cater to black Africans and Dutch and British Europeans, but it also hosts a large population of Indians, Malays, and Pakistanis, some of who are Muslim. Needless to say, walking through the markets is an amazing experiment in diversity.

However, despite the diversity in the marketplace, there was less diversity in the daily crowd of homeless people pleading for food and money at the bus stop or in the alleyways, as no Indian or Malay ever approached me in this way. Some black African friends explained that the Muslims tended to "take care of their own." In fact, I was told that if an Indian sees a poor Indian begging on the side of the road, the first man will likely pull over and take the poor man home, even if the two were not acquainted. This

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[38] Maqsood.

situation shows that it is a disgrace not only for a Muslim to beg or steal, but it is also disgraceful for Muslims to ignore a needy person who may eventually be compelled to steal for survival. So just as some Westerners might condemn Shari'a as cruel, Muslims could argue that the philosophy is actually extremely social-justice oriented.

Certainly, different ways of interpreting Shari'a would influence the exact way it exists for a Muslim community. Adherence to a specific Islamic school of interpretation determines the flexible and negotiable aspects of Shari'a for different Muslims. As mentioned before, Somalis are Sunni Muslims who adhere to the Shafi'i school, who believe that all educated Muslims are equally competent at reading and interpreting the Hadith. In comparison, Shi'ites believe that the interpretations of the Prophet Mohammad's descendents should be considered most accurate.[39] Specifically, the Shafi'i school "attempts to combine tradition and the consensus of the Muslim community (rather than the consensus of individual scholars) and results in a broad recourse to reasoning by analogy."[40] Other Sunni schools include Hanafite ("broad-minded without being lax … appeals to reason [and] personal judgment"), considered a more liberal school, and Hanbalite ("marked by a return to a strict traditionalism"), deemed the most conservative.[41]

Somalis, as Sunni Shafi'i Muslims, live by a Shari'a that is a combination of tradition and interpretative consensus. Somali refugees in Minnesota face the challenge of upholding traditions that appear unfamiliar to Midwesterners. These Somalis also face new challenges that arise from living in a non-Islamic culture. This circumstance

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[39] "Sunni and Shia," *Religion and Ethics*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/, (4 April 2005).

[40] Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 52.

[41] Ibid., 52.

becomes even more confusing by the lack of local Somali infrastructure (in contrast to Somalia) to provide consensus for new issues.

Family Structure: Gender and Age

As mentioned by Yunus, Somalis consider the family as the most important structure in Islam. The Muslim family unit serves many purposes:

> The family's system brings the rights of the husband, wife, children, and relatives into a fine equilibrium. It nourishes unselfish behavior, generosity, and love in the framework of a well-organized family system. The peace and security offered by a stable family unit is greatly valued, and it is seen as essential for the spiritual growth of its members. A harmonious social order is created by the existence of extended families and by treasuring children.[42]

The roles that family members must fulfill in order to maintain a successful family unit are outlined by Shari'a.

Most numerous are the guidelines for the different responsibilities of men and women. Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, writing for the Hizb- ut-Tahrir (a global Sunni Islamic political party committed to re-dedicating Muslim life to Shari'a), explains that there are two types of commandments: gender-universal,

> Allah has legislated them as one, equally for the man and woman ... they are rules legislated for humans, for the man and woman without distinction because each one is a human[43]

and gender-specific. Arguing that variances in the second type of rules between genders does not result in inequality, an-Nabhani states:

> The perspective of equality or inequality is not considered because it is not the subject of study. What is noted is the fact that it is a specific solution for a specific human. And this is the nature of the disparity in the rules concerning the men and women with respect to the disparate rules that have been mentioned. In any case, they are a solution for the problem of a human, whether it is the same solution for both the man and the woman such as seeking knowledge, or it is disparate between them such as the disparity concerning the definition of the *'Awrah* [parts of the body considered shameful to

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[42] I. A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam* (Houston, TX: Darussalam Publishers, 1997), 64.

[43] an-Nabhani, 82.

> display] for men and women. This does not mean discrimination between humans or that it is a discussion about equality or inequality.[44]

Yunus explains that both women and men have power, but each must direct their power to different purposes. Simply put, women provide emotional, moral, and religiously instructive nurturing for the family, and men provide materially and monetarily for the family; both duties are indispensable. The universal commandment is to support the family and the gender-specific instructions provide guidelines for how each type of human (male or female) carry out their calling.

Luqman, the thirty-first sura (book) of the Qur'an,[45] mentions the devotion of mothers towards children, reminding children "their mothers carried them, strain upon strain, and it takes two years to wean them" (verse 31:14). If a woman has several children, the weaning process itself will consume much time, not to mention the efforts of raising the children after weaning is complete, making opportunities for employment outside of the home unlikely.

The challenge occurs when it becomes inconvenient or otherwise uncomfortable to practice these roles as illustrated by Shari'a. Al-Baqarah, the second sura of the Qur'an, instructs Muslim believers in daily responsibility. For example, verse 2:233 mandates men to devote their time and subsequent earnings to his wife and children: "But the father of the child shall bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing." An-Nabhani explains, "Allah made work, for the earning of money, an obligation (*Fard*) on the man but did not make it obligatory for the woman. … Thus, He enjoined the financial maintenance (*Nafaqah*) on the male."[46] When employed outside of the home, the father

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[44] Ibid., 87-88.

[45] All Qur'anic references are translated to English from their original Arabic by M.A.S. Abdeel Haleem (London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[46] an-Nabhani, 85.

spends far less time than the mother with the children, making him less likely to be the provider of nurturing spiritual education.

However, what if the man can no longer provide financially for his family? If circumstances lead to a father living a great distance from his family, or if a father is in a camp or a jail that does not offer a way to earn money, or if a father dies, other financial options must be considered. Often, the mother is forced to work to earn the necessary money. It's not that women aren't allowed to work; rather, they should not participate in activity that will keep them from playing their proper role as family nurturer. With an absence of a strong motherly figure, the "family system breaks down, and the kids are effected."[47]

As a result of less motherly influence during childhood as well as being educated in a non-Islamic school system, the attitudes of children present a second consideration of changing Somali family structure. The Qur'an advises children to abide by their parents' wishes and respect them and other elders for their work in raising them:

> Your Lord has commanded that you should worship none but Him, and that you be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully and, out of mercy, lower your wing in humility towards them and say, 'Lord have mercy on them, just as they cared for me when I was little.' (17:23-24)

However, when the parents can no longer play as dominant a role in the raising of their children (with fathers separated from the family and mothers are working, as is the case with many Minnesota Somali immigrant families), children spend more time absorbing non-Islamic influence in schools, the media, and non-Muslim friends. These children embody values that differ from more-traditionally raised previous generations of Somalis, and will therefore affect the traditional family structure.

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[47] Yunus.

Next, a look at life in St. Peter through the perspective of area Somali Muslims will show how the variables of gender and age are changing in their families.

3. SOMALIS IN THE ST. PETER, MN CONTEXT

Rural Minnesota influences Jamila and her family more and more every day. She proudly tells about the time she and her children went to a local restaurant for dinner. When the server took their beverage orders, Jamila asked for a seven-up. One of her children asked if she was sure about her choice, to which Jamila responded with the common Scandinavian affirmative, "Yeah, sure, you betcha." Her response induced laughter at a nearby table of elderly women, who were certainly surprised by Jamila's contextual humor, and she fondly remembers the connection she felt with those fellow St. Peter women.

The process of assimilation involves a careful balance between the urge to feel accepted and the desire to hold on to familiar and even non-negotiable traditions. The following portion details St. Peter's relationship with Somalis, examining specific factors that affect their assimilation process.

Population

The American Midwest attracts a high number of Muslims and immigrant populations. According to a series of interviews conducted in regions with higher concentrations of Muslim immigrants, "The most common reason given by Muslims in the Midwest for feeling that it is a good place for Muslims to settle is that groups of Muslims from Arab countries and their descendants are already living there."[48]

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[48] Haddad, 69.

Within the Midwest, Minnesota draws the majority of Somali newcomers. The 2000 census taken by the U.S. Census Bureau[49] reported that Minnesota hosted the largest Muslim Somali population in America with 11,164 Minnesotan Somalis completing the census, making up about 31% of the total 36,313 Somalis to be counted by the survey. Mohamed Jibrell of the Somali Community Development Corporation claims that Somalis have spread the word globally about Minnesota, "and the word has gotten out everywhere, all the way to the [refugee] camps of Kenya."[50]

Many argue that more Somalis have settled in Minnesota than the 2000 census reports; according to the Minnesota state demographer's office, estimates range from 15,000 to 35,000.[51] Nomadic tendencies, combined with the statewide dispersing of large families, contribute to the difficulty in knowing the exact Somali population, explains Yunus. Inability to complete the census due to illiteracy or lack of access to translators may also have been a deterrent, he explains.[52]

The 2000 census reported that 26 Somalis live in St. Peter, a city with a population of 12,232. Though estimations by people familiar with the area Somali community range drastically, most argue that the census failed to count the whole population. Speculating from attendance at Dar Abi Bakr, the only somewhat-local mosque and Muslim center, Yunus puts the St. Peter Somali population somewhere between 120 and 180, and Becki Smayling, an Adult Basic Education (ABE) teacher at the St. Peter Community Center, agrees with this elevated estimation.[53] Jamila

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[49] 2000 U.S. Census Data, U.S. Census Bureau.

[50] Jamin Yassin, *Daris Cusub: Hel Hoy Haboon (New Neighbors: A Place to Live)* (Minneapolis: Whittier Neighbors and the Somali Community Development Corporation, 2003), videocassette.

[51] As reported by Lawrence Schumacher, "St. Cloud's Somali population proves hard to pinpoint," *St. Cloud Times*, 17 June 2003.

[52] Yunus.

[53] Becki Smayling of St. Peter, conversation with author, 17 February 2005, St. Peter, MN.

approximates that about twelve families live in St. Peter, suggesting a total of over fifty Somali residents. All sources agree on one fact, however: the St. Peter Somali population has declined dramatically in the last two years. Despite the declination, the magnitude of the current presence of Somalis still warrants relevance to the rest of the St. Peter community. Also, a new question merits attention: Why are Somalis leaving town?

Why St. Peter?

Somalis have been arriving in Minnesota since 1990 (the vast majority came since 1995) and can be here for one of two reasons. First, they've come as refugees straight from Somalia or from refugee camps in countries adjacent to Somalia. Or, they are choosing to come here from another part of America or the world because of the attraction of the large existing community.[54] The Minnesota Council of Churches has played an integral part in bringing Somali refugees to this state. Since 1982, its refugee services has been "an ecumenical ministry welcoming persecuted people from around the world into new lives of freedom, hope, and opportunity in Minnesota." Working directly under the national resettlement agencies of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service "to provide specified services to refugees who are admitted into this country, to accomplish this resettlement work, Refugee Services relies heavily upon resources and support of area Christian Churches."[55]

According to Yunus, most Somali refugees in St. Peter are from rural Somalia and practiced a nomadic lifestyle. After the Somali civil war began in 1991, refugee services

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[54] Yunus.

[55] "Refugee Services," *Minnesota Council of Churches*, 2002, http://www.mnchurches.org/refugees/index.html, (29 March 2005).

were primarily only available or accessible to urban Somalis, and those initial refugee programs offered exile in other African countries such as Kenya and Egypt or European countries such as Italy and Great Britain.

Because Minnesota Somalis are accustomed to living in rural areas, it is not surprising that many would wish to leave the immigrant hub of the Twin Cities in search of smaller towns. This may be why Rochester, with 1,131 Somalis, ranks as the fourth city in the country (after Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Columbus, Ohio, respectively) in terms of Somali residents, while towns such as St. Cloud, Owatonna, Mankato, and Worthington also draw Somalis.[56] It is also important to note that most of these cities are located south of the Minneapolis-St. Paul area (with the notable exception of St. Cloud). The Wilder Foundation reports that among the four main immigrant groups in Minnesota, only 36% of Somalis are likely to enjoy Minnesota winters, compared with 88% of Russian immigrants.[57] Remembering that Somalis come from sub-Saharan Africa and are used to a significantly warmer climate, it is logical that the trend in migration would be southerly. The combined negative perceptions of the Twin Cities and positive perceptions of rural areas contributes to the rural migrations:

> While the push and pull factors may vary for individuals, the push factors of crime and increased job competition tend to press people to leave the larger city, while the pull factors of employment, good schools, and a safe, smaller community tend to draw people into different communities in the ethnic hinterland around a metropolitan area.[58]

Yunus figures that the further Somalis venture from an urban area, the more frequently they will move around, perhaps as often as every two years. This factor explains both the difficulty of nailing down population statistics and contributes to the reason Somalis tend not to settle permanently in St. Peter.

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[56] Robillos, 3.
[57] Mattessich, 4.
[58] Schaid, 26.

As a small rural community located south of the Twin Cities, St. Peter provides the ideal place for the Somali newcomer who is unfamiliar with large cities, attempting to escape the northern winter, and wishing to stay near enough to the metropolitan area where the largest Somali community exists.

A St. Peter Story

When I approached Jamila Said with the intent to interview her, I came prepared with questions about how she resolved issues of religion and culture. I sought concrete examples concerning differences in life between her male children and female children. I anticipated unhappy tales about life as a Muslim in a Christian-dominated society. I expected her to get angry when she spoke of her younger children's pull towards American culture. I perceived her as a grand experiment intended to produce convincing data. However, after conversing with her several times, it became clear that she would be nothing of the sort.

Above all, Jamila promotes an irrefutable impression of normalcy. As an outsider, I can observe her life and point out the differences between her Somali culture and mine. Jamila was unaccustomed to qualifying her cultural experiences in terms of the questions I had prepared. Specifically, she was confused by my insistence on assuming her life was a string of hardships. Instead, Jamila offered stories of reality about being Somali and living in St. Peter, stories detailing not only the challenges of starting over in a foreign land, but also of the joys of raising children, the comedy of intercultural interaction, and most importantly, the rewards of determined hard work and persistence.

After all, to her, she is perfectly normal, and we are unusual.

As previously mentioned, Jamila and her seven children have lived in St. Peter for about six years, making them the first, as well as longest-standing, Somali residents in town. Unlike most other Somalis following her lead, her family has been the only one to settle here permanently.

Though Jamila had tears in her eyes while recalling her experiences of war and displacement, her eyes dried up as soon as she began telling about moving to America. "I love to travel," she declared. However, traveling to this country was not exactly a vacation. When she came to this country as a refugee, Jamila was more concerned with escaping the conflict than with where she was headed. She has friends and relatives in Liverpool, England, as well as Wisconsin and Minnesota. Jamila first lived with her sister in Madison, Wisconsin. She explained that Madison was no good because there were not enough Somalis nearby. Attracted to the large Somali population in Minneapolis, she soon moved to Minnesota. However, Jamila considered the Metro area too large and dangerous to raise her children and so relocated her family to the smaller, quieter rural town of St. Peter. St. Peter proved close enough to the larger Mankato and Minneapolis Somali community yet offered a safer environment in which to raise her children.

Language, Transportation, Employment, and Housing

Upon her arrival to the area, Jamila had four dreams. Her most urgent ambition was to learn English. The language barrier proves to be one of the most frustrating initial challenges for Somali immigrants, even more so than for other immigrant groups:

> Americans are more familiar with Latin Americans than with Africans. Spanish is a more common language in the U.S. than Somali (or Arabic). This makes finding Somali translators much more difficult, and also makes some of the local American residents feel uneasy because they are not knowledgeable or familiar with the Somali language. Although some Somalis have been exposed to English in the formerly British northern region of Somaliland, or in Kenyan refugee camps, most arrive in the U.S. with little or no knowledge of the language that opens the doors to a wider range of American jobs.[59]

Unfortunately, English as a Second Language programs were not offered in town in 1999, so Jamila took a bus daily to Mankato for classes. Soon, Jamila was able to attend ESL classes at the St. Peter Community Center, relieving the stress of arranging transportation to Mankato.

These local ESL classes cater to a combination of Hispanic and Somali immigrants. Though proper attention is given to all participants, Hispanic learners enjoy the added benefit of volunteers who often speak Spanish at least fluently enough to translate basic English. In one class I observed, a young Somali student was demonstrating how to prepare a traditional Somali dish in English. At one point, she needed to use the word *salt*, but could not think of it. The class spent ten minutes playing charades in an effort to understand this simple noun. A volunteer would have aided a Spanish-speaking learner in a similar situation with a background in Spanish. Despite this obstacle, Jamila now speaks proficient English.

Becoming familiar with English means less time spent in a classroom, and less time in a classroom means more time to work. Jamila's next goal was to get a job. She first worked as a filer at the Nicollet County Social Services office for one year. Then, after becoming friends with a local college professor who volunteered as an ESL tutor, Jamila landed a job at Gustavus as a custodian. Her biggest worry was the interview, but Jamila recalls that her employer did not seem to mind that her English was not perfect.

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[59] Schaid, 7.

She enjoys her job and coworkers and claims that a few Gustavus students have befriended her.

Weary of feeling stranded or dependent on St. Peter's single unit of public transportation, Jamila fulfilled her third dream when she earned her driver's license. In Somalia, she explained, people are not required to have licenses to drive. Minnesotan Somalis unfamiliar with this American law often become burdened with large fines when they fail to produce licenses after being pulled over by police. However, the written portion of the license test must be taken in English, meaning Somalis cannot pass until they have spent considerable time learning English. Affording a vehicle presents another challenge. After Jamila devoted time to ESL classes and was able to secure a job, she had the two things needed to become independent: proficient English skills to pass a driver's license test, and enough money to buy a car. Today, Jamila owns a minivan and exercises her independence by making weekly trips to Mankato and Minneapolis and is able to maintain her connection with surrounding Somali communities.

Finally, Jamila desired to own a house. She and her seven children do not fit well in an apartment, she explained. However, as a Muslim, Jamila cannot take out a loan. In larger cities with stronger Somali communities, Somali Muslims form financial systems that bypass the Western banking element of interest. In St. Peter, where no such system exists, Jamila searched for other options. At last she found a solution through Habitat for Humanity and applied for a house through the non-profit organization, stating her inability to take out a loan as a deterrent from purchasing a house the traditional American way. Habitat for Humanity accepted her as a house recipient and students from St. Peter High School initiated the construction of her home. Jamila invested

months worth of Saturdays into helping build her own house and she and her family will move in at the end of the summer of 2005.

During this time, Jamila continued to raise her seven children. A challenge faced by Somali families living in St. Peter, single-parent families have become one source of changing family structure, and therefore Muslim identity, in the community. One survey shows that Minnesota Somalis are more likely to "be married with a spouse living elsewhere (18%),"[60] and 48% of households with children include only one adult.[61] Usually, that single adult is a woman, because the father figure was killed in war, or lost or caught up in another part of the world.[62] Thus, women find themselves at the head of the household, necessitating that their primary role change from nurturer to income earner. Consequently, children in these families become more likely to draw influence from outside the family.

Jamila attributes her achievements to her determination to stay in St. Peter. She asserts that many Somalis have lacked the resolve to create a life without the support of a large Somali community, explaining why most Somalis have chosen to move away from the town. Though St. Peter's remoteness presents more challenges than living in Minneapolis or Rochester, Jamila's determination clearly resulted in success.

Isolation and Skin Color

When asked why other Somalis seem to leave St. Peter quickly after arriving, Jamila lists a lack of jobs paying more than the minimum wage as the main factor of

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[60] Mattessich, 5.
[61] Ibid., 17.
[62] Robert Douglas, Professor of Geography at Gustavus Adolphus College, conversation with author, 15 April 2005, St. Peter, MN.

disinterest. Next, the distance of St. Peter from Mankato (the location of the closest mosque) and the Twin Cities (home to friends and relatives) is exacerbated by the obstacle of attaining a driver's license.

Also, Somalis are deterred by the general lack of diversity and specific lack of a Somali Muslim infrastructure. It is essential to understand the nature of Somalis as neighbors of African descent with a Muslim religious identity. The impact of the Somalis' entrance into a relatively homogenous St. Peter has been intensified by their dark skin color, as 95% of St. Peter chose 'white' when describing their race on the 2000 census. St. Peter's lack of ancestral diversity compared to an urban area makes the issue of skin color more significant than in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

A Somali appearance, for instance, does not seem as strange in Minneapolis, where other people of African ancestry live. In St. Peter, where the majority of the local population is of European descent, "...the greater contrast in skin color makes Somali immigrants stand out more than Hispanic immigrants, and make them more easily identified as 'foreign'."[63]

Somali women are especially noticeable, as "Somali women's Muslim dress is very different from the attire of the majority of the population. The Somali women wear bright colored dresses and head coverings, and so stand out among the rest of the population (more so than Somali men)."[64] As a result of their skin color and customary dress, Somali women appear especially conspicuous in St. Peter.

Jamila's children do not care for this town. They complain that St. Peter is too small, that there is nothing to do here, and that the students in the St. Peter School District

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[63] Schaid, 7.
[64] Ibid.

do not have the same capacity for accepting minorities as they imagine students in a larger town do. Usually, Jamila just reminds her children that they are safer here and refuses to consider moving.

Jamila admits that her children probably feel more like outsiders than they would in Minneapolis, and that this aspect may cause her children to feel more compelled to emulate their school peers. She claims that her children have started to become like American children. Her youngest daughter, in elementary school, already adores Britney Spears. Her elementary school-aged son insists on having a birthday celebration each year, complete with cake, candles, presents, and a party. Somalis traditionally do not observe birthdays in this way, and Jamila finds she does not have the time or energy to observe each of her seven children's birthdays annually in the American way. But her son's American school reinforces his ambition to have a birthday party, especially when he sees all of his teachers and classmates making a bid deal out of theirs. She declares, birthday parties "are not my culture."

Dating poses another challenge for Jamila. The constant contact of genders at public schools only leads to close relationships and temptations between male and female children. In Somalia, teenage males and females do not date. Instead, young people marry and devote themselves entirely to one person. In Somalia, the parents were more likely to arrange marriages for their children. In America, Jamila says that young people are more likely to choose their own spouses. Jamila's own 17 year-old daughter was married to a Somali in Owatonna over winter recess during her senior year at St. Peter High School. She will leave St. Peter to live with her husband after she graduates from high school in May. Jamila approves of her daughter's decision and asserts that even

girls as young as 15 marry. Jamila prefers the Somali system to the casual American system. She winces when she thinks of her older son's commonly used phrase: "She's just a friend." It's not that she's prejudiced against non-Muslim children, she maintains, but dating "is not my culture."

Other Factors

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Jamila was at home doing housework when her eldest son called her from school. "Mom, turn on the T.V. Something happened in New York City and it's on every channel." Jamila remembers being more concerned with preparing lunch than what ever was happening in New York. It was not until the afternoon that she finally sat down to watch the story of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Jamila did not realize the significance of rumors that Muslim extremists were the alleged masterminds of the attacks until her children came home from school. "Mom, we can't stay here anymore. Everyone at school was giving us looks," they protested. When Jamila's eldest daughter was pushed in the hallway at school soon after September 11, her children's campaign to move intensified. Jamila contacted the school and the person who pushed her daughter was punished, and Jamila remained determined to stay in St. Peter.

An additional frustration lies in America's proclivity towards pork. "There are many different names for pork here. The sneakiest one is gelatin. They even put that in Skittles," vents Jamila, who can be seen at the local grocery store educating other Somalis in an effort to keep them from unknowingly consuming pig. St. Peter's canine population presents a further annoyance. If a dog, which in Islam is considered unclean,

brushes against one of her children's legs at the park, for instance, she must wash that child's clothes seven times before they can be considered clean.

Hard-pressed to recall any other traumatic instances, Jamila believes that most St. Peter citizens are indifferent to her and her family. Sometimes she feels eyes on her at the grocery store, she says, but she's convinced people are admiring her colorful dresses and headscarves.

And feel free to ask her about her clothes, or about any other unfamiliar aspect of her life. Though scarves and cloths cover her entire body except her hands and face, Jamila is anything but hiding behind her attire.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR ST. PETER

As shown above, St. Peter life affects Somali refugees in different ways. After learning about Somalis as Muslims, it is easy to make grand assumptions about the differences between them and us. However, the similarities far exceed the differences.

Gender/Age Model

Whether one is young or old, male or female attributes to the level of American influence St. Peter life conveys. Younger Somalis appear to stray from Somali tradition more than older Somalis. Obviously, school-aged Somali children identify least with Somali traditions because they spend most of their time in St. Peter public schools and have little or no memory of life in Somalia. Elderly Somalis have spent the majority of their lives in Somalia, and are therefore more inclined to retain their customary lifestyle.

Male Somalis appear more likely to defer from Somali traditions than females. Less likely to heed the guidance of their parents, they also depend less on attracting a spouse to ensure a proper reputation or for economic security. Already conspicuous by donning veils and long dresses, female Somalis promote Somali customs by cooking traditional foods and nurturing the family religiously. They remain dedicated to customs such as not shaking hands with men or dating, and finishing high school according to her parents' wishes. Women will marry young before dating. Clearly, these gender-specific traditional norms still govern habits for Muslims. However, it is the women who manifest the most conspicuous behavior.

Yunus cites shifting family structure as the chief concern of local Somali residents. A pamphlet distributed at Dar Abi Bakr answers the question, "Why is the family so important?":

> The family is the foundation of Islamic society. The peace and security offered by a stable family unit is greatly valued, and seen as essential for the spiritual growth of its members. A harmonious social order is created by the existence extended families; children are treasured, and rarely leave home until the time they marry.[65]

Bonded with culture, Islam orders life for Muslims. As the core institution of Islam, the family unit educates children about their religion, and nurtures their religious beliefs. Therefore, if the family unit is altered, the nature of Islam practiced by the family members changes as well.

Interviews with Jamila Said and Hamis Yunus consistently resulted in the conclusion that Somalis in St. Peter thrive despite a lack of official and general awareness of the daily challenged they face. Though ESL classes have been implemented, and the Dar Abi Bakr mosque in Mankato serves as a relatively convenient Muslim center, these developments have not succeeded in keeping Somalis in St. Peter, because "these basic needs are not a substitute for educating local Americans about Somali history, culture and religion, in order to open the doors of understanding between communities."[66]

One St. Peter City Council member's inability to recall any serious conversation in the St. Peter City Council's legislation shows that no official initiative to promote awareness of its immigrant community members is not a main concern of the current administration.[67]

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[65] The Islamic Affairs Department, *Understanding Islam and the Muslims* (Washington, D.C.: The Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 1989) 23.

[66] Schaid, 26.

[67] Tim Strand, St. Peter Council member, Ward II, interview with author, 4 March 2005, St. Peter, MN.

A Collaborative Approach

St. Cloud, a city of 60,000 people about 70 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, has taken an active approach when considering their new Somali neighbors:

> St. Cloud is one of the only local governments to act prior to the arrival of the Somali immigrants in order to prepare the local community. First, the City acted to educate and train public service providers and the general community about the Somali population, its culture and Islamic beliefs. Second, the City identifies the housing needs of the Somalis and was able to negotiate housing opportunities with providers. Next, the City set aside funding and space to encourage and allow the Somalis to practice their culture and religion.[68]

Not only did St. Cloud act pre-emptively to ensure a smooth transition for Somalis into its community, it went one step further by informing the local community about Somalis and their culture:

> ...panel presentations were organized to provide educators, spiritual communities, service providers and the general community with information about Somali culture and Islamic beliefs. Next, cultural awareness training was for City administrators and Human Rights and Housing brochures were translated into Somali. Also, the Mayor's office set aside funding for local nonprofit Somali organizations...[69]

This preparation of both sides for change offers the most comprehensive process for assimilation. The arrival of Somalis in small towns affects not only the Somali group but also the receiving community.

Undoubtedly, the opening of a halal grocery store and a Muslim center would bolster local Somali life. In addition, Somali workers would flock to good job opportunities, regardless of a rural or urban context. However, the real goal for communities such as St. Peter who are faced with the task of accommodating Somali refugees should be "to view immigration as a potential gain rather than a loss for their

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[68] Ibid., 13.
[69] Ibid.

community,"[70] thus creating a hospitable situation for the newcomers, and a privileged opportunity to learn and serve for the host community.

Sharing the responsibility for overcoming challenges related to diversity will not only relieve the burdens of the Somali refugee. The knowledge profited from the exchange will enable St. Peter to become less afraid of the unknown, more involved and understanding, and ultimately, more accommodating.

Suggestions for Further Study

This paper suggests that the most challenging aspect of life for Somalis in St. Peter lies in a lack of awareness of Somali culture, history, and most significantly, religion. But the question remains: how can this ignorance be overcome? It would be practical to analyze St. Peter's cultural and social event scene in order to determine what opportunities already exist that could incorporate education of local Somalis, such as fairs, festivals, and parades. Then, a combination of educational approaches such as classes, outdoor activities, or artistic performances could be analyzed to determine the most effective way to involve the St. Peter community in the process of assimilating and welcoming Somalis into their community.

In order to better understand the St. Peter psyche, research of non-Somali Muslim residents would provide insight into any differences between the experiences of Somalis as immigrant Muslims and locally-born Muslims. In the same light, comparing the experiences of African Americans to those of Somalis in St. Peter would clarify whether Somalis tend to be regarded as immigrants or as black people. Finally, examining the experiences of non-Somali immigrants, such as Hispanics and Russians, would determine

[70] Ibid., 26.

any discrepancies between the experiences immigrant groups. This exercise would segregate the characteristics of Somali immigrants by comparing them to a kind of control group in order to establish the significance of the Somali as a Muslim African immigrant.

Another idea offering room for additional examination involves the concepts of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb, the state of being ruled by Islam and the state of confusion when Islam is not the official dominant authority. The story of Somali Muslim refugees' presence in America, where democracy rules, illustrates the experience of Islam entering a state of Dar al-Harb. Simultaneously, Iraqi Muslims have been confronted with democracy. Dar al-Islam must deal with the penetration of democracy. Perhaps understanding the experiences of Muslim assimilation in America can help democracy smoothly assimilate in Iraq.

Their story is one of trial and immense loss, of triumph and dreams fulfilled. War, death, and disease afflict traditions of family, hope, and rejuvenation. The saga spans continents and decades, expectations and religions, cultures and governments, and ultimately unites the vastly different worlds of African immigrants with those of rural Minnesota. For now, the story ends with a chance this small rural community to embrace the newest face of St. Peter, MN.[71]

[71] Mattessich, 18.

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