

Islam: The Religion of Somalia

How can a group of citizens see their country through so much? How can they survive such environmental hardships and adversity and then turn and face war and horrific violence in the eye? The one common factor that holds this unraveling country together is their Islamic faith. The Somali base their beliefs upon the words of the Koran, their holy book. They have strictly executed daily prayer rituals and rules that they live by which account for the structure and dedication of their culture. They exercise daily prayer, which takes place before dawn, around noon, mid-afternoon, at dusk, and in the evening. They believe that since they are in a prayerful state throughout their day, they are less likely to think of temptation. This prayer time provides them with a few moments out of their day to ask Allah for cleansing and to refocus their minds on living life in a spiritual way.

Tradition and religion govern daily routine. Because the inhabitants of this country are 99% Muslim, rules and social norms are clear. Children from Somalia are able to recite verses from the Koran at a very young age. This provides a foundation for their faith as well as their community. The Muslim foundation learned and practiced in childhood will follow individuals throughout life. Faith is interwoven into the routine of the worshiper.

The Koran

“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful”

By Kate Sutherland

“All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.” God has 99 names, Allah being one of them. There is such a place as heaven and hell, but you cannot go to hell if you pray, know all 99 names of God (Allah being one of them), and recite your last words, “There’s no god except Allah.” Allah says that it is important to pray on time. When Abdi proceeded to tell me about whom Allah is in regards to the Islamic culture and the *Koran*, I, in turn, became more inquisitive about the *Koran*.

The *Koran* is spelled “*Qur’an*” in the Islamic religion and in Arabic means “recital.” It consists of 30 chapters and 114 verses and is arranged according to length, beginning with the long verses. Every verse has much meaning, but the longer ones contain more detail. When children are trying to learn about the Koran, they start from the back, learning the shorter verses, and then make their way to the front of the Koran. It is the principal religious text for Muslims. As I knew prophets and messengers were a part of the Koran, I asked Abdi about the details regarding them. There are twenty-five prophets and messengers. “Prophets are

messengers, but not all the messengers are prophets," Abdi told me. There is a total, however, of 300 messengers.

In the *Koran* there are four main prophets, a Book on each. One prophet is "Musa" and the book is called, "Tawrat." Another prophet is "Isa" and the book is named, "Injiil." A third prophet is named "Duad" and the book is called "Zabur." Finally, the fourth prophet is named "Muhammad" and the book is named "Furqan."

Muhammad is the central messenger and prophet in Islam. He is also the receiver and transmitter of God's messages to humankind as it is stated in the *Holy Koran*. "Muhammad," began Abdi, "is different than any other prophet because he was the final or last prophet. He warned everybody about what was going to happen in the future."

The *Koran* states what has happened in the past along with what will happen in the future. It also explains what will happen if you do something good and if you do something bad. "It has all the answers," Abdi said, "When I read it I can say, "Okay this is where I'm at, this is what I am doing right, and this is what I need to work on. You can measure yourself. The *Koran* clearly says what is right and what is wrong. It is the actual words of God."

"The *Koran*, which is termed "glorious and wonderful," (50:1; 72:1) expressed itself as a "healing and mercy, light and guidance from God, the absolute Truth,

along with a "perspicuous" Book sent down from heaven upon Muhammad" (Believe).

The *Koran* is offered as a sanctified reminder and a warning to people everywhere that these are God's words and that they should be listened to.

The *Koran* also calls for appreciation of the signs that are all around; as I stated before, what is right and what is wrong, along with what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future. Signs are everywhere and it is very important to pay attention to them.

The "final fulfillment" of God's or Allah's promise in the *Koran* is the announcement of Judgment Day. Judgment Day is the determination of who goes to hell or heaven. A sign that Judgment Day is coming Abdi told me, a "monster" with one big eye named Dajjal comes to try and conquer the world. He has the word "Kafara" meaning "disobeyed" across his forehead. He says he is God and tries to get people to believe him. Dajjal will kill the people who don't believe him, and the people who do believe him will become his followers. As quoted from an excerpt from the *Koran*:

After the lesser signs of the Hour appear and increase, mankind will have reached a stage of great suffering. Then the awaited Mahdi will appear; he is the first of the greater, and clear, signs of the Hour. There will be no doubt about his existence, but this will only be clear to the knowledgeable people.

The Mahdi will rule until the False Messiah (al-Masih al-Dajjal) appears who will spread oppression and corruption. The only ones who will know him well and avoid his evil will be those who have great knowledge and faith.

The false Messiah will remain for a while, destroying mankind completely, and the earth will witness the greatest tribulation in its history. Then the Messiah Jesus will descend, bringing justice from heaven. He will kill the Dajjal, and there will be years of safety and security (translator: Khattab).

The announcement of Judgment Day is a warning to the people doing evil and being ungrateful to Allah, and a bringer of good things to those who accept Allah and His guidance. Translated from the Koran about Judgment Day:

And the Trumpet will be blown, and all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth will swoon away, except him whom Allah wills. Then it will be blown a second time, and behold they will be standing, looking on.

And the earth will shine with the light of its Lord and the Book will be placed open; and the Prophets and the witnesses will be brought forward; and it will be judged between them with the truth, and they will not be wronged.

And each person will be paid in full of what he did; and He is Best Aware of what they do.

And those who disbelieved will be driven to Hell in groups till, when they reach it, the gates thereof will be opened. And its keepers will say, "Did not the Messengers come to you from yourselves, reciting to you the Verses of your Lord, and warning you of the Meeting of this Day of yours?" They will say: "Yes, but the Word of torment has been justified against the disbelievers!"

It will be said to them: "Enter you the gates of Hell, to abide therein. And what an evil abode of the arrogant!"

And those who kept their duty to their Lord will be led to Paradise in groups, till, when they reach it, and its gates will be opened and its keepers will say: "Peace is upon you! You have done well, so enter here to abide therein."

And they will say: "All the praises and thanks be to Allah Who has fulfilled His Promise to us and has made us inherit this land. We can dwell in Paradise where we will; how excellent a reward for the good workers" (translator: Khattab).

Abdi says they always look to The Koran for guidance. He reiterates, "It is the exact words of God. It is like God is talking with you."

On the way back from the interview, Abdi was driving me to my car, and he put on what I thought was music and what sounded like someone singing. "Listen," he said, "This is someone reading The Koran." I listened, telling him how I thought it sounded like a person singing a very

melodic tune. "That is how they read it, it does sound like singing," Abdi told me.

All in all it was such a great experience listening and learning about something so different from anything I have learned before.

Khattab, Huda, Imam rahimahulla. "Various names on the Day of Judgment: There is none worthy of worship except Allah." 11 July 2004. 3 Dec 2004. www.sunnahonline.com

What is an Immigrant?

By Shannon Scully

The word immigrant has been in my vocabulary since I was very young. I'm the granddaughter of an immigrant. I remember my father proudly telling me the stories of my grandfather's journey to America. In 1953 he made the trek, across the Atlantic Ocean, from Ireland. He was detained four days on Ellis Island because his x-rays showed a black spot on his right lung; a possible sign of TB. This was his second experience in America; in 1951 he came to study agriculture. He finally made it through immigration and with ten dollars in his pocket he set out to fulfill the American dream. He found a job with Northwest Airlines, cleaning and polishing airplanes for the pilots. Eventually he moved on from that job, becoming the owner of a garbage company and then running for county commissioner. He married, raised three children and put them all through college. Having an immigrant for a grandfather always seemed so natural. He is living proof that the American dream can come true. Someone can come from another country and build a new and better life.

I encountered a different concept of what an immigrant is, through out school, in my social science classes. We read stories about the people who came from all corners of Europe, in hopes of making a better life for themselves

and their families. The treacherous journey, across the Atlantic Ocean, was not enough to hold them back. Thousands of people made the crossing between 1890 and 1920, making it the largest surge of immigration in the nation's history. Risking everything they bought tickets for a space in the dark, cramped, disease ridden quarters, in the lower decks of ships. Even when they saw Lady Liberty over the horizon they could not get their hopes too high. Once on the main land they waited in long lines to be seen by the health inspectors, many times being turned away and sent home.

Text books describe the immigrants as the builders of modern America. They provided the factories of the Industrial Revolution with workers. They started their own businesses and were some of the first pioneers to venture into the west. Even when they were crowded into some of the dirtiest slums of the largest cities, exploited by factory owners and faced with prejudice, they pushed on. In America there remained the hope for a better life than the one they left back in the old country. We see their dream fulfilled today in the faces of their ancestors: people you pass everyday on the streets, teachers, bosses, friends and the person who stares back from the mirror.

Now as I reach the age of adulthood I am faced with a new image of an immigrant. Large populations of Hmong,

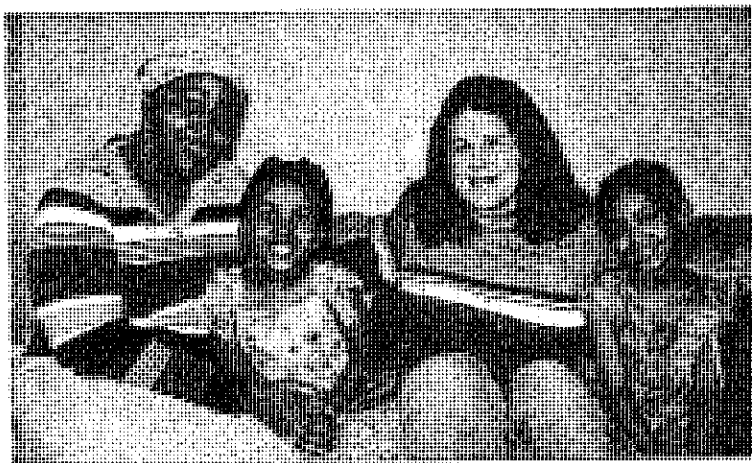
Latinos and Somalis have begun to flood into the country, coming from Asia, Latin America and Africa. While the face of the modern immigrant has changed, the same determination to fulfill a dream has flooded over into this new generation. They take the lowest paying jobs of factory workers and monitoring the grill at McDonalds. They inhabit housing complexes that have been deemed unlivable by others. To them this is the American Dream; they have the opportunity for something better than what they left behind. In America a Somali girl can earn a degree from a university and a Latino father can earn a fair minimum wage to provide for his family.

While the dictionary may define an immigrant as "a person who leaves one country to settle in another," I think the word holds a larger meaning. An immigrant is my grandfather, an ancestor or the Somali family that moved in next door. An immigrant is a human, someone with a dream, wanting to make life better for themselves, their children and their children's children.

What Malyun Holds True

By Renée Iverson

What is important to a Somali refugee in America? What are the values that Malyun carried with her? What was her view of her new world as a Muslim in America? At the heart of the matter, Malyun has the same hopes and aspirations for her children as any good parent. She wants them to be safe, happy and healthy. Malyun wants children that will be able to survive in this modern world.



A few months after September 11, 2001, Malyun took her two daughters to a McDonald's restaurant. She was doing what the average busy American does. Realizing that her children would love the clown like atmosphere, Malyun felt this would be a great place. When she got her children

settled in she sat down. A few moments later she was approached by a strange man. He started yelling at her. In a few short moments he had blamed her and all Muslims for the attack on New York. He did this in spite of the fact that she and her children sat helpless in the presence of this large man. Additionally, she was not sure how she should react to this situation. "When I first came to this country they told me I would be safe." This did not seem like safety. While this man continued on an angry line of accusation, a few other men walked over. They attempted to calm him down but ended up just escorting him out of the restaurant. After the man left, the men that had escorted him out came over and apologized to Malyun.

One of the things that people may not think about is how difficult it might be to parent in the Muslim tradition within a predominately Christian area. An example of this would be dolls. Few American girls (and some boys) grew up without a doll of some sort. Dolls are collected and prized. They are used until falling apart or passed down to the next generation. The difficulty for Malyun is that dolls are considered to be sacrilegious. According to Islam, a doll is considered to be a caricature of what God created. God created everything, including all humans. Muslim tradition dictates that this is man trying to re-create what God made, and not doing a very good job.

Another thing Malyun considers difficult is the differences in schools. Malyun's daughters, if they were living in Somalia, would probably be in *Koran* school. They would be attending classes meant to teach them about their religion. Additionally, these classes would be intergraded with the same types of subjects that American children are taught. However, in America, Malyun's oldest daughter attends a public school. At public school she will not have the opportunity to learn about the *Koran*. Her children do not have the same opportunities that they would have in Somalia.

Malyun says her children are her teachers. She feels that she learns more from them on a daily basis than she teaches. She has learned patience, understanding that reacting in anger, is at best counterproductive. It's not that she hasn't thought about physical discipline; it's that she understands that this will only make the moment worse.

It is obvious that Malyun gets her family love and devotion from her mother. Her mother has the same dedication to Malyun. It is very difficult for Malyun to be separated from her mother who is still in Kenya. She gets upset when she thinks about her mother being there. Like most of the Somali refugees, she sends a great deal of money to her family that is still in Africa. She sends anything she can to help pay for the light bill or water. Anything she can do to make her family more comfortable where they are in

Africa. Also, like many of the Somalis she sees the faces of those that have been left behind when she falls asleep. She thinks to herself that there must be something more that she can do. This thought process manifests itself in sleepless nights. Many of these nights Malyun says she sleeps on the floor. Why? It is painful for her to think about being comfortable when her family is in such dire straits.

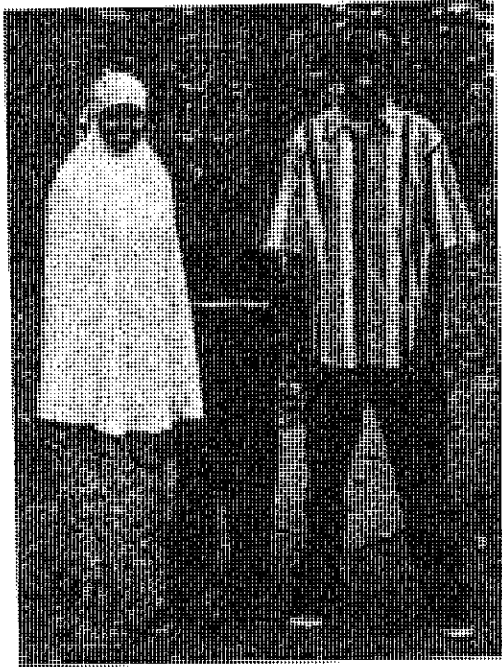
Family First

By Angie Seidel

As I walked into Abdinasir's home for the first time at our last meeting I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect and who would be there. We had decided to go to his house to take picture with some of his siblings. There was an excitement between us. I was excited to finally meet the people I had heard so much about, and he was just as excited to introduce me. As he opened the door and let me in the first thing I noticed was the aroma of cooking. It was a spicy thick smell that made my mouth water. His mom had been cooking and preparing to break the fast of Ramadan only a short hour from when I arrived. The apartment was cozy.

As soon as the door opened I felt comfortable. Directly to my right was a staircase leading to the bedrooms where he had to go wake his little brother, to the left was the kitchen and the source of the great smells of the home. In the living room and dining room I heard sounds of Somali coming from the computer. His sisters were listening to Somali radio over the internet. As soon as I walked in their attention was on me. They were asking me my name, age, and political views because it was Election Day. While Abdinasir went up stairs to wake his little brother, I talked with his sisters who were extremely hospitable offering me water even though they were not allowed to have some themselves until

it was time to break the fast. It was clear to me walking into this warm, friendly and comfortable home that Abdinasir's family was a central part of his life.



Abdinasir is proud of his family and friends; it is easy to tell when talking to him that they are really important to him. The sheer excitement he had when introducing me to them is an indicator of this. I met some of his friends, two of his sisters, a little brother and both parents. Each new person I met gave new insight into Abdinasir's life. His family is a big part of what drives him to be successful as well as where he finds his support. He enjoys spending a lot of time with his friends and has many stories to tell about them. The

character of this 15 year old boy can be seen when he talks about how important his brothers and sisters are as well as what he hopes for the future of all of them and his friends. He is a fun loving, mischievous, yet a really considerate and concerned person.

Abdinasir loves his family. He loves everything about them, including that they provide a support network of so many people which he can rely on. He has a total of ten brothers and three sisters. He often helps to take care of his little brothers as well as helping them with their homework and other things. Being a middle child with brothers and sisters between the ages of nine to 29 has given him an advantage. He learned how to be an older brother as well as learned what not to do, too. He helps his little brothers with homework and teaches them right and wrong in general. He also spends much time teaching them the *Koran* because he knows that as they did not spend time in Africa they are behind in their schooling in the *Koran*. He talks to them in Somali because he is afraid that growing up in America will cause them to lose their language and that is something he does not want to see happen. He has a wide smile when he talks about his little brothers and it is easy to tell they mean a lot to him. He has spent much of his free time not only helping his little brothers out with important things but playing with them, too. He helped teach them to walk, taught

them to ride their bikes and often spends a lot of his free time with them. Abdinasir wishes his little brothers could have spent more time in Africa so they would know where they came from and cherish the culture that is so important to their big brother.

He teaches his younger brothers just as his older brothers taught him in Africa. He recalls times when they used to come home from school and teach him what they had learned that day with a look of wistfulness on his face, a look that says he remembers how that felt and hopes he can provide the same feeling for his younger siblings. Abdinasir didn't go to school while he was in Kenya and his older brothers who did go to school would come home and teach him what they had learned like the language of Kenya. Here in America one of his older brothers lives less than two blocks from him. They still see each other often and retain the same older/younger brother relationship they have always had. He is excited that his brother might teach him how to drive and take him to get his license when he turns 16. Abdinasir will probably end up doing the same for his younger brothers.

Abdinasir doesn't spend time only with his family but also spends a significant amount of time with his friends as well. He enjoys playing basketball for fun and in tournaments with them. They also play soccer a lot of the time especially

in the summer. He does the same things here as he did in Kenya with his friends there. Abdinasir likes to play tricks on friends and they have a friendly banter back and forth that is harmlessly hilarious. He grins from ear to ear as he tells stories about pranks pulled on a friend or mischievousness they caused together in times past. Abdinasir smiles as he tells me of a time in Kenya when he and some friends placed a banana peel on the road in front of another one of his childhood friends. He can't keep himself from laughing when he tells of the friend slipping and falling on the banana peel because he didn't see it. Looking at Abdinasir while he tells this story it is easy to tell that there are many more like it that he holds close to his heart.

Family and friends are a vital part of this 15 year old boy's life. He smiles a wide caring smile when talking about any of these people who are so important to him. Abdinasir hopes that here in America his younger siblings can hold tight to their Somali heritage, and he is willing to do what he can to make sure they do. As his older brothers and sisters provided guidance to him he too will to his younger siblings. His friends are important to him allowing him to be the jovial, fun person that loves to play harmless pranks. Abdinasir loves having this large support network alongside him at all times, but the reality of it is that Abdinasir gives much to both his family and friends and expects less than he gives. As

I leave Abdinasir after entering his home, meeting his family and meeting many of his friends, I feel that I know him better than before. Before I only heard of these great people and now after watching him interact with them I get the sense that I know him so much better. It is inspiring to watch how his little brother admires him and how they interact in such a friendly loving way. I was watching how his friends wanted to be in the picture, and watching them joke around and fighting over who got to do what all while laughing so hard they could hardly stand.



A Day at the Mosque

By Renée Iverson

At 10:38 p.m. on November 12 Malyun called to tell me the fast was going to be called off. The new moon had been sighted indicating the end of the fast. The service for the end of Ramadan would be Saturday morning at 8:30 a.m. She wanted me to be there at 7 a.m., because she had to get me ready. This meant that I had to leave Alexandria for St. Cloud at 5:30 a.m. I spent the hour and a half thinking about I was about walking into a different world. Chances are that it would be a culture vastly different from my own. I have a very limited knowledge of Islam. I don't speak Somali or Arabic. Besides, I can be a bit socially inept in new situations. What I did know was that at the end of the following day, I would have at least an understanding of Islam.

On the way there my brain ran through every possible scenario I thought I might encounter. My biggest fear was that I would say or do something that was inappropriate. I thought to myself, 'What if I don't pause long enough when I am speaking to someone? What if there are people that don't want me there? What if I do something to embarrass Malyun?' Of course, these were questions that I had relatively little control over. Eventually I calmed down.



When I arrived at Malyun's apartment I could hear chanting from the *Koran*. It was a man's voice, and since Malyun's husband lives in Kenya, I wondered where the sound was coming from. I knew that this was her morning prayer. Inside her apartment she showed me she was playing the prayer through her computer. Apparently, the prayers from the *Koran* can be downloaded and played. The prayer was *Surah* 89, the Morning Prayer. She let me look at the written form of the prayer. Like many of the *Surahs* in the *Koran*, this chapter emphasized one God and charity towards the poor.

Malyun then gave me a long black dress to put on. It had beading on the front that formed an almost floral pattern. She told me just to wear it over the pants and turtle neck I had on already. Next she gave me the *Hajib* (which would fall off twice before the end of the Mosque). It looked so big before she put it on me. It was a heavy, black, cotton fabric. Once she started winding it around my head the huge scarf became very small. She told me that I looked like a Muslim. Her dress was very similar to mine, although she had gold embossing rather than the beadwork.

At 7:50 a.m. Malyun, her two daughters, and I took off for the Mosque. We were going to be a little early so we decided to stop and get some coffee. Driving to the gas station I noticed that people did not hesitate to stare. This didn't actually bother me, but it made me think. What is it like for Muslim women to live in a predominantly Christian area of the country? Do the looks ever bother them? I can only speak from this one-time experience. This would be the first lesson that I would learn that day. I would learn that looking different attracts a great deal of attention.

When we stopped at the gas station to get coffee there was a man from the Middle East working behind the counter. When I went over to pay for my coffee he asked, "Where are you from?"

I replied, "Alexandria."

He went on, "No, where did you grow up?"

For a moment American me wondered if he felt as though he knew me. I replied "I grew up around Detroit Lakes, Minnesota." Yes, at this point I was still relatively clueless as to why he was asking these questions. I didn't get it until he asked yet another question.

"No, I mean where did you live before you lived in Minnesota?"

When Malyun and I got out to the car, I asked her about this. She said he was assuming that I was an Arab, "Because of your dark hair and light skin." I realized that this was something I had always unconsciously assumed whenever I had seen someone wearing the *hijab*. It made me a little sad that this was just an automatic assumption on my part. The second thing that I would learn that day is that people are going to make certain assumptions about someone who is dressed as a Muslim woman.

As we drove up to the Mosque (Community Center) I started to realize I was not in 'Kansas' anymore. Malyun smiled and said, "Everyone is going to assume you're an Arab. You really do look like a Muslim woman."

We unbuckled her daughters and walked in. There were three Somali men around 18 years old wearing orange vests directing traffic into the community center. At the door

was a man wearing a long white dress shirt that went down to his knees. He was greeting those that walked into the church. He didn't say anything to us, but walked over and opened the door. The first thing I heard when we walked through the door was a prayer being sung through a loudspeaker.

When we got into the lobby there were more young men this time two of them were holding plastic bags while another two held plastic bins. Written on the plastic bins was the sign "Donations for the Needy." Malyun took two bags giving one to me and keeping the other. In the background the prayer continued.

We made our way into the gym. The gym was separated by two dividers into three areas. We just walked past the first area. The second area was filled with women. The third one, that we would not see, was where the men prayed.

Malyun took her shoes off and placed them in the plastic bag. She said that it was important not to walk on the prayer area. I did the same with mine. Her daughters also took off their shoes, but there seemed to be much less emphasis on what they did. I'm sure this was because they are under seven years old.

We walked over to an area where some other women were sitting on the floor. Malyun placed her prayer mat on

the floor and said, "We will be able to share the mat." I looked around and realized many other women were sharing mats. Some of the prayer mats were small, while others were huge, all different colors, but all the same rectangular shape. Many of them had pictures representing different sacred places in the Middle East.

Malyun's daughters immediately found other children to play with and ran off. We sat and listened to the prayer that was read through the microphone. This prayer had been recited continuously since before we arrived.

It was then that I observed Malyun as very comfortable with her surroundings. I could tell that she really enjoyed being around so much that is familiar. Malyun is a woman who loves God.

As we sat there, many women approached Malyun. They greeted her with a hand shake, sometimes shaking my hand. It wasn't like an American handshake. The women held hands long enough to talk for a few moments. Sometimes they would take turns kissing each other's hand. She said that this is a common way for Muslim women to greet each other when they haven't been in contact for a while.

The prayer continued over the speakers. I wondered what the man looked like who was reading the prayer. I wondered what it looked like on the other side of the

screen. However, at no point did I feel this was sexist. It is hard to explain, but it was because of the behavior of Malyun and other women around me. There was nothing in their demeanor that implied their role within their culture was any less important than the role of the men.

The room started to fill with women. All wore different styles of *hijab* and dress in general. Some wore black like Malyun and me, while others wore a soft beige color. There were few bright colors. It was then when I looked around and I realized that I was only one of three white women in the room. The other two may have been Arabic, but I don't want to make any more assumptions. It's just that this was a little strange, being the minority. It was wonderful that everyone was so kind, but it still made me self-conscious.

My clothing and behavior could be modified for the situation, but not the color of my skin. Hmmm, makes you wonder how hard this is for minorities. This realization was magnified when Malyun went to the bathroom, and I was left there without a translator or lifeline. This would be my third lesson that day. I would learn how it is difficult to be a minority, even when everyone is being kind, accommodating, and thoughtful.

As sound of the prayer then changed, I realized that this was the sermon portion of the service. All the women

moved their prayer mats close to the screen. There were a few women that were keeping close tabs on what I was doing. After we moved, there was about a half hour of sermon. This seemed a bit more casual than what was to come. Malyun told me I could sit in whatever position I felt most comfortable. I asked Malyun what the *Imam* was saying. She said that it was a prayer saying that God is great.

During the prayer portion of the service, things became more formal. The mats and the women had to be in strictly straight and parallel rows. In fact, there were a couple of women that walked through the rows to make sure that the mats and the women were aligned properly. We were all touching shoulders. Malyun told me that this is a time when we would be talking to God. This was our chance to have a one on one with God. There would be no intermediary "This is the time that it is just you and God," and added, "Don't worry, just follow what I'm doing." We stood for a little while. When a certain phrase was said the women held their hands to both ears. We then bowed, holding ourselves in this position for about 10 seconds each time. We also knelt with our head to the floor. I didn't keep track of how many times we went through each prayer, but it seemed as though it went in a pattern. It reminded me a little of the Catholic Mass.

After the prayer it was time to leave. As we were leaving I noticed that a few men and women were handing out dollar bills to the children. Malyun said that this is a tradition associated with the end of Ramadan. The children are supposed to spend this money on treats.

A New Generation

By Shannon Scully



~View through a Window~

Through the window of the coffeehouse the silhouette of a person flashed by. The door opened and blew in a girl about five feet tall. She was completely covered from head to foot, the tips of her toes barely visible from beneath her floor length skirt. Her pinstriped, button down shirt seemed familiar and I recognized it as something similar to one I had hanging in my closet. It hung loosely on her, untucked and wrinkled, most likely from sitting in classes all day. On her head a black cotton *hijab* was haphazardly wrapped, leaving only her face visible to onlookers.

Over one shoulder she supported a green and black backpack, that looked as if it is about to explode with its

contents. Taking a similar shape to the one I lug around all day, I can only assume that it was being weighed down by books, notes and other objects necessary for class. Her small hand clutched a 20 oz. Mountain Dew bottle as if the caffeine in it was the only thing keeping her awake. Sadly I could relate. Her eyes held an intense concentration as they scanned the room. She seemed pensive. I could only imagine that she had lists of things she had to accomplish, running through her head.

Turning in my direction her wide, oval, cocoa colored eyes, looked at me quizzically from under small wire rimmed glasses. She was looking me over, sizing me up and down, the same as I was doing to her. After a moment her facial features relaxed into a smile and she hurried towards me.

Coming closer I had a better view of her facial features. Nothing overly distinctive, she has a long face, strong cheek bones and a cocoa colored, clear complexion that most women would kill for. Shaking my hand she apologized for being late. We were to have met an hour earlier but she had called at the last minute, stating that she had a meeting to go to. It had completely slipped her mind. I understood: holding down a full time job as well as taking eighteen credits could cause things to get lost in one's memory. Relaxing as we moved into the interview her true colors began to show through.

She is very opinionated and doesn't hide it. With excitement and energy she is just itching to express all the ideas and thoughts she has swimming in her head. I had this preconceived notion that she would be a bit more traditional but having gone through American high school she has been exposed to mainstream American culture. She is an ambitious young woman of 19 years and while her age might not yet qualify her as a woman she has the strength and perception of someone three times her age. A student, a daughter, a sister and a Somali she juggles these roles while creating a new identity in her world of clashing cultures.

~Roots~

Fatuma came to America in May of 1999. At 14 she was unaware of what this place, which adults magically referred to as America, was. Unlike the many other Somali who were seeking refuge at that time, Fatuma immigrated. She was raised in Kenya and her native land of Somalia was about as foreign to her as America. For all intents and purposes she considers her nationality Kenyan and her heritage to be Somali.

She remembers her life in Kenya to be happy. Carefree days, running around with her cousins, turned into nights and more time spent with her family. The weather was always warm and the streets served as a safe playground.

Reminiscing, she concludes that children who are raised in America aren't as lucky as she was. Too much time is spent inside, playing video games, when they could be outside or using their imaginations. But in her new home, she realizes, the streets are the last place children should be playing.

When she was very young her parents divorced. Being the only child she left Somalia with her mother to go and live with relatives in Kenya. Her father stayed in Mogadishu, where he was a fisherman. They remained strangers until the day he changed her life.

Years had passed without any word from Fatuma's father. Then one day, without any warning, he made contact with her mother's family. The last several years he had been in the refugee camps. Now starting his life again in America, he wanted his daughter to join him.

Without hesitation a decision was made. The answer was very clear; she would go to America to be with her father. As a woman in Kenya he had limited opportunity for an education or a career. America held a bright future: the land of opportunity. This was her free ticket to opportunity.

Leaving her mother and all that was familiar, she left Kenya, unsure of what lay ahead of her. Accompanied by her step-mother, a woman she had never seen before, Fatuma stepped onto a plane for her first flight across an ocean.

Apprehensive of what was happening, the trip is a cloudy memory.

~Arriving in America~

Their plane descended into the Chicago airport and Fatuma stepped off the plane into what would be her first dose of America. People moved quickly by. The sound of many voices blending with the roar of planes, taking off or landing, echoed in her ears. Everything surrounding her was new and terrifying, especially the people. Fatuma had never seen a white person before and to be frank she didn't know what to think about them. To make matters worse she could not understand a word anyone was saying. The language that they spoke was different from the Swahili spoken at home. But her trip did not end in this place of noise and strange people. She and her step mother were to catch a connecting flight to Fargo, North Dakota, where her father would be waiting for them.

Fatuma was so overwhelmed, everything was so confusing. Their connecting flight was to depart at 6:00 pm. They were unaccustomed to American clocks and under the assumption that since the sun was still bright in the sky, they had plenty of time before their flight, they missed their flight.

The airline attendants were very helpful. They placed the two women on the next flight to Fargo. Afraid that they

would miss their flight a second time, Fatuma and her step mother camped in front of the gate from which their flight was to leave the next morning. Fatuma stayed awake for most of the night, unable to find a comfortable position in the stiff chairs. So tired, she just wanted this nightmare to be over.

Meanwhile her father didn't know what to think. He had gathered a large group of people to greet Fatuma and her step-mother at the airport. Much to everyone's surprise, they were not on the flight. Fatuma laughs as she pictures people's reactions as the passengers exited the plane and they were not amongst them.

The first days in America were the worst of her life. "You are used to this life and then you come here and everything is totally changed. You become sick and depressed, that is how I was the first time. I was so sick." In a country, worlds away from the one she came from and surrounded by people she didn't know, Fatuma sat in front of the television wondering what she was going to do. Her father was almost a complete stranger and the first time she had seen her step mother was when they left Kenya together. She missed her family and more than anything she wanted to go home. But going home was not an option.

The chance to come to America was the greatest gift she would ever receive. Here she would have the chance to

go to school, get a job: putting it to words, "it's like a free ticket to a better life."

~Face to face with Discrimination~

As a minority in a society that is not always accepting, Fatuma sees discrimination first hand. She counts herself lucky; she has found most of the people she encounters to be very friendly and welcoming. After September 11th, every now and again people yelled at her to "go back where [she] came from". As much as this hurt Fatuma took it all in stride. She understood why Americans were scared and the way she dressed represented what their anger was directed towards. The discrimination and the anger come from fear and misunderstanding.

While working, at Electrolux, she was stationed next to a middle age man who was complaining about the Somali, how they take advantage of the system and receive special treatment. Under the assumption that Fatuma didn't speak English, he continued to go on about his dislike for her people. As much as she would have liked to give the man a piece of her mind she took a deep breath and continued to work. "You have to be understanding, these people don't know who you are and are afraid of your difference." She remains patient and sometimes her friendliness eventually wins people over.

In her apartment building there was a man who always gave her nasty looks, never smiling or greeting. Even though she had no reason to be polite to the man she always would greet him and smile when their paths crossed. "It's hard for elderly to change their way of thinking." Then one snowy day she was sitting in her car looking through some mail. Her windshield was covered in snow and ice from the storm the night before. Suddenly there was a scratching and scraping at her windshield. The same man was scraping the ice off her windshield. As surprised as Fatuma was, she smiled and waved to say thank you. Then there have been the times where she has been pushed too far.

The health clinic in Fargo, North Dakota, was crowded and noisy. Fatuma had spent several hours in the small room waiting to give a urine sample. She had just taken a new job and the drug test was the last thing her employer needed before she could begin working. Anxious and irritated, her insides were beginning to hurt from drinking so much water. A friend had promised to pick Fatuma up from the clinic but when her friend arrived; her name still hadn't been called. Leaving the waiting room for a few minutes Fatuma went to inform her friend she wasn't ready to leave.

Upon her return she went to the receptionist desk to inquire how much longer the wait would be. At her approach the receptionist informed her that her name had

been called and since she did not respond her file was removed. She would have to wait longer or come back some other time. Fatuma was a bit confused. She had only left the room for a few moments. It was imperative that she take the sample today.

She approached the receptionist a second time. The lady responded saying that Fatuma was a trouble maker and that she was going to call Fatuma's employer and inform them that she had failed to show up for the test. Fatuma wanted to scream! At this point she'd had enough! She had come all the way across town, waited for several hours and she was going to take the test today. Fatuma approached the receptionist for the last time and informed her that she was going to give the sample today.

The woman looked shocked. But Fatuma didn't stop there, she dared the woman to call the employer right then and there. And while the receptionist was at it she might as well go ahead and call her supervisor because Fatuma was going to be helped and if this woman wasn't going to help her, then she would find someone who would.

"I don't like to stand up for myself." Fatuma finds it more to her liking if she remains passive. "[But] No matter how nice you are to people they aren't nice to you . . . It's really sad you have to use force to get what you want."

~Two different ways of life: Making it work~

Fatuma is a modern woman trying to exist in two different worlds, the traditional Somali culture and main stream America. As a college student, at St. Cloud State University, she takes 18 credits and works full time at Electrolux. Because her culture and the society clash she, as well as many other Somali, do their best to survive.

American culture is very dependent on the idea of borrowing money. Credit cards, loans and mortgages all depend on the assistance of a corporation, as long as they receive a little interest as a payment. In the Islamic religion the *Qur'an* clearly states that followers should stay away from interest because it represents debt to another. Due to the Somalis strict following of their faith, they do not take out loans or mortgages to buy a home. Many simply rent apartments so they may pay for their housing on a monthly basis, hence avoiding the problem of interest.

Fatuma has found ways around the system, to make her life easier. She has a credit card which she uses sparingly. Many credit card companies have a 15 day grace period when a customer pay back what they owe without accumulating interest. When Fatuma uses her credit card she takes advantage of the 15 day grace period.

Though there are ways to work with the system and still stay true to their religion, Fatuma sees her people

compromising more and more. Slowly, through compromising, the strength of their culture and religion is being eliminated in the younger generations. In the absence of clans and strong communities many Somali youth struggle to identify with their heritage, while still function in Americas culture. In Fatuma's opinion there will be a battle for their culture to survive into the next generation.

Students must attend American school, where English is the primary language. Since they spend most of their time in school and in spaces where only English is spoken, many have trouble remembering their native language. Fatuma used to speak her native language, as well as Swahili but since her English is in constant use, she finds herself struggling to remember the languages of her ancestors.

Fatuma struggles with all she must compromise in her life. In the near future she would like to go into business. In America as a sign of greeting and respect people shake hands; it seems like a harmless custom. But for Fatuma it means crossing a line. In her culture it is inappropriate for a woman to shake a man's hand. They believe that this simple physical contact could cause one to sin in their thoughts. While she could simply nod a hello she worries that it may be misconstrued as a sign of disrespect. So she has stepped out of her comfort zone as to not offend anyone. She is just trying to fit in but she worries that one compromise will lead

to another. "Today it is shaking hands, next it will be something else."

An issue that Fatuma will not compromise, but sees many of her peers compromising, is with America's drinking culture. The Islamic religion does not allow drinking, which poses a problem with many social situations Fatuma encounters. Several times groups she is involved with on campus will hold a meeting at a bar. The setting makes her very uncomfortable though she will still attend but declines any offers to drink. She still worries that the people she is with may not understand. While she has chosen to abstain from drinking many of her Somali peers have chosen another route. They go to the bars and order drinks because it's what is done in America. "Some Somali come to this country and completely change. They forget who they are and where they came from."

To try and keep her culture alive, Fatuma plans to raise her children with a strong sense of their heritage. While she admits that this will be difficult she wants to do her best. Her children will be raised in America but she will make sure that they learn the *Qur'an*. Ideally she would like for her children to be raised as much Somali as possible but realistically she realizes that this might not happen. So she intends on focusing strongly on keeping their religion. Religion is more important than culture. Even though the

Somali have been here for only a few decades their beautiful culture is already beginning to disappear and there may not be anything anyone can do about it. In order for them to survive compromises are needed.

~Fighting To Pray~

There is one compromise in which the Somali community will not bend. The clash of religious practices has caused many Somali to challenge the system.

In Islam followers must pray five times a day. Times of prayer are specified and at those times followers kneel down for a few minutes of worship. For countries where Islam is overwhelmingly practiced everyone's day revolves around the times of prayer. In comparison it is similar to the way America's calendar designates Sunday as a day off (started for Christian religious purposes). Wednesday nights are considered holy, due to the large number of religious youth groups that meet on that night, so schools have deemed it inappropriate to hold school functions on this night. America is primarily Christian; our daily timeline has been molded to fit a Christian life style.

What the Somali are having trouble with is that one of the five prayer times takes place in the middle of the day, when most are at work or school. While the schools have been very accommodating, providing a space where children

may go and pray during the day, businesses have not been as supportive. Some companies have even made it a policy stating prayer is not allowed during the work day.

Fatuma doesn't understand why it is so hard for employers to accommodate their employees. "It doesn't take too much time to pray, two minutes! Can you spare two, three minutes to pray? You can!" In her eyes it's all about compromise, if the employers want their employees to work then the least they could do is give them something in return. They allow their Christian employees time on the weekend to go to their place of worship and pray, so why not allow the Somali five minutes to pray at work.

For some the choice comes down to, stop praying or be fired. In their eyes there isn't any other choice, they choose prayer. To choose work would be denying Allah. It is not that they don't wish to work; prayer simply affects both the human life and the after life.

It is very important for Somali to work; there is a strong obligation to financially take care of one's family. When employers will not accommodate their religion they are forced to quit or are fired. This puts them back on welfare which is another issue that many feel Somali are taking advantage of. But when they are forced out of a job they must go back to the system to survive. "[it is hard] you want

a job but they want you to do something that you are uncomfortable with." It is all about give and take.

~Arranged Marriage? ~

Fatuma lives away from her family. In order to attend college she rents her own apartment in St. Cloud. For a female in her culture this is very unusual. The majority of Somali women live with their mothers and fathers until they are married. A female living by herself would be cause for suspicion that perhaps she had disgraced her family.

A young woman will live with her family until her parents have found someone else to take care of her. The Somali still practice the custom of arranged marriage. Fatuma informed me that if she were still in Kenya she could have been married years ago. I was very interested in her views on arranged marriage because it was such an ancient concept to me. My parents would never encourage me to marry young, not in a million years.

One reason the Somali practice arranged marriage is because in their culture dating is not allowed. Other cultures may see it as a way to get to know someone but Somali feel that the only way to really know someone is if you live with them.

Another reason for arranged marriage is to make sure the young women is taken care of. A woman living by herself

is very susceptible to harm and unwanted attention. If she lives with her parents or husband she will be safe.

In Somalia the process of arranging the marriage and then the marriage itself is a grand event. If a man sees a girl and he thinks she would make a good wife he does not approach her but goes and speaks with the elders in his family. The potential groom must make an appointment with the girl's parents to which he brings the elders from his family and make his intentions known. He has to make an appointment because this day is very important.

The girl's parents will clean the house and prepare a large meal for the event. On the day of the "appointment" the elders in the girl's family as well as her parents meet with the potential groom, his parents, and elders of his family. They all discuss the marriage. At the end the parents decide if the groom is fit for their daughter. "It's not as bad as people make it out to be." Sometimes the parents will even let the daughter have a say in the agreement.

On the day of the wedding the men in the community gather in the morning. The groom and the father of the bride meet to discuss the *Mehr*. *Mehr* is a type of dowry or insurance. If the husband were ever to leave his wife or die, then the wife will have this money to help support her. While the men negotiate, the women prepare the bride. Her arms are painted elaborately with henna and she is dressed

with beautiful fabric. A camel is killed and prepared for the evening meal. At night both groups join together for a meal and dancing. Men and women don't dance together but in separate groups.

The media has projected this process and arranged marriages to have a disastrous ending. But the way Fatuma sees it, it's not just the Muslim women who are oppressed by their husbands; women in America are also oppressed by their husbands. It happens in all cultures. And while Americans might see some Muslim men as oppressors to their wives, American men are not seen much better.

Fatuma is very hesitant around American men. She is afraid that if she ever married an American man that he might beat her or kill her for money. One might wonder where she would get such an idea! Fatuma has a love for *Lifetime* movies. In most of the movies the men kill their wives for money or out of hate. What she knows of American marriages is what she has seen in these movies and from her perspective its all about money and jealousy. The media has sent negative images of marriage in different cultures. It's all how one perceives things; perceptions can be different depending on what your world view is.

While we were sitting discussing marriage Fatuma pulled out a book she was reading called, *The Muslim Marriage Guide*. She wants to know everything she can about marriage

in her religion. While she is researching, she had no intention of getting married anytime soon. Being in America allows her more time and flexibility. She wants to finish her education so she will be able to provide for herself and her family. But Fatuma would not mind having her marriage arranged. To be happy in an arranged marriage the woman must be willing to give her husband a chance to make her happy. "If you see the man as an oppressor then you will always view him as the man who took your freedom away, and you will be miserable." To make the marriage work it's all about compromise. It's a process of learning to love each other. "It's like a blind date . . . for life!"

