The First Somali Diaspora: A Transnational History of Migration, Race, and Colonialism

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PREFACE

This story began with a stranger's phone call. It was an early June evening in 2020. George Floyd had been dead for exactly seven days, and the world looked on as protesters against police brutality took to the streets of Minneapolis and across the United States. I was in my second year in the history department at the University of Minnesota. I came to graduate school after an eight-year career in journalism, and so in that fateful summer, I put on my reporter's hat, covering issues of race, immigration, and the impact of COVID-19. Just a few hours before the phone call, the Minnesota-based news outlet *Sahan Journal* had published my latest piece. In it, I explained how young Somali Americans were increasingly identifying with the African American struggle—and the integral role they were playing in confronting police brutality and racial injustice. I also offered brief historical context, noting that the first Somalis—a small group of students and government personnel—had arrived in the United States in the early 1960s.[1]

I picked up the phone. The voice on the other end belonged to Abdi Mohamed Suleiman, a retired engineer who had lived in Harlem during the early 1980s as an undergraduate student at the City University of New York. He had called to discuss the piece—and to gently correct my claim that the first Somalis had arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s. His tone, warm and unassuming, felt more like an invitation to a deeper conversation about the community's long history in the United States than a challenge to my piece. Suleiman told me of the Somali men who had lived in the U.S. long before the post-independence elites arrived. He spoke of former seafarers who settled in New York during the first half of the twentieth century, of running into them in the

[1] Ibrahim Hirsi, "Young Minnesota Somalis, asserting their blackness, take center stage in George Floyd protests," *Sahan Journal*, June 2, 2020, https://sahanjournal.com/the-killing-of-george-floyd/young-minnesota-somalis-black-george-floyd-protests/

streets of Harlem as he rushed to and from classes, and of a Somali-owned restaurant and bar they frequented—a world of chatter, card games, fights, and quiet acts of generosity. He recalled attending the funeral services of some of these men, who arrived in their twenties and thirties and died of old age. There were even some, he said, who entered the U.S. in the 1890s and died long before he had arrived in the country.

I listened to Suleiman in awe, wondering why I had never heard of these Somali migrants before. By then, I had lived in the U.S. for exactly fifteen years, one of more than 86,000 Somali residents in Minnesota, home to the largest Somali population in the country.[2] Yet throughout those years, the narratives I encountered—in books, films, news reports—focused almost entirely on the more recent Somali immigrants and refugees. I had come to learn about the students, diplomats, and government workers of the post-1960s only through my journalism work and tried my best to bring their presence to light in articles like the one that prompted Suleiman's call that June evening. And now, through Suleiman, I was discovering an even earlier group of Somalis whose presence remains largely absent from historical scholarship. Their erasure mirrors that of other Black migrants from continental Africa who also settled in America during the first half of the twentieth century.

After my conversation with Suleiman, I began to investigate this lost history in earnest. In the process, I learned that early Somali migrants in the U.S. hailed from pastoral communities in British Somaliland and, in their teens and twenties, joined the global colonial labor force at sea and ashore. Although Somalis had been active in the colonial economy since at least the early nineteenth century, their participation increased at the turn of the twentieth century. Many

[2] Jayne Williamson-Lee, "Is Minnesota home to the largest number of Somali Americans in the country?" *MinnPost*, July 11, 2023, https://www.minnpost.com/fact-briefs/2023/07/is-minnesota-home-to-the-largest-number-of-somali-americans-in-the-country/#:~:text=Yes.,largest%20population%20in%20the%20country.

worked as firemen and trimmers in the engine rooms of British steamships that transported people and goods throughout the world. Others worked in manufacturing, construction, and mining industries or operated elevators and small businesses such as cafés, restaurants, and lodging houses. The Somalis Suleiman spoke of were part of the first Somali diaspora: migrants dispersed across cities and towns in Arabia, Africa, Europe, and North America. They toiled in engine rooms, on manufacturing assembly lines, and in mining fields alongside other colonial migrant laborers from Yemen, Liberia, Barbados, Jamaica, India, Bangladesh.

The more I learned about the journeys and experiences of these workers, the more frustrated and fascinated I grew. Frustrated, because there was virtually no writing about them—just a few lines here and there noting their early existence in passing. Fascinated, because for the first time, I was uncovering a history that connected Somalis to the sea—not as the gun-wielding pirates that popular narratives have long fixated on (think about the Oscar-nominated *Captain Phillips*), but as global maritime laborers who powered the maritime economy that transported passengers and commodities and mail service across the world. Throughout the twentieth century, especially in the first half, Somali seafarers and factory workers could be found in places few would expect: Norfolk, Virginia; Bahia, Brazil; Lisbon, Portugal; Saint Vincent, the Caribbean; Cape Town, South Africa.

In September, just three months after my call with Suleiman, I decided to devote the rest of my graduate career to researching and writing about these early Somali migrant laborers. I have traced their stories through institutional archives, in government and historical newspaper databases, and in the fading memories of their descendants and people like Suleiman. What follows is a reconstruction of that history.

INTRODUCTION

Tracing the Lost History of Somali Migrant Laborers

> The Somali wanders afar. You will find him working as a deckhand, fireman, or steward on all the great liners trading to the East. I know of a Somali tobacconist in Cardiff, a Somali mechanic in New York, and a Somali trader in Bombay, the latter of whom speaks French, English, and Italian fluently.
>
> —Henry Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somals*, 1921.

One August morning in 2022, I settled into a quiet room at the National Library of Wales, in the historic university town of Aberystwyth, listening to oral history interviews of Somali seafarers and their descendants who lived and worked in Britain more than a century ago. My journey to that room had begun two years earlier, when I first came across references to the Butetown History and Arts Centre, a non-profit community center that had been collecting, preserving, and publishing materials about the history of Black people in Cardiff, Wales, since the late 1980s. I learned through a local news report that the center was closing due to funding constraints and had transferred its collections to the Heritage and Cultural Exchange, another community-based archival center in Cardiff.[3] In the summer of 2022, I left Minneapolis to study the collections at HCE. But soon after arriving, I discovered that the center no longer maintained a physical facility and had transferred most of the BHAC materials to Glamorgan Archives, also in Cardiff. When I traced the collections there, I was told that BHAC oral histories had been relocated yet

[3] Ruth Mosalski, *Wales Online*, May 20, 2016, https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/butetown-history-arts-centre-close-11365080; "In pictures: Remembering Tiger Bay," *BBC*, September 6, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-54026131

again—this time to the National Library of Wales, which houses a more advanced sound system. And so, on that August morning, I finally found myself in that listening room.

One of the recordings I listened to was a wide-ranging interview with Stella Hersi, the eldest daughter of a Somali seafarer and a Russian Jewish refugee.[4] Moosa Hersi, her father, was born in the British-occupied Aden—now part of Yemen—in 1898. It was not uncommon at the time for Somali families to have children in Aden, which had long served as a destination for employment. In fact, Somalis had maintained a conspicuous presence there even decades before the British Empire formally took possession of the city in 1839. In port towns like Aden, they were integral to the colonial economy as racialized and exploited maritime laborers and domestic servants.[5] By the turn of the twentieth century, young Somali men were increasingly coming into contact with European shipping companies that recruited them for engine room jobs. This was largely because white workers regularly protested the backbreaking fireman and trimmer positions in the engine rooms—roles that required breaking and shoveling coal into burning furnaces. Through organized strikes, these workers demanded improved conditions and better pay. Rather than meet their demands, employers turned to colonial laborers to fill those roles.[6] Moosa Hersi was thus among thousands of migrants recruited from across European colonies in Africa, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean islands.

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[4] "Interview with Stella Hersi," audio recording, unprocessed collection, The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, accessed in August 2020.

[5] Leila Ingrams and Richard Pankhurst, "Somali Migration to Aden from the 19th to the 21st Centuries," in *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia*, ed. Shihan de S Jayasuriya and Jean-Pierre Angenot (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 107-118; Edward A. Alpers, "The Somali Community at Aden in the Nineteenth Century," *Northeast African Studies* 8, no. 2/3 (1986): 143–68; Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* 32, no. 2 (1977): 159–76; Frederick M. Hunter, *An Account of the British Settlement of Aden in Arabia* (London: Trübner, 1877).

[6] Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment," 58-59; Derek Matthews, "1889 And All That: New Views on the New Unionism," *International Review of Social History* 36, no. 1 (1991): 24–58.

Sarah Slapper, Stella's mother, was born in Russia in 1898 to a German-Jewish mother and a Russian-Jewish father. When Sarah was six years old, the Slapper family fled to London. Violent antisemitic attacks—or pogroms—swept through Russia between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Mass destruction, thousands killed, hundreds of thousands wounded, orphaned and rendered homeless—this was the legacy of pogroms," as a historian once said of the period.[7] The violence sparked mass exoduses that sent Jewish refugees across Western Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Sarah and her family were among 120,000 to 150,000 Eastern European Jews who settled in Britain between 1881 and 1914. In London, her parents started a tailoring business through which they sustained their children.[8]

In the 1920s, when Sarah was in her early twenties, she moved to Butetown—also known as Tiger Bay—a Cardiff dockside settlement that was home to a growing number of multi-ethnic colonial migrant laborers. Most of these workers had arrived to fill job openings created by a massive labor shortage during the First World War. They constituted a broader class of cheap, racialized laborers of color who worked across various sectors of the colonial economy: the maritime, service, and manufacturing industries.[9] Tiger Bay served as a base for migrant seafarers transporting goods and passengers aboard British steamships. Over time, some of them

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[7] Shlomo Lambroza, "The Tsarist Government and the Pogroms of 1903-6," *Modern Judaism* 7, no. 3 (1987), 1; Benjamin Nathans, "Introduction," in *The Revolution of 1905 and Russia's Jews*, ed. Stefani Hoffman and Ezra Mendelsohn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 11.

[8] David Dee, "'The Sunshine of Manly Sports and Pastimes': Sport and the Integration of Jewish Refugees in Britain, 1895-1914," *Immigrants and Minorities* 30, no. 2–3 (2012), 321; Brendan McGeever, "How Jewish Socialists Fought to Stop the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War," *Jacobin*, June 2, 2020, https://jacobin.com/2020/06/antisemitism-russian-revolution-bolsheviks-pogroms

[9] Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, "The Construction and Negotiation of Racialized Borders in Cardiff Docklands" in *Gendering Border Studies*, edited by Jane Aaron, Henrice Altink, and Chris Weedon (University of Wales Press, 2010), 224; John E. Roemer, Woojin Lee, and Karine van der Straeten, *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution : Multi-Issue Politics in Advanced Democracies* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 135; Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Cardiff, Wales: Butetown History and Arts Center, 2004), 1.

formed service businesses catering to fellow seafarers and their families. These businesses included lodging houses, cafés, and restaurants that fostered a sense of community among migrants.[10] Lodging house owners often hired working-class white women as bookkeepers and caretakers. Soon after relocating to Tiger Bay, Sarah found work at a Somali-owned house on Nelson Street. It was there that she met the seafarer Moosa Hersi. By the end of that decade, the couple had four children together: Ali (or Howard), Omar, Stella, and Marai.[11]

This dissertation aims to excavate the lost history of Somali migrant laborers and their descendants—people like Moosa Hersi and his family—who were integral to the transnational colonial economy throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It traces their journeys from pastoral communities in British Somaliland to cities and towns in Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—global imperial centers in which they established what became the first Somali diaspora. While the project mainly focuses on the journeys and experiences of Somali communities in the U.K. and the U.S., this does not mean that early Somali migration was confined to these two countries. Indeed, Somalis were scattered across Arabia, the Americas, Australia, Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and Africa's southern, northern, and eastern regions. They reached these places as colonial servicemen, livestock traders, coal miners, construction workers, Islamic students, and seafarers.

If Somali migrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were scattered across the world, then why focus on the communities that settled in the United Kingdom and the United States? What drew them to these countries? What neighborhoods did they live in? How

[10] See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a detailed discussion.

[11] Sara Hersi, letter to Arthur Henderson, March 9, 1930, Somaliland: Original Correspondence, CO 535/90/9, National Archives, London, United Kingdom; interview with Stella Hersi.

did colonialism shape their migration? How did employers and state officials in both countries racialize Somali migrants? From which region in Somalia did these laborers come? How did they interact with other racialized groups in America and Britain? How did the legacies of slavery, anti-Blackness, and Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. affect their daily lives and immigration status? And what of the racialized surveillance regimes that British authorities deployed to police and contain subjects in the metropole? These questions, and more, are explored in the sections that follow—and throughout the dissertation. However, before delving into this chapter—which introduces the dissertation and its sources and methodology—I begin with a brief explanation of the early Somali populations on both sides of the Atlantic and how I use the terms "diaspora" and "Black" to describe the migrants.

* * *

Somali population in Britain: There is no clear answer to how many Somali migrants settled in the United Kingdom and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, and several reasons explain this challenge. First, in Britain, Somalis mostly worked as global seafarers, constantly on the move and spending most of their time at sea. Once they came ashore between voyages, they stayed in seamen's boarding houses, which did not serve as stable residences and made it hard for officials to keep track of them. In addition, many Somalis had already spent considerable time in places like Aden and Port Said before arriving in Britain, where they often shared lodging with Arab laborers. Because Somalis and Arabs shared a common religion (Islam), sometimes spoke the same language (Arabic), and lived in close proximity (in Arab lodging houses), they were frequently grouped under the label "Arab," which further obscured the presence of Somalis.

That said, we can still estimate the Somali migrant population in Britain during the period in question. In the summer of 1938, an officer with the local government in Cardiff reported that 230 Arabs and 108 Somalis who were "registered with the police" lived in the city.[12] If a total of 338 Somalis and Arabs were registered with the police, the officer added, an estimated 300–500 more Somalis and Arabs were "in possession of documents establishing them as British subjects and not registered with the police but who are residents of this city."[13] When we add the Cardiff Somali population to those living in other parts of the country—Liverpool, South Shields, Sheffield, London, Birmingham, Glasgow—we can estimate their numbers (and those of their biracial children) to be 3,000–5,000.

Somali population in America: As in Britain, we do not know the exact population of early U.S. Somali migrants. This is partly because most of them jumped ship, thus becoming undocumented migrants and avoiding contact with authorities for fear of detention and deportation. Still, shipping records indicate that Somali laborers arrived at and departed from American ports throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Other sources, such as newspaper accounts, official documents, and oral history interviews, situate Somalis in various U.S. states—Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio—during this period.

When estimating the total Somali population, we can refer to three sources. The first is a government document that puts the number of U.S.-based Somali and Adenese migrants at about 2,000 in the 1920s. Although the document offers no breakdown, it is reasonable to assume that

[12] Colonial migrants unable to prove their British citizenship were required to register with the police.
[13] William Reed, letter to the deputy chief of constable, Cardiff City Police, DCONC/7/5/1-3, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Walkes, UK.

between one-half and one-third of them were Somalis.[14] We know that more Somalis joined them during the 1940s and 1950s, increasing their numbers to the hundreds. The second source is a memoir by Abdirisak Haji Husein, a prominent Somali official, who lived in New York in the early 1950s and interacted with Somali laborers in Harlem. Husein estimated that there were around 300 in New York alone. It is likely that a few hundred more were spread across other states.[15] The third source is an oral history interview with Abdi Suleiman and others who lived in Harlem. Suleiman estimated the number of early Somali migrants at approximately 1,000.[16] Based on these three sources, it is reasonable to estimate that between 600 and 1,000 Somalis lived in the U.S. from 1900 to 1960.

Diaspora: The term *diaspora*, as noted by scholar Judith T. Shuval, comes from *diaspeirō*, a Greek word used to describe migration and colonization. The term, along with others with similar meanings in Hebrew, was first applied to the "classic" dispersals of Greeks, Jews, and Armenians in exile. In recent decades, however, the term has been used for various other communities—Chinese, Indians, Italians, Germans, Nigerians—scattered around the world.[17] In my dissertation, I use *diaspora* in much the same way: to tell the history of Somalis who, during the period in question, lived outside their homeland, be that in other parts of continental Africa, Arabia, Europe, or North America.

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[14] John Cameron, letter to Esmé Howard, British Ambassador to the United States, August 10, 1929, CO 725/21/1, National Archives, London, United Kingdom.

[15] Abdirazak Haji Hussein, *Abdirazak Haji Hussein: My Role in the Foundation of the Somali Nation-State: A Political Memoir* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2017), 103-4.

[16] Abdi Suleiman, oral history interview by Ibrahim Hirsi, July 2024.

[17] Judith T. Shuval, "Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm," *International Migration* 38, no. 5 (2000): 42; Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 2.

Black: Race, like gender and other categories, is a social construct and discursive. In an ideal world, it would never have existed or carried significance. In our world, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant remind us, race has been and "will always be at the center of the American experience."[18] One can add that race—and racism—also informed the colonial and capitalist systems that shaped the lives of Somali migrant laborers in maritime and manufacturing economies. Within these systems, they became incorporated into existing racial categories: "Black," "Negro," "Colored," "African." They might or might not have seen themselves in any of these imposed labels. However, they had no choice: the racial structures they encountered in Britain and the United States dictated their fate—the jobs they performed, the pay they earned, the neighborhoods they lived in—based on their skin color. At the risk of reproducing imposed racial labels, this dissertation categorizes Somali migrants as Black in the same way scholars have described Nigerians, Ethiopians, and Jamaicans.[19] Though imperfect, even problematic to some, this approach provides the necessary framework for reconstructing the history of these racialized, exploited global migrant laborers.

Dissertation Background

The dissertation primarily focuses on the first five decades of the twentieth century. However, this is not to suggest that Somalis' engagement with the outside world began only in 1900. Even

[18] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) 6, cited in Joane Nagel, "Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s. Michael Omi , Howard Winant" *The American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 4 (1988): 1025–27, and in Daniel HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) 1.

[19] James Lorand Matory, *Stigma and Culture : Last-Place Anxiety in Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Yoku Shaw-Taylor, and Steven A Tuch, *The Other African Americans: Contemporary African and Caribbean Immigrants in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007); Percy C Hintzen, Jean Muteba Rahier, Problematizing Blackness: Self-Ethnographies by Black Immigrants to the United States (New York: Routledge, 2003).

centuries earlier, they used the international waterways along the Somali coast—the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean—as traders, students, pilgrims, boatmen, and colonial maritime laborers. Until the late nineteenth century, their voyages were often confined to regions along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Traders, for instance, transported livestock to Arabia in exchange for sugar and dates and rice and textiles and exoticized goods and foodstuffs. Students and pilgrims journeyed to Saudi Arabia to pursue Islamic education and perform Islamic rituals.[20]

Others left behind their pastoral lives in search of employment opportunities and business ventures in present-day Yemen. One of the earliest glimpses into the long history of Somali involvement in the colonial economy comes from the British explorer and scholar Richard Burton. In his seminal work, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, first published in 1856, Burton offered accounts—though deeply racist and condescending at times—of the customs, languages, and politics of the Somali people he encountered in the ancient cities of Zaila, Harrar, and Berbera. His journey began in Aden, where he met Somali migrant laborers who had been living and working in the port city for decades. Burton enlisted several of them to serve as porters and guides for his daring months-long expedition into the Horn of Africa. He provided brief introductions to a number of these companions, including Mohammed Mahmud—nicknamed *El Hammal*, "the porter" in Arabic—a respected sergeant in the Aden police force.

In *First Footsteps*, we catch a glimpse of Mahmud's dramatic journey from his pastoral family in British Somaliland to the garrison city of Aden:

> An orphan in early youth, and becoming, to use his own phrase, sick of milk, he ran away from his tribe, the Habr Gerhajis, and engaged himself as a coaltrimmer with the slaves on board an Indian war-steamer. After rising in rank to the command of the crew, he

[20] See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a detailed discussion.

> became servant and interpreter to travellers, visited distant lands—Egypt and Calcutta—and finally settled as a Feringhee policeman.

In addition to Mahmud, Burton introduced another member of the expedition team, Guled, also one of the early Somali settlers in Yemen. Like Mahmud, Guled served in the Aden police force. Of Guled's migration from Somaliland to Aden, Burton wrote:

> His father was a man of property, and his brethren near Berberah are wealthy Bedouins: yet he ran away from his native country when seven or eight years old, and became a servant in the house of a butter merchant at Mocha. Thence he went to Aden, where he began with private service, and ended his career in the police.

The third Somali in Burton's list of introductions is forty-year-old Abdy Abokr, nicknamed "End of Time." Of Abokr and his family, Burton wrote:

> His father was a wealthy shipowner in his day; but, cursed with Abdy and another son, the old man has lost all his property, his children have deserted him, and he now depends entirely upon the charity of the Zayla chief. The "End of Time" has squandered considerable sums in travelling far and wide from Harar to Cutch, he has managed everywhere to perpetrate some peculiar villany.[21]

By the time Mahmud, Guled, and Abokr met Burton in 1854, they had already secured roles within the colonial labor force in Aden. Mahmud and Guled, in particular, share similar experiences. Both fled their homeland to start anew in Yemen at a younger age: Mahmud was in his early youth, and Guled was only seven or eight. If Burton's account is accurate, it is likely they were in their thirties or forties when they joined the expedition, given that it would have taken them years to settle into their careers in the colonial administration. In Guled's case, leaving Somaliland before the age of ten suggests he may have arrived in Yemen as early as the 1810s or 1820s—decades before the British Empire seized Aden in 1839.

[21] Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa: Or, An Exploration of Harar*, *Cambridge Library Collection - African Studies* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7-16.

In addition to arriving in Yemen at a young age during the early nineteenth century, both Mahmud and Guled were seasoned travelers by the time they met Burton. So impressed was Burton by their experience that he included their travel résumés in the brief biographical sketches among key members of the expedition team. Of Guled, for instance, Burton wrote that he "squandered considerable sums in travelling far and wide from Harar to Cutch." And of Mahmud, Burton noted that the Somali had journeyed to such "distant lands" as Egypt and India, years before rising to the rank of sergeant in Aden. Indeed, it was partly because of their travel experiences that Burton selected the men, appointing Mahmud as "the managing man" who oversaw the expedition.

Understanding this periodization is particularly crucial for two reasons. First, even in the early nineteenth century, Somalis were migrating to Arabia. They left behind their pastoral lives—sometimes as children—to take up domestic work or wage labor. Once in places such as Aden and Port Said, European colonial employers stationed along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean exploited the migrants, assigning them menial tasks for minimal pay. As Burton reported, Mahmud "engaged himself as a coaltrimmer with the slaves on board an Indian war-steamer." If we take Burton's use of "slaves" literally—and I do here—then he was referring to the period before the British Empire officially abolished slavery in 1833. However, it's also likely that he was referring to early post-emancipation years. Although Britain had outlawed slavery, the Arab slave trade remained active along the sea lines that link Africa and Arabia well into the twentieth century. British ships continued to intercept vessels carrying African captives across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.[22] After their release, many of them were absorbed into the colonial labor

[22] George Lydiard Sullivan, *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa: Narrative of Five Years' Experiences in the Suppression of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Suzanne Miers, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in Saudi Arabia and the Arab States on the Persian Gulf, 1921—63,"

system, often working under exploitative conditions that closely resembled slavery. In any case, the fact that Somalis like Mahmud labored alongside enslaved or formerly enslaved Africans reveals not only their deep integration into the imperial economy well before the Scramble for Africa, but also the extent of their exploitation and racialization in that system as well as the broader historical entanglements linking Somali migration and the African slave trade.

Second, throughout most of the nineteenth century, the movements of Somali travelers and migrants were largely confined to routes along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. As Burton noted, the furthest Mahmud and Guled reached prior to the 1850s was Egypt and India. This regional containment was not accidental. Most Africans who reached Europe or North America at the time did so as forced migrants. For capitalist colonial and imperial regimes, there was little incentive to recruit voluntary migrants. Enslaved Africans and their descendants were already performing the essential task of working the plantations in the United States. For the colonized African masses, sizable voluntary migration would not begin until after slavery was abolished in the U.S. in the 1860s, which was made possible, in part, by the rise of European colonialism.

Beginning with that vantage point, this dissertation shows that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Somalis were no longer confined to the familiar routes along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. For the first time, they were traversing the Atlantic Ocean to reach international metropolises in Europe, Australia, North America, and South America. Many of these Somalis came from pastoral families and first encountered European steamship owners in Arabian port cities. From there, they became laborers toiling in the engine rooms of European

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in *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, 120–36, 2013; Matthew S. Hopper, "Slavery and the Slave Trades in the Indian Ocean and Arab Worlds: Global Connections and Disconnections," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, 2008, 1-33, https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/indian-ocean/hopper.pdf.

steamships that carried passengers and cargo throughout the world. The growing Somali presence in the global maritime economy in this period was no coincidence. It coincided with the expansion and formalization of European colonialism in Africa. By the turn of the twentieth century, Somalia had been carved into three territories, each under the control of a separate European power: British Somaliland, French Somaliland, and Italian Somaliland.

The dissertation is primarily concerned with migrants from British Somaliland. I focus on this group for three reasons. First, the majority of Somali migrant laborers in question came from British Somaliland. As subjects of a British protectorate, they faced fewer legal obstacles to living and working in the British colony of Aden than, say, migrants from Italian Somaliland. Second, British Somaliland—especially the port city of Berbera—is geographically closer to Aden than most, if not all, regions under Italian or French control. In fact, the port city of Berbera was widely regarded as a gateway to southern Arabia. Because of this proximity, migrants—children included—could cross the Gulf of Aden into Yemen with relative ease, often traveling in small boats that operated between Somali and Arabian ports. Third, the British Empire maintained dominance over the maritime routes. As the empire expanded over the nineteenth century, so, too, did its reach across the world's major sea lines. By 1880, as historian David Killingray noted, Britain possessed not only the most extensive colonial empire but also the world's largest naval and commercial shipping fleets.[23]

Somalis came into contact with British shipping companies mainly in Aden. Although they had maintained a presence along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean for centuries, the final

[23] David Killingray, "Introduction: Imperial Seas: Cultural Exchange and Commerce in the British Empire 1780–1900," in *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by David Margarette Lincoln Killingray and Nigel Rigby, NED-New Edition., 1–12 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2004) http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt9qdht8.6.

decades of the nineteenth century opened new pathways for Somali migrants to reach Western countries for the first time. These migrants, though small in number, worked as firemen and trimmers in the engine rooms of steamships and reached cities as far away as London. By the turn of the twentieth century, the number of Somali engine-room workers had grown. Many shipping companies operated direct routes between Arabia and major British ports, enabling steady recruitment of colonial laborers. They were part of a broader network of global migrant laborers drawn from British colonies in West Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean.[24] Most often, these workers were confined to the engine room, where they endured dangerous conditions: suffocating soot, excessive heat, and poor ventilation. Such conditions led to sudden deaths from heat exhaustion, respiratory illnesses, and heart diseases.[25] The decision to place them in these positions was not accidental: as colonial and racialized laborers, they were viewed as inferior and thus expendable, their bodies sacrificed to the hellish conditions.

These jobs eventually led to the settlement of Somali migrants in both the United States and the United Kingdom in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawn by wartime jobs during the Great War, these diasporas emerged simultaneously in both countries, though each group pursued different occupations depending on where they settled. In Britain, many remained in

[24] Laura Tabili, *We Ask British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994); Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999); Jacqueline Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace: The 1919 Seaport Riots in Perspective," in *Minorities and the First World War: From War to Peace*, edited by Hannah Ewence and Tim Grady, 175–198 (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

[25] Tania Bhattacharyya, "Steam and Stokehold: Steamship Labour, Colonial Racecraft and Bombay's Sidi *jamāt,*" *Historical Materialism* 31, no 2, (2023): 179-180; Richard de Kerbrech, *Down Amongst the Black Gang: The World and Workplace of RMS Titanic's Stokers* (The History Press, 2014), 65-84; Jonathan Hyslop, "Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c. 1880-1954," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1. (2009): 56; Frank T. Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service* (New York,1900,) 317, 324.

maritime labor, making their home base dockside settlements in cities like Cardiff, Liverpool, and South Shields. They toiled aboard British steamships—owned and operated by major London-based firms such as Australind Steam Shipping Company, Prince Line, and the Royal Mail Packet Company—that transported coal, grain, fruit, mail, and minerals around the world. In the United States, by contrast, most of the migrants settled in the northeastern and midwestern states, where they found employment in the steel and service industries.[26]

In the dissertation, I call the Somali communities in the United Kingdom and the United States the "First Somali Diaspora" in Europe and the U.S. I use this label to distinguish them from the more recent immigrants and refugees who have settled in Europe and North America in the hundreds of thousands over the last four decades. Contemporary scholarship on Somalis often focuses on these populations whose displacement is connected to the outbreak of the 1991 civil war in Somalia. These studies examine critical issues such as global refugee crises, their economic precarity and resilience, and the Islamophobic violence Somali communities face.[27] Yet they have effectively eclipsed the much earlier presence of Somali migrants who followed the colonial steamships. Although these early migrants were scattered across dockside settlements in Britain and industrial cities in the United States, many established roots in Black neighborhoods such as Tiger Bay and Harlem. In these spaces, Somali migrants established

[26] Kenneth Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations in English Society* (London: Hunt, Barnard, and Co., 1947); Gordon Waterfield, *Morning Will Come* (London: John Murray, 1944); Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismail, "An Early Somali Autobiography" *Africa* 32, no. 3 (1977): 335-384; Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Cardiff, Wales: Butetown History and Arts Center, 2004).

[27] Cawo M. Abdi, *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Päivi Armila, Marko Kananen, and Yasemin Kontkanen, *The Contexts of Diaspora Citizenship: Somali Communities in Finland and the United States*, ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Maxamed Abumaye, *Black Muslim Refugee: Militarism, Policing, and Somali American Resistance to State Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025).

small businesses that served seafarers and often married or cohabited with local women with whom they raised multi-ethnic families. As people of color, they lived alongside other racialized communities, including Afro-Caribbeans and Black Americans.

Scholarly Contribution and Significance

By situating Somali migrations within the context of the colonial era and centering their history in the global maritime economy, the dissertation makes several scholarly interventions. First, it challenges stereotypes and academic paradigms that have portrayed Somalis solely as pastoral and agricultural nomads, whose survival is intrinsically tied to the land. The foundations of this framework were first laid by colonial officers and writers whose works often painted Somalis—especially the northerners—as tribal savages in never-ending violent struggles over scarce water wells and green pastures.[28] According to these accounts, Somali nomads have always moved around in search of rain and grazing ground. When discussing their southern counterparts, the narratives accentuate their traditions as sedentary farmers and cattle pastoralists, also with intimate ties to the land. In both cases, such framings have presented Somali political, economic, and social life as entirely land-bound and have effectively erased the centuries-old history that links Somalis to sea lines and global labor networks.

The dissertation, in contrast, situates Somali history at the center of the global maritime networks that helped shape the modern world. It highlights the ways in which Somalis have long engaged with international waterways that nearly encircle their country. While the majority of Somalis indeed hailed from pastoral and agricultural communities, this did not prevent them

[28] Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, an Exploration of Harar* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans,1856; London: Tylston and Edwards, 1894; New York: Dover; 1987); M. H. Rayne, who served as a district commissioner in British Somaliland in the early 1900s, calls Somalia "a wild country," and its peoples "a race of maniacs." See more in Rayne's book, *Sun, Sand and Somals* (England: Witherby, 1921, 1921), 4; 14.

from engaging with the outside world. Some of the earliest groups they encountered were Arabs, South Asians, and Persians who reached Somalia through the trade routes along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and established trading markets and settlements in what became Mogadishu, Berbera, Brava, and Zaila. As historians Lee Cassanelli and Scott Reese have shown, pastoral Somalis maintained commercial relationships with coastal and non-coastal traders as early as the tenth century, exchanging livestock, ivory, and hides for imported sugar, rice, and textiles. These encounters also fostered the exchange of cultural practices and religious ideas that helped shape a Somali identity, one that is distinctly both Muslim and Black.[29]

The dissertation also contributes to the scholarship on global migration and colonialism. It explains how the British Empire facilitated Somali migrations through formal and informal recruitment schemes that moved workers from Arabian port cities to British dockside settlements and American industrial cities. As colonial laborers of color, Somalis were exploited and racialized by shipping companies, which confined them to the most grueling positions on steamships—most notably the engine rooms—where they fed furnaces in harsh conditions for meager wages. Beyond the engine rooms, the racialization of these migrants continued in British and American segregated neighborhoods in which they lived. In Britain, law enforcement agencies routinely surveilled residential and commercial areas where colonial subjects of color worked and socialized. As mobile seafarers and racialized minorities, Somali migrants were rarely treated as equal citizens of the Empire. Instead, local authorities cast them as potential criminals inherently drawn to gambling and other "vice" activities. In the United States, they were similarly confined—both spatially and economically—to segregated areas like Harlem,

[29] Ioan M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali* 4th ed. (Ohio University Press, 2002), 11.

where many took on service jobs such as bartending or operating boilers and elevators in residential and commercial buildings.

In addition, the dissertation contributes to the studies of race and the Black diaspora. Until recently, scholars have often treated the history of migration as separate from Black studies. In the U.S. context, Black studies have traditionally focused on the histories of slavery and legalized segregation, and their lingering legacies. Immigration historians, by contrast, have concentrated on the push-pull factors that shaped migration from Europe, Asia, and Latin America, along with the policies and politics that impacted their arrivals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. African migrations during this same period have been—aside from a handful of recent studies—largely overlooked. This dissertation collapses the ostensible disciplinary boundaries that divide migration history and Black studies. As both Black people and colonial migrants, Somalis existed between the intersecting forces of anti-Blackness and anti-immigrant attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1945, the African American journalist and civil rights activist Henry Lee Moon witnessed this shared experience firsthand when he traveled to Cardiff as a staff correspondent for *The Chicago Defender*. "The citizens of the Bute Town are confronted by many of the problems of discrimination and segregation which beset their American kinsmen," Moon wrote. "And they have sought to meet the difficulties in much the same manner—through organized protests."[30]

The dissertation also documents the Somali involvement in transatlantic anti-racism and anti-colonialism in the first half of the twentieth century. In the face of racial discrimination, segregation, and colonialism, Somali migrants forged solidarities with African migrants, Black

[30] Henry Lee Moon, "Little Negro Community in Britain Faces Same Race Bias As U.S. Colored," *The Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1945.

Caribbeans, and African Americans to resist racism, demand better working conditions, and support anti-colonial movements in their homeland. In 1919, for instance, white mobs launched violent attacks on British dockside neighborhoods in what became known as "racial riots." Somalis stood shoulder to shoulder with other colonial migrants of color to fend off the attackers and protect their properties. These riots erupted in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, which had left Britain in an economic crisis. Rather than address the root causes of that crisis, Britons and their government placed the blame on colonial migrants, particularly those in the maritime sector, accusing them of taking their jobs.[31]

In response to this social unrest, the British government introduced a series of immigration laws to control, restrict, and exclude colonial migrants. These post-war laws were built on earlier anti-immigration policies that targeted poor migrants and refugees, especially Jews from Eastern Europe. As historian Jacqueline Jenkinson and others have explained, the 1905 Aliens Act was the first modern-day immigration policy, established to restrict the movements of foreign-born arrivals. It was specifically designed to exclude those deemed "undesirable" or "destitute aliens," who were feared to overwhelm public resources. In the aftermath of the Great War, the government expanded these restrictions through the Aliens Restriction Order. Initially introduced as wartime legislation, it imposed limits on "enemy aliens," barred entry or residency in certain coastal regions, and required those already in Britain to register with the police. In the early post-war years, the British Empire reworked these wartime measures to apply to its own subjects. The most notable of these were the 1920 Aliens

[31] Chapter 4 of this Dissertation; Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 137; Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd, 2010), 240, quoted in Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace."

Order and the 1925 Coloured Alien Seamen's Order—Britain's first state-sponsored, race-based immigration laws. These policies targeted colonial migrant laborers—including Somalis—by curbing their right to entry to the country, forcing them to register with the police as "aliens" if they could not prove British citizenship, and subjecting them to repatriation and deportation.[32]

By examining the history of British immigration policies through the lens of colonial migrants, the dissertation exposes how the British Empire exploited these migrants in times of need, only to discard them once they were no longer deemed useful. From the beginning of the twentieth century—especially in the second decade—the Empire actively recruited and employed colonial laborers without subjecting them to bureaucratic scrutiny over their citizenship or legal identity. The government made a calculated decision to overlook the nationality status of colonial migrants who worked aboard merchant navy steamships along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. As Jenkinson has noted, laborers from Aden and British Somaliland "could be freely employed in the merchant navy during the war."[33] This was a decision rooted in economic necessity: the British merchant navy desperately needed to fill the wartime labor shortage. Yet as the war came to a close, the Empire moved to expel those very workers. Indeed, if questions of legal status and documentation held no weight during the wartime period, those same documents suddenly became decisive in determining who could remain in the country or access employment in the post-war years.

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[32] Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2020), 105-6; Jordanna Bailkin, "Leaving Home: The Politics of Deportation in Postwar Britain," *The Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 852–82. doi:10.1086/590168; Laura Tabili, "'Keeping the Natives Under Control': Race Segregation and the Domestic Dimensions of Empire, 1920–1939" *International Labor and Working-Class History* 44 (1993): 64–78. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900012230.

[33] Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War*, 42.

As maritime employment declined and nativist and xenophobic sentiments intensified in Britain, Somali seafarers turned to the United States for job opportunities. Although Somali laborers had been arriving in the U.S. since at least the final decade of the nineteenth century, most came during and after the Great War. At the time, the booming American industrial sector was attracting not only foreign-born migrants but also African Americans fleeing the Jim Crow South for northern cities like Philadelphia and New York City and Chicago. Many of the Somali seafarers arriving during this period carried only discharge books, a passport-sized document that served as an employment ID card. While seafarers could use these documents to enter a country as transients, immigration inspectors at ports of entry did not recognize them as legal identification.[34] As a result, many jumped ship and quietly disappeared into crowded streets. Some found work in steel factories in cities like Buffalo, New York; Detroit, Michigan; and Youngstown, Ohio. Some secured jobs in residential and commercial buildings as elevator and boiler operators. Others invested their life savings in small businesses—mainly restaurants and grocery stores—that they established in Harlem.

The dissertation demonstrates the ways in which Somali migrants were racialized in the United States just as much as they were in the United Kingdom. As Black people, they were rendered inadmissible under the race-based U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, or the Johnson-Reed Act. This legislation represented the culmination of a series of nativist and racist federal policies that had shaped U.S. immigration since the nineteenth century. They included the 1875 Page Act, which barred the entry of those accused of prostitution; the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which excluded Chinese laborers; the 1882 Immigration Act, which prohibited people with criminal

[34] Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2020), 42.

records, mental or physical disabilities, or those deemed likely to become public charges; and the 1917 Immigration Act, which excluded most Asian migrants, expanded the categories of inadmissibility, and imposed a literacy test on new adult migrants.[35] And then there was the Johnson-Reed Act, which established a racist quota system that favored northern and western Europeans over migrants of color. Because most African countries were under colonial rule, a handful of independent countries were allowed a quota of 100 migrants each. As a result, Somali migrants who arrived during this period were effectively barred from lawful entry into the United States. Deserting their ships became their only viable option, and in doing so, they were automatically classified as undocumented migrants.

Although these early Somalis were dispersed across the United States, the majority settled in Harlem, where they established a community. Their presence in this predominantly Black neighborhood was no coincidence. The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation that long defined Black bodies in America also applied to them and other African migrants. Upon arrival, they became immediately incorporated into the broader racialized structures that relegated people of color to second-class citizenship, confined them to impoverished areas, and excluded them from pathways to upward mobility. The Somali settlement in Harlem occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. During this same period, large numbers of African Americans from the South and Black migrants from the Caribbean were also coming to northern and midwestern states. The dissertation shows how early Somali migrants formed what I term the "First Somali Diaspora" in the United States—emerging in the same era and from the same

[35] George Anthony Peffer, "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875-1882," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (1986): 28–46. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500484; Judy Yung, *The Chinese Exclusion Act and Angel Island: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/Saint Martin's, 2019); Naomi Paik, *Bans, Walls, Raids, Sanctuary: Understanding U.S. Immigration for the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020).

neighborhood that gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance. While the histories of African Americans and Black Caribbeans have received substantial scholarly attention, Somalis and other African migrants who lived and worked alongside them have remained largely invisible. This dissertation seeks to expand existing scholarship on the Black experience by foregrounding the presence and contributions of these early Somalis.

The dissertation also lays bare the pivotal role Somali migrants in Harlem played in the anti-colonial movement of the 1940s and 1950s. By this time, these migrants were experienced travelers with a keen awareness of the colonial and imperial powers that had shaped their lives. As residents of Harlem, they must have been conscious of Pan-Africanism, Black radicalism, and Black transnationalism: ideologies articulated not only in the Black press but also through the thundering voices of street-corner orators. Soon after anti-colonial activists in Somalia sounded the call for liberation from European colonial rule, Somali migrants in both Harlem and Tiger Bay responded. They forged connections between Somali anti-colonial leaders and African American activists, journalists, and politicians, who helped bring international attention to the Somali struggle. They amplified the Somali cause through newspaper articles, public events, and correspondence with United Nations delegations, mobilizing American liberals and leftists sympathetic to the broader anti-colonial agenda.[36] In addition to building transnational political networks, members of the early Somali diaspora offered direct material support. For instance,

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[36] "Somali Leader Thanks NAACP For Aid at UN," *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 4, 1949; Abdi Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats: Somalia's Aden A. Osman and Abdirazak H. Hussen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 49-50.

they financed the travel, lodging, and living expenses of Somali anti-colonial delegates attending meetings at the United Nations.[37]

My dissertation thus contributes to the rich body of scholarship on Black international solidarity in the era of anti-colonial revolutions in continental Africa and Black liberation movements in the United States. In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the global forces that drove the sweeping anti-colonial and decolonial movements in the twentieth century. As historians Erez Manela and Heather Streets-Salter have noted, these studies emphasize that individual liberation movements did not confront colonialism in isolation. Instead, they "drew extensively" from the ideas and strategies of anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggles around the world.[38] It was in this spirit of transnational residence that leaders of the Somali Youth League and early Somali migrants in Britain and the United States sought to forge solidarity. They cultivated personal and professional ties with prominent African American figures, including scholar-activists W. E. B. Du Bois and St. Clair Drake as well as Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and civil rights leader Roy Wilkins. For these and other leaders, the color line represented a global problem that demanded collective struggle. They believed that dismantling white supremacy in Mississippi was no less urgent than ending colonialism in Mogadishu.

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[37] Letter to Foreign Office, June 30, 1949, FO 371/73802, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK; Abdi Suleiman, oral history interview by Ibrahim Hirsi, July 2024; Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats, 50.*

[38] Erez Manela and Heather Streets-Salter, "Introduction" in *The Anticolonial Transnational : Imaginaries, Mobilities, and Networks in the Struggle against Empire*, eds. Erez Manela and Heather Streets-Salter (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1-3; Juliana Góes, Du Bois and Brazil: Reflections on Black Transnationalism and African Diaspora, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 19, no. 2 (2022): 293–308. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X2100045X.

The dissertation builds on a growing body of scholarship that explores the transnational history of colonial migrant laborers across both sides of the Atlantic. In the British context, historians such as Jacqueline Jenkinson, Laura Tabili, Diane Frost, and Hakim Adi have written extensively on colonial migrants, immigration policies, and racialized communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They trace the journeys that brought these migrants to Britain, examine the exploitative practices of the British Empire, and analyze the racist policies, political dynamics, and uprisings that followed the arrival of colonial subjects.[39] These historians place their subjects within broader historical frameworks—colonialism, the maritime economy, racism, the two world wars, and anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments—all of which also feature prominently in my dissertation.

However, my project departs from the work of these scholars in two significant ways. First, rather than grouping all colonial migrants, I focus on one ethnic community: Somalis. This narrower lens enables a more nuanced understanding of their origins and underscores their longstanding historical connections to the sea lines, dating back centuries before they became "colonial subjects" of European empires. Indeed, rather than situating their initial entry into the global maritime industry at the turn of the twentieth century with the advent of European

[39] Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Black 1919: Riots, Resistance and Racism in Imperial Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019); Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020); Jacqueline Jenkinson, "'All in the Same Uniform'? The Participation of Black Colonial Residents in the British Armed Forces in the First World War," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 2 (2012): 207–30. doi:10.1080/03086534.2012.697611; Jacqueline Jenkinson, "Black Sailors on Red Clydeside: Rioting, Reactionary Trade Unionism and Conflicting Notions of 'Britishness' Following the First World War," *Twentieth Century British History* 19, no. 1 (2008): 29–60. doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwm031; Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*: *Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); LauraTabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Diane Frost; *Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK* (Routledge, 2019); Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999); Hakim Adi, *African and Caribbean People in Britain: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2023).

colonialism, I begin where their story truly originates: in the pastoral hamlets of Somaliland. From there, I trace the movements of Somalis into Arabian cities, into the engine rooms of European steamships, and ultimately into major cities and towns in the United States and the United Kingdom. This approach aligns with what historians have termed *microhistory*—the close study of small groups or individuals. It is important, however, not to mistake this for a decontextualized reconstruction of their experiences. The aim is to closely study their lives while simultaneously situating them within a broader historical context.[40]

The second significant way my dissertation diverges from existing scholarship lies in scope. From the turn of the twentieth century, Somali migrant laborers established settlements in Yemen, Britain, and the U.S. Despite residing in these distinct sites, they shared a common set of experiences. First, nearly all of them hailed from British Somaliland; second, they had participated in the pastoral economy as herders; and third, they simultaneously formed communities in all three countries. Thus, rather than focusing exclusively on colonial laborers in Britain, as much of the present scholarship does, my dissertation collapses the imperial borders that held little significance for these highly mobile laborers—men who often deserted their vessels wherever new opportunities arose.

I take an interdisciplinary and transnational approach to tell this history. My work engages with scholars across several fields, including American immigration and migration history, maritime labor history, and Africa and African diaspora studies. One particular influential framework for this project is Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof's *Racial Migrations*, a microhistory that reconstructs the experiences of a small group of Black Cuban and Puerto Rican

[40] Andrew B. Hargadon and R. Daniel Wadhwani, "Theorizing with Microhistory," *The Academy of Management Review* 48, no. 4 (2023): 681–96.

migrants who formed an intellectual community in the United States in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Like my own work, *Racial Migrations* traces its subjects from their countries of origin to New York City, where they built a vibrant transitional community and forged networks of like-minded friends and collaborators across race and class lines.[41] This work provides a model for reconstructing the lives of Somali migrant workers—from their early experiences in Somaliland to their participation in both the British colonial economy and the American manufacturing and service sectors.

The dissertation also engages with scholars who have produced influential studies of Black migrants in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century. These include Marilyn Halter's groundbreaking *Between Race and Ethnicity*, which tells the history of Cape Verdean migrant laborers who settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, between the 1860s and 1960s. This was the first, and probably the largest, African community to voluntarily settle in America following the abolition of slavery. My work is also in conversation with Nemata Blyden's *African Americans and Africans*, which examines the historical encounters between Black Americans and Africans, as well as African Americans' connections—imagined or real—with the African continent. Like my dissertation, Blyden's work explores the experiences of the Black diaspora prior to the 1960s. Likewise, my work engages with Winston James's *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia* and Irma Watkins-Owens's *Blood Relations*, both of which illuminate the lives of early Afro-Caribbeans in the United States and their radical political thought. These

[41] Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

works underscore how Afro-Caribbean migrants shaped the discourse of Black nationalism and contribute to broader Black liberation movements in the United States and beyond.[42]

Sources and Methodology

The dissertation draws on a range of primary sources, including archival records, travelogues, newspaper accounts, and oral history interviews. One of the most significant archival collections utilized is "Licensing Records for Lodging Houses, 1909-1964," housed at Glamorgan Archives in Cardiff. These records were produced by the city of Cardiff's municipal authorities, particularly the police and sanitary departments. As the number of migrant laborers in Tiger Bay increased during the first half of the twentieth century, many Somali seafarers retired from maritime work and invested their savings into businesses—primarily lodging houses—tailored to the needs of migrant laborers and their families. To operate legally, lodging house owners were required to apply for seamen's boarding house licenses. Applications were first submitted to the sanitary department, which then notified the police. The police then dispatched detectives to assess each applicant's "honesty, morality and sobriety." The process involved interviews documenting the applicants' lives from birth to the date of application. The result is a vast collection containing detailed personal information: names, birthplaces, birthdates, employment histories, citizenship statuses, business records, and information on spouses and children. Because the licenses had to be renewed annually, the records make it possible to trace the transitions and life changes of lodging house operators and their families over time.

[42] Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Nemata Amelia Blyden, *African Americans and Africa: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1999); Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

However, the voices we encounter in these records do not fully capture the migrants' life experiences. Instead, they are filtered accounts, translations, and interpretations of brief encounters presented in the words of law enforcement authorities. Those who controlled the archive seemed to deem the existence of Black colonial migrants unworthy of preservation. After all, they belong to the billions—the colonized, the enslaved, the poor—whose lives remain largely erased from historical memory. In many ways, these absences echo the archival erasure described by the philosopher Michel Foucault, when he wrote of those not "endowed with any of the established and recognized nobilities" and who "belong to those billions of existences destined to pass away without a trace."[43] The silenced voices of migrant laborers also mirror those described by the scholar Saidiya Hartman in her acclaimed article "Venus in Two Acts." Confronting the limits of the archive—particularly regarding the lives of enslaved Black women and girls—Hartman noted that her subject, Venus, appears only "in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand."[44] Like the historical subjects in the works of Hartman and Foucault, Somali migrants appear in the archive only through their brief encounters with power. In other words, their presence is documented not because their lives were deemed valuable, but because they came into contact with the state's surveillance apparatus.

In addition to the "Licensing Records for Lodging Houses," I found many other valuable collections at Glamorgan. These included unprocessed materials that were originally housed at the BHAC before its 2016 closure. The person responsible for the creation and preservation of

[43] Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men" in *Archives of Infamy*, ed. Nancy Luxon, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 17.

[44] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008), 2.

these collections was Glenn Jordan, an African American scholar from Sacramento, California. A longtime mentee of the renowned scholar-activist St. Clair Drake, Jordan came to Cardiff in the 1980s for fieldwork while completing a dissertation in the anthropology department at the University of Illinois – Urbana. In a 1984 research proposal, Jordan decided to conduct what he described as "a preliminary, exploratory study" in Tiger Bay. Forty years earlier, his mentor had conducted doctoral research in the same neighborhood as an anthropology graduate student at the University of Chicago. The result was a dissertation, "Value Systems, Social Structures, and Race Relations in the British Isles," that Drake defended in 1954. Jordan proposed to return to this same research site, seeking, as he put it, to "critically confront and systemically build on the work of my mentor of some thirteen years."[45]

As it turned out, Jordan's plan to build on Drake's work became a lifetime commitment. Unlike his mentor, Jordan never left Cardiff after his graduate studies. He made the city his permanent home, much like the migrants of color and other minority groups whose experiences hold a prominent place in his creative and intellectual chronicles. Jordan taught cultural studies at the University of Glamorgan and published widely on issues of race and migration in Britain. In addition to his teaching and scholarship, Jordan was a photographer and curator with creative works featured in both community and institutional exhibits in Wales, England, and Ireland.[46] As the founding director of the BHAC, he led numerous projects that sought to preserve and highlight the history of Tiger Bay through photographic initiatives, community conversations,

[45] Glenn H. Jordan, "Race Relations and Social Transformation in the British Isles: Cardiff, Wales Revisited," Proposal Research Project, Submitted to the Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois - Urbana, March 1, 1984, Uncatalogued Collection, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales; Ira E. Harrison, "The Association of Black Anthropologists: A Brief History," *Anthropology Today* 3, no. 1 (1987): 19–20.

[46] Zoe Jensen, "Glenn Jordan," Medium, February 16, 2021, https://medium.com/representations/glenn-jordan-ae73223cab7d

book projects, and oral histories—including that of Stella Hersi—a treasure trove for those seeking to investigate the histories of twentieth-century Black communities in Wales. Among these projects were the hundreds of unprocessed materials I encountered at Glamorgan Archives.

In addition to Glamorgan, I conducted research at several other archives and libraries across Britain and the U.S. These included the National Archives and the British Library in London; the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York; and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Over the course of this research, I learned that archival records on the early U.S. Somali diaspora are markedly more limited compared to those in Britain. Even the Schomburg Center—regarded as a "world-leading cultural institution devoted to the research, preservation, and exhibition of materials focused on African American, African Diasporic, and African experiences"—holds far less material on early Somali migrants than its British counterparts, despite the aforementioned limitations.[47] In fact, the Schomburg Center's holdings include only one Somali-related collection: St. Clair Drake's Papers, 1935-1990, much of which came out of Drake's dissertation fieldwork.

To address the scarcity of archival records, which presents significant challenges to reconstructing a fuller history of early Somali diasporas, I employ an additional methodological approach: oral history interviews. The methods by which these interviews were collected, and the forms in which they exist, can be divided into three categories. First, over a dozen archived oral interviews recorded between the late 1980s and early 2000s and housed at the National Library of Wales, which document the personal journeys and experiences of Somali migrant laborers and their descendants in Britain. Second, another dozen interviews I conducted between

[47] "About the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture," *New York Public Library*, https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/schomburg

2021 and 2024, both in person and virtually, with individuals in Minneapolis, New York, London, Cardiff, Connecticut, Maryland, and Nairobi. Third, interviews available in published books and on online community platforms, which complement both the archived oral history at the National Library and those I gathered, offering additional perspectives and context.

Since the 1960s and the 1970s, when oral history emerged as a recognized methodology in academic research, scholars have debated its reliability and epistemological limits. Critics have raised concerns about the interviewer's role in shaping the narrative—through the framing or omission of questions and the potential influence on the interviewee's responses—as well as the inherent fallibility of memory itself. As one scholar noted, oral history relies on memory, "which can be restructured and manufactured within the mind of the narrator."[48] Another scholar asked, "How can the historian evaluate the responses of the informant, which can be trained in a variety of ways?"[49] These important questions underscore the need to approach oral sources with critical scrutiny. In my research, I do not treat oral history as the sole form of evidence; rather, I use it to corroborate and enrich other sources, including archival records, travel narratives, and secondary literature.[50]

Here is a case in point of how I bring together oral interviews and archival records to reconstruct a more complete historical narrative. In the early months of summer of 2022, I came across a lodging house license application at Glamorgan Archives, submitted by a longtime

[48] Nicholas Mariner, "Oral History: From Fact-Finding to History-Shaping," *Historia* 14 (2005), 62.

[49] R. Kenneth Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (2008): 24-5; Alice M. Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History," *Today's Speech* 22, no. 1 (1974): 23–27.

[50] Of course, we must also treat institution archival documents and travel narratives by white writers the same way since these records were often informed by the interest and racial constructs of the imperial powers.

Somali seafarer, Yousef Shire, to the sanitary department in Cardiff in 1929. Shire sought to convert his Cardiff property at 7 Nelson Street into a lodging house and café. As was standard in the licensure process, the sanitary department forwarded the application to the office of the police chief, which then dispatched a detective to investigate the applicant and inspect the property. In the resulting report, the detective offered sufficient details about Shire, outlined his reasons for opening the establishment, and noted that the lodge was in the capable hands of a domestic servant identified only as Mrs. Hersi.[51] Aware that Hersi was a Somali name, I grew curious about the woman's identity and her journey to becoming "Mrs. Hersi." Yet the archive could reveal no more.

A few weeks later, as I sat listening to oral history recordings in that quiet room at the National Library of Wales, I came across an interview with Stella Hersi, who, as it turned out, was Mrs. Hersi's eldest daughter. In the interview, Stella recounted her family's story in detail. Her mother, Sarah Slapper, was a Russian-Jewish woman who arrived in Britain at the age of six. Her father, Moosa Hersi, was a Somali seaman born in Aden. Sarah and Moosa met at Yousef Shire's lodging house, where Sarah worked as a cleaner, and Moosa rented a room between voyages. Together, the couple had four children. At some point, Moosa sent the boys to Somaliland, and soon after, he died at sea.

Several weeks after listening to Stella's interview, I traveled to the National Archives in London, where I discovered a letter that Sarah had written to colonial officers. In it, she noted:

> On November 28th, 1928, my late husband, Moosa Hersi, Somali, born in Aden in the year 1898, took my two boys, the oldest one Howard Moosa Hersi, and Omar Hersi to

[51] Letter from Police Detective Robert Fleming to the Office of the Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, April 4, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales; Letter from the Office of the Deputy Chief Constable to the Detective Department, Cardiff City Police, April 11, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

> Aden and from there to Somaliland. In March 1929, my late husband returned to Cardiff; after a few weeks he went to sea on the steamer Llangollen on the 28th July, 1929, and on the 4th September, 1929, he died at sea, sickness unknown. A few weeks ago I heard of the death of my oldest boy Howard Moosa Hersi, he died from grieving after me.[52]

The letter continued with Sarah pleading for the return of her surviving son, Omar. In the end, officers told her that Omar was "looking healthy and well," that he was "living with his uncle to whom he is evidently much attracted," and that he "had no wish to return to England."[53]

I share this story to illustrate how archival sources and oral histories can complement and corroborate each other. In the case of Sarah Hersi and her family, drawing on both archival materials and oral interviews provides a near-complete account of the family's story. For instance, the records at Glamorgan Archives present Sarah simply as Mrs. Hersi, a one-time caretaker of Yousef Shire's house at 7 Nelson Street. At first glance, it may seem like useless information. However, we can still identify several key details in this source: her occupation (cleaner), her employer's name (Yousef Shire), her workplace (7 Nelson Street), her place of residence (Cardiff), and the year of encounter (1929). Then, we meet her again at the National Archives in London, where additional information emerges: her married name (Sarah Hersi), her husband's full name (Moosa Hersi), his year of birth (1898), his occupation (seafarer), and his death aboard the *Llangollen*; the names of their sons (Howard and Omar); and the tragic news of being separated from her and then the loss of Howard. Beyond what the archives reveal, Stella Hersi's oral history interview contextualizes the family's biographical narrative and fills in the gap left by official records. This example highlights the crucial role oral history plays in my dissertation—especially when it is completed with archival documents.

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[52] Sarah Hersi, Letter to Arthur Henderson, March 19, 1930, CO 535/90, National Archives, London, United Kingdom.

[53] J.F.N. Green, Letter to Sarah Hersi, June 9, 1930, CO 535/90, National Archives, London, United Kingdom.

Chapter Outline

The dissertation consists of four core chapters. The first offers a historical overview of the Somali people, with particular attention to their connections to the sea. It illustrates the various ways in which Somalis have engaged with the major international sea lines—the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal—that nearly encircle their country. Somalis relied on the sea for trade, performing the pilgrimage, and pursuing Islamic education in Arabia. The sea also attracted diverse migrants—Arabs, Asians, Persians—who settled in port cities that later became Berbera, Brava, Mogadishu, and Zaila. The chapter further explains how these maritime connections introduced ideas and cultures that shaped Somali identity. For instance, Islam reached the Somali people through Arab migrants and traders who followed these waterways and settled in port cities along them. Today, Islam and Arab culture influence almost every aspect of Somali life. In addition, the chapter reveals how the sea brought unwanted visitors—European colonizers—who ultimately partitioned the country into separate colonial territories. By accentuating the historical connections Somalis had with the sea, this chapter challenges the prevailing narrative that reduces Somalis to mere pastoral and agricultural nomads disconnected from the outside world. Instead, it shows that while Somalis were indeed nomads, they also maintained sustained engagements with global networks through trade and migration.

The second chapter examines the historical forces that drove Somalis from their pastoral villages in British Somaliland to port cities in Yemen, as well as their initial encounters with European steamships and their subsequent recruitment as maritime laborers in the engine rooms. While clan violence and episodic droughts had long driven internal migration, the chapter argues that European colonialism—especially the establishment of British colonialism in what became British Somaliland—intensified political instability and inter-tribal conflict. Armed resistance

movements emerged in opposition to colonial control, prompting the British to arm rival tribes, which further escalated tensions and devastated livestock populations. In the face of these conditions, many young Somalis fled to nearby Arabian ports such as Aden, where they encountered colonial shipping companies and secured jobs as trimmers and firemen. This chapter also sheds light on the grueling experiences Somali laborers endured in the engine rooms.

The third chapter traces the movement of Somali migrant laborers from Arabian port cities to dockside settlements in Britain. Prior to the onset of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, few Somalis traveled beyond the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. However, as imperial networks expanded and employment opportunities opened for colonial migrants, Somali laborers were increasingly drawn into the global maritime economy. Britain, in particular, recruited them as a source of cheap and exploitable labor to sustain both its domestic and imperial industries. As the chapter demonstrates, these positions eventually brought Somali laborers to dockside settlements in cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool, and South Shields. They were part of a broader web of colonial migrant laborers from across the British Empire—Adenese, Egyptians, West Africans, Afro-Caribbeans—who were also similarly funneled into Britain's labor force. By the end of the Great War and into the Interwar period, many Somali migrants invested their life savings in the seamen's boarding house business. The majority of these lodges were established in Tiger Bay, which by the early twentieth century had become a vibrant social and cultural hub for colonial laborers of color. These lodging houses were far more than temporary spaces; they were sites of community-building: Somalis connected with fellow countrymen, shared meals, performed their religious duties, and formed multiethnic families. In short, these lodges offered what mainstream British lodges could not: familiarity and a sense of community.

The chapter also examines the interracial unions Somali men formed with white women in these dockside settlements. These relationships often began in the lodging houses, where white women were employed as bookkeepers and caretakers. As the chapter demonstrates, many of these men and women formed bonds rooted in shared working-class experiences and mutual aspirations for a better life. Their marriages and cohabitations grounded the once transient migrant laborers, transforming them into family men with permanent homes in Britain. Such unions gave rise to multiethnic families that became integral to the fabric of the Tiger Bay communities. If some formed permanent residences in Cardiff, others maintained transnational networks. For these men, migration was not a one-way journey: they frequently traveled between Britain and Somalia, maintaining ties with their families in the homeland. By the 1950s, some began bringing Somali women to Britain.

The fourth chapter focuses on Somali migrant laborers in the United States. Like their counterparts in Britain, these laborers hailed from British Somaliland and spent considerable time in Arabia before arriving in America. While the first Somali migrants began arriving in the U.S. in the late 1890s, their numbers grew in the early decades of the next century, in part due to wartime demand for a workforce during the First World War. Many of these Somalis jumped ship because of the restrictive immigration policies—including the immigration legislation of 1917 and 1924—which made it increasingly difficult for people of color to enter the country legally. In the U.S., they joined fellow colonial migrant laborers from western Africa, Arabia, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent. Their migrations coincided with the Great Migration of African Americans fleeing racial violence and economic hardship in the South. Although Somalis were dispersed across the country, most put down roots in New York, where they

became small-business owners or secured jobs as steelworkers, peddlers, and elevator, boiler, and small-business operators.

By the 1940s and 1950s, as this chapter demonstrates, Somali migrants in the United States—like their counterparts in Britain—played a crucial role in Somalia's anti-colonial struggles. They contributed to the mission in two important ways. First, they provided financial support to anti-colonial activists who attended the United Nations meetings. In addition, the migrants facilitated connections between Somali activists and African American leaders and intellectuals, who—through community events, news articles, and letters to UN delegates—raised awareness about Somalia. As the chapter shows, these collaborations were consistent with a broader transnational network that Black people on both sides of the Atlantic forged to resist racism and colonialism in the twentieth century. Indeed, Black international solidarity became especially pronounced in the post-Second World War era, as African Americans mobilized to desegregate the South and African nations sought to decolonize the continent.

In short, these chapters uncover the forgotten history of Somali migrant workers who, between 1900 and 1960, journeyed from pastoral communities in British Somaliland to Arabian ports and eventually to dockside settlements in Britain and industrial cities in the United States, forming the earliest diaspora in the West. They were part of a global network of colonial migrant laborers who hailed from British colonies in Arabia, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent. As colonial laborers of color, they faced racialization and exploitation and were confined to menial jobs in the maritime and steel industries. Yet Somalis and their colonial counterparts played an integral role in the maritime economy, moving cargo and passengers along transnational sea lines. Their participation in the global economy was not accidental. European colonialism facilitated their movements, especially during wartime, when imperial powers were

desperate for working hands. In both Britain and the United States, these migrants were confined to segregated neighborhoods like Tiger Bay and Harlem. In the post-Second World War era, Somali migrants forged transnational solidarity with African Americans and other communities of color to challenge racism, colonialism, and workplace violence.

CHAPTER ONE

Ocean Echoes: A History of Somali Connections to the Sea

> The [Somali] man who goes striding through the bush with his camels and armed with a spear may know the slang of British sailors, or the jargon of Chicago, and play an excellent game of football.
>
> —Gordon Waterfield, *Morning Will Come*, 1944.

On a Sunday afternoon in October 1854, Richard F. Burton departed the British protectorate of Aden on a mission to explore the Horn of Africa, which includes present-day northern Somalia. Like many European explorers of the nineteenth century, he was determined to venture into this largely uncharted East African country and bring back exotic stories for his eager readers. This voyage was particularly significant to Burton because, until then, no white man had set foot in the territory. In his telling, the region "was previously known only by the vague reports of native travellers." By then, Burton was a well-known explorer, having previously journeyed across Arabia and the Indian subcontinent.[54] His daring pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1853—during which he disguised himself as a Muslim, a "dangerous enterprise, given that the *Hajj* was prohibited to non-Muslims and punishable by death at this time"[55]—propelled him into the international spotlight as an explorer and a writer.

Just a decade prior, imagining such success seemed almost inconceivable, even to Burton. Born in England in 1821, his early life was, as scholar Vicky Randall put it,

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[54] Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, an Exploration of Harar* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans,1856; London: Tylston and Edwards, 1894; New York: Dover; 1987), xi-xxxiv. Citations refer to the Dover edition.

[55] Vicky Randall, "Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism: Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton and the *Arabian Nights*," *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature* 139, no. 139 (2021), 2.

"inauspicious—a disobedient child and intelligent but rebellious youth."[56] As a student at the University of Oxford, he spent more time reading for leisure, boxing, and fencing than tending to his schoolwork. As a result, his college experience proved to be "highly unsatisfactory," and he was subsequently dismissed from school.[57] Soon after, Burton joined the private armies of the British East India Company, serving from 1842 to 1849. During his tenure, he is said to have become proficient in twenty-nine languages, including Hindustani, Punjabi, and Arabic. His passion for foreign languages and indigenous cultures turned him into a man of many talents: a world-renowned explorer, a writer, a scholar, and a spy for the British state.[58]

On that fateful October afternoon, when Burton set sail for the Horn, no one could have predicted that his three-month investigation would produce one of the most—if not the most—significant documents on northern Somalia in the nineteenth century: *First Footsteps in East Africa.* Today, more than 170 years later, we have detailed accounts of the political, cultural, and social life in the three ancient cities Burton visited during his expedition: Berbera, Harar, and Zeila. Through this writing, we can catch glimpses of the architectural design of city buildings, traditional wraps of men and women, and the sizes and shapes of Somali spears and shields. We can also hear echoes of singing herders, traditional dancers, and the playful chatter of young children. In *First Footsteps*, Burton presented important historical accounts of the townspeople and villagers, a record that certainly delights students of nineteenth-century Somalia.

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[56] Randall, "Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism," 2.

[57] Richard F. Burton, *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* (England: J. van Voorst, 1852), 92; Randall, "Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism," 2.

[58] Randall, "Orientalism, Islam, and Eroticism," 2-5.

If *First Footsteps* remains a crucial historical document, it also laid the groundwork for later generations of scholars and writers who have viewed the history of northern Somalia and its dwellers through a pastoral nomadic framework. Indeed, nomadism has been a staple theme in scholarly paradigms and popular narratives dealing with Somali history and culture. Burton represents early European explorers and writers whose observations were often set against the backdrop of racist colonial perspectives that have placed Africans at the bottom of the ostensible racial hierarchy. In this framework, pastoral nomadism was seen not as a social and economic system that benefited its participants, but as a peculiar tradition that produced what Burton called "short-sighted savages" and "wild people," in stark contrast to the supposedly "civilized" and "enlightened" Europeans.[59]

The narratives of these nomadic communities often follow a similar storyline: Somalis are nomadic people who depend entirely on the land for water and grazing pastures. Yet this land is deprived of the said treasured resources and episodic droughts regularly threaten the lives of its dwellers. Somalis are thus bound to be violent and pose a threat not only to themselves but also to the safety of the white sojourners and their valuable possessions. To the Europeans, these social ills were enough to justify the colonization and subjugation of the "savage" natives. Even decades before the port city of Berbera fell under British colonial administration in the 1880s, Burton was already advocating for the colonization of the country. Among the reasons he wanted Berbera incorporated into the Empire was to "protect the lives of British subjects upon this

[59] Burton, *First Footsteps*, 31-32; 59. M. H. Rayne, who served as a district commissioner in British Somaliland in the early 1900s, calls Somalia "a wild country," and its peoples "a race of maniacs." See more in Rayne's book, *Sun, Sand and Somals* (England: Witherby, 1921, 1921), 4; 14.

coast."[60] His depiction of indigenous peoples as dangerous and a justification for taking their land has been a stable colonial framework that remained in practice for centuries.

Following the first publication of *First Footsteps* in 1856, numerous other white explorers and colonial writers visited the eastern regions of Africa. For instance, the British geographer and explorer John Walter Gregory traveled through parts of East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, studying nature and the local peoples and their cultures. In *The Great Rift Valley* (1896), Gregory documented his encounters with various ethnic groups from Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Somalia. In his discussion of the Somalis, he echoed Burton's racist views, referring to them as "half-caste" people with roots in both Arabia and Africa. He heavily relied on *First Footsteps* to analyze the "characteristics" of the Somali. Quoting Burton, he described Somalis as possessing "all the levity and instability of the Negro character," who at times erupted "without any apparent transition into a state of fury, when they are capable of terrible atrocities."[61] Gregory's engagement with *First Footsteps* demonstrates Burton's profound influence on the succeeding generations of writers and scholars of the region.

Numerous travelogs and colonial accounts that emerged in the twentieth century also painted Somalia as a wild country and its people as dangerous. Herbert Vivian's *Abyssinia* (1901)—while it serves today as a significant historical record—at times perpetuated disparaging images that were prevalent in the colonial narratives of the previous century. In one instance, Vivian praised the colonial administration in Berbera for its control over the Somali people. "I feel confident," he wrote, "that every one of my readers will thrill with pride over the wonderful

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[60] Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, xxxi.

[61] John Walter Gregory, *The Great Rift Valley: Being The Narrative of a Journey to Mount Kenya and Lake Baringo* (London: John Murry, 1896), 357-358.

work which is being carried among barbarous tribesmen by a mere handful, less than a handful, of our countrymen."[62] This perspective not only reflected the author's support for colonialism, but it also conveyed his profound satisfaction that a small number of white colonial officers were able to dominate what Burton described as "docile" Somalis. This stereotypical image of the Somali nomad remained fixed throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

In the second half of the century, a new generation of European scholars picked up where the old colonial writers had left off. Among them was anthropologist I. M. Lewis, who expanded upon the pastoral nomad framework established by early colonial writers. He accentuated Somalis' deep connections to the land and their clan social structure, both of which have come to define what it means to have a quintessential Somali identity. In one of his classic works, Lewis explained that "it must be appreciated that the nomadic Somalis are a warlike people, driven by the poverty of their resources to intense competition for access to water and grazing."[63] Today, nomadism maintains an imposing presence in scholarly and popular literature. Even memoirs such as *The Last Nomad* (2021) and fiction works such as *The Lion's Binding Oath* (2018) reflect similar nomadic themes found in colonial and post-colonial writing. Historian Lee Cassanelli has pointed out that one reason for this continuity is that "our understanding of Somalia has been limited by the fragmentation of knowledge as it is produced, transmitted, and received by successive generations of Somali Studies students and scholars."[64] At the head of

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[62] Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia: Through the Lion-Land to the Court of the Lion of Judah* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, ltd., 1901), 44.

[63] Ioan M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali* 4th ed. (Ohio University Press, 2002), 11.

[64] Lee Cassanelli, "The Partition of Knowledge in Somali Studies: Reflections on Somalia's Fragmented Intellectual Heritage," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 9 no. 0 (2009), 4.

these successive generations sit colonial writers like Burton, whose work remains crucial among students of nineteenth-century Somalia and its inhabitants.

Sure, the history of northern Somalis is a history of pastoralism. In fact, the majority of Somalis have historically lived in the hinterlands and raised camels, cattle, and goats.[65] However, these communities weren't always isolated in rural enclaves. As people living on a peninsula at an international crossroads, Somalis in both interior villages and coastal towns used the sea as a bridge to the rest of the world. Even centuries before Burton set foot in Somalia, they transported livestock to faraway markets in Arabia and Asia through these waterways. They exported animals and ivory and ostrich feathers and hides and gums and myrrh and frankincense.[66] They also trekked to ancient Arabian cities to study Islam or perform the pilgrimage in Mecca.[67] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, young Somalis crossed transnational sealines aboard colonial steamships as wage laborers. These voyages eventually led them to settle in European and American cities, where they established the first Somali diaspora in the West.[68] Somalis were thus not isolated nomads who always searched for water and green

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[65] Lee Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600 - 1900* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 3. Abdulkadir A. Handulle and Charles W. Gay, "Development and Traditional Pastoralism in Somalia," *Nomadic Peoples*, 1987, no. 24 (1987), 36.

[66] Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society*, 150; Richard Pankhurst, "The Trade of the Gulf of Aden Ports of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3, no. 1 (1965), 81.

[67] Accounts by explorers, colonial writers, and contemporary scholars are filled with Somali names preceded by *Hajji* or *Haji,* a title obtained after Muslim men perform the pilgrimage in Mecca. *First Footsteps* discusses al-Hajji Sharmarkay bin Ali Salih, the governor of Zaila, and his son, Mohammed Sharmarkay, who "received a liberal education" in Yemen. It also discusses a scholar by the name Sheik Jami, who was "remarkably well read in the religions sciences, and even Meccans paid him the respect of kissing his hand during his pilgrimage." See, Burton, *First Footsteps*, 12; 22; 33; Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society*, 140.

[68] Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Cardiff: Butetown History and Arts Center, 2004); Gerold Krozewski, "Hidden Seamen from East Africa: Somali Firemen, European Steamers, and Global Labor Markets, 1800s-1930s," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2022) 21-43. Minayo Nasiali, "A Working Alias: African Seafarers and Fungible Identities across European Empires in the Early Twentieth Century," *International Journal of Maritime History* 36, no. 1 (2024): 91–106.

pastures. They were also intimately connected to the sea as much as to the land, and played an integral role in the global maritime economy that helped create the modern world.

Yet the history of Somali participation in the maritime economy remains largely overlooked in academia. And if it does come up, it is often presented within the framework of contemporary piracy and violence that has threatened the region since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. The study of Somali piracy garnered popularity in the 2000s after a series of attacks on ships overwhelmed Somali coastlines.[69] In those years, armed men on fishing boats seized sailing vessels and kidnapped crew members for millions of dollars in ransom.[70] Perhaps the most notable event of this kind happened in the spring of 2009 when armed Somalis raided an American cargo ship and held its captain, Richard Phillips, hostage. Five days later, U.S. Navy SEAL snipers freed the captain in a dramatic rescue, in which three of the pirates were killed and another captured.[71] Since then, the once-obscure Somali maritime has become a hot topic of discussion among Western scholars, journalists, and filmmakers.[72]

Like the studies of pastoral Somali communities, these piracy investigations, crucial as they are, have eclipsed the centuries-old Somali maritime history and obscured the experiences

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[69] The piracy issue in the Horn has become the subject of dozens of books and academic articles in the past decade or so. Such works include *Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa* (2019), *Pirates: A New History, from Vikings to Somali Raiders* (2019), *New Pirates: Modern Global Piracy from Somalia to the South China Sea* (2014), and *Pirate State: Inside Somalia's Terrorism at Sea* (2010).

[70] Before 2005, Peter Lehr wrote, piracy only appeared in fictionalized books and films. But this changed in 2005 "when a new breed of high-seas pirates – the Somali pirates – brought themselves to international prominence with a brazen attack on a modern cruise liner." See Peter Lehr *Pirates: A New History*, (Yale University Press, 2019).

[71] David Axe, "8,000 Miles, 96 Hours, 3 Dead Pirates: Inside a Navy SEAL Rescue," *The Wire*, October 17, 2012. https://shorturl.at/LMORT; Katie Zezima and Mitchell L. Blumenthal, "Rescued Captain Returns to Vermont Town," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2009, https://shorturl.at/nsuMV; Joshua Hammer, "Tracking Somali Pirates to Their Lair," *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 2011, https://shorturl.at/apqP0.

[72] Even Hollywood made a blockbuster movie, *Captain Phillps* (2013), that won six Oscar nominations. CNN Staff, "2014 Oscars: The nominees' list," *CNN*, Jan. 16, 2014, https://shorturl.at/cgAQ5

of the transatlantic Somali seafarers. This chapter revives that lost history. Breaking away from the dominant nomadic paradigm, it situates Somali history at the center of global maritime networks that have connected Somalis to translational maritime economies, cultures, and ideas for centuries. To tell this story, I examine the writings of explorers and their interactions with Somalis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These travel accounts, as I have shown, focus on nomadic pastoralists. But they also offer glimpses into the lives of Somali migrant laborers whose presence was conspicuous in the global maritime economy. In addition, I draw on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sources that nod to the various ways Somalis used the sea lines as traders, students, pilgrims, and members of fishing communities. This chapter also demonstrates how Somali seaports drew Arab and Asian migrants and merchants, who helped form many ancient coastal cities and towns, including Berbera, Brava, and Mogadishu.

The chapter consists of three sections. The first briefly sketches Somalia's geographic location and the role its coastlines played in shaping Somalia. It examines how the country's proximity to international waterways—the Gulf of Aden, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean—has fostered deep connections between Somalis and the maritime world. Scholars often divide Somalis into two fixed categories: agro-pastoralists in the south and pastoral nomads in the north.[73] They emphasize the groups' intimate ties to the land for social, economic, and political survival. In this section, I pose a different question: How did Somalis, southerners or northerners, utilize the waterways that hug their country? It posits that Somalis have for centuries used the ocean to export and import goods, ideas, and cultures; to reach distant lands for education and employment; and to swim and dive for foraging and commercial reasons. In doing so, I demonstrate that these pastoralists moved between land and sea and maintained close

[73] Cassanelli, "The Partition of Knowledge in Somali Studies," 7.

connections with coastal communities. Their ties to the sea later became crucial when European empires began recruiting colonial subjects for employment opportunities at home and abroad during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The second section explains the ways in which these sea lines drew diverse migrants, cultures, and ideas from Arabia and Asia. Here, I argue that these importations transformed, expanded, and diversified the Somali population. Islam, for instance, reached Somalia through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, thanks to the first Arab migrants and merchants who settled in coastal cities during the tenth century. The religion played a fundamental role in the formation of a distinct Somali identity that combines elements of Islam, African, and Arab cultures. Islam also fostered a sense of common identity that unified Somalis under one religion—despite their tribal differences—and situated them within the global Muslim community, *ummah*. I argue that the unique Somali identity that we have come to know would not have existed without the international waterways that nearly envelop the nation.

The third section outlines how the sea also attracted uninvited guests: European colonial powers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, following the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, three colonial powers—Britain, Italy, and France—divided the country among themselves. As part of the Scramble for Africa, European empires staked claims to almost the entire continent, except Ethiopia and Liberia. Despite their lofty promises to "civilize" Africans and establish free trading ties with their countries, the colonizers' main goal was to exploit the continent and its peoples for the benefit of the mother countries. This section thus analyzes how these colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, came to Somalia primarily to gain control of the port cities for economic and strategic reasons. By controlling trade routes and accessing

international waterways through cities like Berbera and Djibouti, they sought to dominate the maritime world economically and militarily.

Somalis and the Sea

Somalia sits on the eastern edge of the African continent, occupying a large peninsula and sharing the strategic geopolitical region known as the Horn of Africa. It boasts the longest coastline on mainland Africa, which stretches about 1,800 miles. This coastline connects directly to the Gulf of Aden, the Guardafui Channel, and the Indian Ocean and lies in proximity to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Throughout history, these sea routes have served as vital trade highways, linking Somalia to transnational maritime networks.[74] These waterways have attracted merchants and migrants and empires alike. In the nineteenth century, Richard Burton described the Berbera port city as "the true key of the Red Sea, the center of East African traffic, and the only safe place for shipping upon the western Erythraean shore, from the Suez to Guardafui."[75] This ancient city, along with other seaport cities across the country, has served as a gateway for the steady flow of people, goods, cultures, and ideas from around the world.

Travel accounts from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries reveal that some of the first migrants to enter Somalia were traders and merchants who followed the waterways from Arabia, Persia, and South Asia. They established waterfront settlements and open-air markets that eventually blossomed into the cities we now know as Mogadishu, Marka, and Brava in the south and Berbera and Zaila in the north.[76] Merchant ships from Arabia and South Asia disembarked at

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[74] Mike Graf, *Somalia* (Bridgestone Books, 2002), 7; Raphael Njoku, *The History of Somalia* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2013), 1-2; Ahmed Dualeh Jama, *The Origins and Development of Mogadishu AD 1000 to 1850: A Study of the Urban Growth along the Benadir Coast of Southern Somalia* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 1996), 7.

[75] Burton, *First Footsteps*, xxxi.

[76] Jama, *The Origins and Development of Mogadishu*, 13.

these ports where they unloaded dates, spices, grain, textiles, glassware, and manufactured items in exchange for livestock, pearls, ivory, animal skin, mangrove poles, and scented gums and resins.[77] European and Arab explorers who strolled through these cities described streets teeming with commercial activity and ports buzzing with the comings and goings of merchant vessels. For instance, when the celebrated Moroccan traveler Abu Abdallah Muhammad Ibn Battuta visited Mogadishu in the spring of 1331, he found a booming cosmopolitan city where residents spoke Somali, Arabic, Persian, and Swahili. These early dwellers depended on the sea for survival: traders earned their living by exchanging goods with foreign merchants at ocean fronts; lodgers by housing sojourners; porters by loading and unloading ships; and young men by hosting and serving merchants as brokers.

Ibn Battuta explained his encounter with some of these brokers at the Mogadishu port in the early fourteenth century. Soon after the ship that carried him kissed the shore, young men sailing in "small boats" approached the new arrivals, most of them merchants. The boatmen then entered the ship with plates of food in hand. Ibn Battuta remembered that each man presented a dish "to one of the merchants, saying 'this is my guest.' Each merchant on disembarking goes only to the house of the young man who is his host, except those who have made frequent journeys to the town and know its people well; these live where they please."[78] Ibn Battuta

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[77] Pankhurst, "The Trade of the Gulf of Aden Ports of Africa," 36; Charles L. Geshekter, "Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1985), 22; Leila Ingrams and Richard Pankhurst, "Somali Migration to Aden from the 19th to the 21st Centuries" *African and Asian Studies*, (2006), 381; Scott Steven Reese, "Patricians of the Benaadir: Islamic Learning, Commerce and Somali Urban Identity in the Nineteenth Century," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996), v.

[78] Ibn Batuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa,* trans., H. A. R. Gibb (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1929), 110-111; Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta* (University of California Press, 2012), 123; Samuel Lee, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta in the Near East, Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2004), chapter ix.

himself was greeted by one of these brokers with a dish. But the broker soon realized that the Muslim explorer was not like the typical sojourners he was used to welcoming. He took Ibn Battuta directly to the governor's residence. From such interactions, we learn that the people of Mogadishu used boats and utilized the sea to make a living. Their boats were not just for transporting people and goods but also for patrolling the waters. In addition to hosting and serving merchants, the young brokers' duties included identifying new arrivals and ensuring authorities were aware of their presence in the city.

By the time Ibn Battuta came to Mogadishu, the merchant migrants had established permanent homes, married indigenous women, and introduced Islam and Arab customs to some of the local inhabitants.[79] The first Muslims came to East African coastal cities from the Arabian Peninsula around the seventh century—in the heels of the founding of the religion itself. Some two centuries later, these cities had been transformed into some of the busiest and wealthiest places in the region, thanks in part to sea routes that offered direct, easy connections to the rest of the world.[80] As historian Iman Mohamed has pointed out, Mogadishu, which traces its origins to sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries, was at its economic and population peak by the fourteenth century. "Like other port cities along the Indian Ocean," she explained, "it came to

[79] Lee, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, chapter IX; I. M. Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 1-2; Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, "Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction," in *The Invention of Somalia*, ed. Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 11-12. I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, (Ohio University Press, 1965, 1980, 1988, 2002), 20-21. Helen Chapin Metz Metz, *Somalia: a Country Study* (Library of Congress, 1993), 79. Raphael Njoku, *The History of Somalia* (Greenwood, 2013), 23.

[80] Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 123; Abdirahman Ali Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History: The Origins and the Development of Arab Enterprise and Cultural Influences in the Somali Peninsula" (PhD diss., University of Los Angeles, 1977).

life with the arrival of dhows from the shores of the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent brought by the monsoon winds."[81]

These early maritime economies set the foundation for conspicuous economic growth and architectural development in coastal cities. When the Portuguese explorer Vasco Da Gama visited Mogadishu in the fifteenth century, he observed a prosperous city with a flourishing maritime and trading economy. His description of the buildings suggests that they would fit into the architectural design of any civilization of the era: impressive stone-and-mortar palaces, mosques with three-dimensional shaped minarets, and imposing five-story houses.[82] In the sixteenth century, another Portuguese named Duarte Barbosa found Mogadishu to be a "very rich" and "beautiful town."[83] On this trip, Barbosa also explored other port cities and towns in Somalia, including Brava, Berbera, and Zaila. Here, the writer witnessed thriving maritime and trading industries. At the port of Berbera, for instance, he encountered "many ships" importing textiles, sugar, and spices from Aden and South Asia. The ships returned loaded with, among other things, gold and ivory and meat and honey and wax. Upon his arrival in Zaila, Barbosa observed that the city was:

> a good trading place, whither many ships navigate and sell their cloths and merchandise. It is very populous, with good houses of stone and whitewash, and good streets; the houses are covered with terraces, the dwellers in them are black. They have many horses and breed much cattle of all sorts, which they make use of for milk, and butter, and meat.

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[81] Iman Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia and the Material Remains of Italian Colonialism in Mogadishu," *Interventions: International Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 7 (2024): 921.

[82] Njoku, *The History of Somalia*, 39.

[83] Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16. Njoku, *The History of Somalia*, 39.

> There is in this country abundance of wheat, millet, barley, and fruits, which they carry thence to Aden.[84]

Ibn Battuta, too, described Zaila as a prosperous "large city with a great bazaar" during his brief visit in the previous century. Its residents, he reported, were dark-skinned Muslims of the Shi'a denomination. These Somalis raised camels and sheep for domestic and commercial uses. Ibn Battuta's sensitive nostrils detected an unbearable odor seeping out of the fish market and the blood-soaked streets that served butchers as slaughterhouses. He called Zaila "the dirtiest … town in the world."[85] Ibn Battuta's keen but blunt observation reveals something crucial about early Somalis' connections to the sea: that Zaila was an important commercial hub with a busy fish market. The Somalis used the sea not only to interact and conduct trade with foreign merchants. They also entered the sea to fish for both domestic and commercial use.

Catching seafood and other resources required advanced swimming and diving skills as well as equipment such as boats, nets, iron hooks, and diving nose clips. Africans generally exhibited superior swimming and diving abilities that astonished chroniclers who encountered them at sea. Alvise de Cadamosto described Africans living along the Senegal River as "the most expert swimmers in the world." Pieter de Marees, an adventurer from the Flemish region of Belgium, said in the sixteenth century that Africans in the Gold Coast "can swim very fast, generally easily outdoing people of our nation in swimming and diving."[86]

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[84] Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa*, 17.

[85] Muhammad M. Mohammadain, "Somalia in Ibn Battuta's Travel Account 'Tuhfat Al-Nuzzar'" in Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies, (Hamburg: H. Buske, 1984), 23-33. https://shorturl.at/opFSW; Njoku, *The History of Somalia*, 38; Dunn, *Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, 122.

[86] Kevin Dawson, "Swimming, Surfing and Underwater Diving" in *Navigating African Maritime History*, "St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2009), 84.

Somalis, like those on the banks of the Senegal River, were known as skilled divers and swimmers, crucial abilities that helped them make the most of the deep sea. They used these skills to forage for seafood, escape wrecked vessels, entertain arriving passengers, and collect sinking coins. In the nineteenth century, the English journalist Herbert Vivian saw a boat teeming with Somali boys in Aden. It was typical at the time for voyagers to playfully throw coins into the sea and watch competing boys disappear into the water in search of the sinking metals. "God bless my soul, but they do dive," exclaimed Vivian. "Toss out any silver money … and in a trice a black devil whistles through the air, shoots into the sea, emerges in no time with his trophy, and clamours breathless for fresh ordeals."[87]

American writer Joseph Osgood similarly observed Somalis' unparalleled swimming and diving skills during his travels across Arabian and East African coasts in that same century. Speaking about young Somali migrants he met in Aden, Osgood described "expert swimmers and divers" who effortlessly catch every sinking coin tossed by the amused white passengers.[88] Born in Somalia during the final years of the century, Ibrahim Ismaa'il became one of these swimmers and divers as a child migrant in Aden. He recalled in his autobiography that:

> when ships came with European passengers on board, we children used to swim to them, and the passengers would throw pennies into the sea — sometimes even shillings and half-crowns. As soon as we saw the coin falling into the water, we dived to some depth and watched it sinking in wide zigzags above our heads. Sometimes there was a scramble. As soon as we got it, we came up to the surface, showed the coin to the delighted passengers and stored it in our cheek.[89]

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[87] Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia* (London: C. A. Pearson Ltd., 1901), 57-58.

[88] Joseph Osgood, *Notes of Travel or Recollections* (Salem: 1854), 155.

[89] Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* (1977), 171.

The diving activity, however, was not always a glamorous undertaking. It came with life-threatening risks. Sometimes, divers lost a limb or two to hungry sharks. Or they fell to their death under the giant knee of moving vessels. Or they ruptured their eardrums due to exposure to waterborne infections.[90]

In addition to catching fish and collecting coins, skilled Somali swimmers and divers turned to the sea to find treasured commodities. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the British colonial official Henry Rayne watched pearl divers collect oysters in the depths of the sea at the Zaila port. The divers often traveled in groups of five to twelve for their gathering missions. People in this city used oysters for two main reasons: to eat the inside meat, and to sell the pearls and shells. Worth thousands of dollars, the pearls were sold worldwide to wealthy people who used them to adorn clothes and wear them as necklaces. One day, as Rayne explained, a dealer sold a collection of pearls for 700 rupees in Aden. The buyer then resold the pearls for 24,000 rupees in Mumbai.[91]

The accounts by Ibn Battuta, Vasco Da Gama, Duarte Barbosa, Joseph Osgood, Ibrahim Ismaa'il, and Henry Rayne unveil the deep ties that Somalis maintained with the sea across the centuries. They reveal, also, that the sea played a crucial role in the establishment of Somali coastal cities. These were mainly prosperous cities, as we have seen, due to their maritime economies. But it wasn't only the coastal dwellers who took advantage of these opportunities. The pastoral and hinterland communities, too, brought their treasured items—livestock, ivory, frankincense—to the coastal markets in exchange for dates, sugar, rice, textiles, artifacts, etc.[92]

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[90] Dawson, "Swimming, Surfing and Underwater Diving," 110.

[91] Henry A. Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somals* (England: Witherby, 1921), 36-38.

[92] Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society*, 27.

The Somali coastlines have thus been an economic lifeline for the people of Somalia for centuries. The trading routes that brought merchants to the shores and the seaborne occupations that gave Somalis their livelihood reveal an overlooked aspect of history: that the people have been intrinsically intertwined with the maritime economy as traders, travelers, fishermen, swimmers, and divers. If one accepts the dominant thesis that Somalis have always been nothing more than agro-pastoralists and nomadic pastoralists, it is easy to dismiss these oceanic communities as exceptions. However, pastoral life in Somalia was not always separate from the urban region. Cassanelli has reminded us that, while most Somali pastoralists evaded city life, they maintained "a lively commerce with" urban residents. Likewise, historian Scott Reese explained that coastal dwellers—at least since the tenth century—have remained in contact with pastoral nomads, often trading goods such as tobacco, weapons, jewelry, and beads for livestock, ivory, and hides.[93]

This "cultural juggling" was a common phenomenon across the world. For instance, in Eritrea's coastal city of Massawa, residents maintained commercial, cultural, and social ties with those in the interior. As historian Jonathan Miran has explained, "Massawa is a town with a mixed population originating from both land and sea, and a site where access to inland and overseas trade networks was subject to competition that could be determined on the basis of social and cultural markers, constructions of identity and culture articulated by Massawans have been multifarious."[94] In Somalia, during periods of drought or conflict, nomads moved into

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[93] Reese, "Patricians of the Benaadir," v; Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society*, 27.

[94] Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Indiana University Press, 2009), 217-219.

coastal cities, abandoning their pastoral lifestyle in search of employment in the maritime economy, locally or overseas.

Cultures, Ideas, and the Sea

If the waterways proved to be the foundation of early coastal development on the Horn, they also played a crucial role in the emergence of new cultures, religious beliefs, and revolutionary ideas. These developments were particularly significant in anti-colonial struggles and Ethiopian resistance beginning in the 1500s. Islam was especially instrumental in shaping a distinct Somali identity—one that is conspicuously Muslim, African, and Arab all at once. It has provided a common identity that unified the country under Islam and connected them to the global *ummah*.

Somalis, of course, were not always Muslims. As historian Abdirahman Ali Hersi showed, the ancient northern city of Zaila was known to explorers as a mostly Abyssinian Christian city during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Likewise, Somalia's southern seaport cities remained untouched by Islam or any Abrahamic religion during this period. Citing the Arab geographer Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Idrisi, Hersi explained that the city of Brava was a "country of the pagans who do not believe in anything." To be sure, these inhabitants did believe in something, which al-Idrisi dismissed as "superstition" and "corrupt faith." They prostrated in prayers before stones they anointed with fish oil and erected in places of worship.[95] Paganism was not limited only to the southern cities. S. B. Miles, a British army officer who later wrote about northern cities, explained that he could detect aspects of "old paganism" or "old pagan rites" during his encounters with Somalis.[96]

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[95] Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 117-118.

[96] S. B. Miles, "On the Neighborhood of Bunder Marayah," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 42 (1872), 66; 69.

By the turn of the thirteenth century, however, explorers noticed a new trend in the same coastal cities where writers had often portrayed Somalis as non-Muslims the previous century. As Hersi's meticulous investigation shows, the Somali Islamization process had certainly been in the making for centuries. The religion initially traveled with Arab merchants and migrants to the East African coastal cities within a century of its emergence in Saudi Arabia in the seventh century CE.[97] Although historians disagree on the exact date the religion reached Somalia, some point to Arab Muslim tombstones in Mogadishu bearing the death dates 719 CE (101 AH) and 755 CE (138 AH). These graves were probably those of some of the first Arab settlers, who are often credited with laying the foundation of the city, which by the thirteenth century had become one of the most important settlements on the eastern coast of Africa.[98]

Although Islam was brought to the Somali shores as early as the seventh century, it was not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that observers noticed any visible presence of the religion.[99] One explanation is that the initial group of Arab migrants was too small to have a noticeable impact on Somali territories. Moreover, as I. M. Lewis noted, these migrants were also isolated in mercantile centers in coastal cities. Although urban dwellers and interior residents interacted in the seafront markets, the conversion of the Somali people to Islam was slow. This is partly because foreign merchants and traders initially maintained "their own

[97] C. C. Steward, "Islam" in *The Colonial Moment in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 191.

[98] Among early Arab Muslims in Mogadishu included Fatima bint Abd as-Samad Yaqub and al-Hajiya bint Muhammad Muqqaddam (buried in 711 CE), Abu Abdulla B. Raya b. Muhammad b. Ahmed an-Nayasaburi al-Khursani (buried in 1217 CE), and Muhammad ibn Abdusamad ibn Muhammad al-Husayn (buried 1217 CE). See for more, Jama, *The Origins and Development of Mogadishu,* 34; Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 113.

[99] Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 119-1920.

exclusiveness" in the coastal cities.[100] As well-traveled Arab aristocrats and the bearers of Islam who proudly traced their ancestors back to the Prophet Muhammad's Banu Hashim family as proof of their social standing and nobility, they must have looked at the godless natives with a disparaging gaze. In Massawa, Miran explained, a "sense of urban superiority reflected the ideal values … of the elite town dwellers or those who aspired to become part of the urban life."[101] In the Somali port cities, this superior attitude comes into view when we listen to Lewis, who reveals that these men often distanced themselves from locals, yet married their women and seldom gave away their daughters to Somali men.[102]

These early Arabs did not thus prioritize the Islamization of Somalis. Instead, it was mainly pastoral Somalis, who as teachers and preachers, increasingly carried the religion to the interior. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, more and more Somalis had been traveling to Islamic schools in North Africa, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Some of these students established permanent residency in these countries after completing their education. The historian Hersi noted that over a dozen Somalis lived in Yemen during the Rasulid dynasty, which ruled from 1229 CE to 1454 CE. After their studies, the men "distinguished themselves as the top scholars and teachers in the country" in the fourteenth century. Sheik Ismail ibn Abi Bark ibn Ibrahim al-Jabarti (1322-1403), a prominent scholar from Zaila, was among the scholars who maintained an imposing presence in Yemen.[103] Others returned to Somalia to serve the people as *imams*,

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[100] I. M. Lewis, "Regional Review of the Distribution and Spread of Islam," in *Islam in Tropical Africa* (Oxford University Press, 1966), 7.

[101] Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*, 220.

[102] Lewis, "Regional Review of the Distribution and Spread of Islam," 7.

[103] Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 132-3; Noha Sadek, "Taʿizz, Capital of the Rasulid Dynasty in Yemen." *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* (2003), 309.

teachers, and leaders in coastal cities and inland villages.[104] Shaykh Uways B. Muhammad Al-Barawi, for instance, studied in Baghdad around 1870 under the renowned *Qadiri* scholar Sayyid Mustafa B. Salman al-Jilani. After his return to the Banadir coast, Uways was hailed as an influential scholar with a major following that spread along the eastern coast of the continent, including parts of Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Madagascar, and Mozambique.[105]

By the sixteenth century, almost all Somalis were Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school. At a time when they were scattered across the Horn, divided along tribal lines with no central authority, religion became the single unifying identity that mobilized Somalis under Islam.[106] This was especially crucial, given the constant threats Muslim sultanates faced from the more powerful ancient Abyssinian Christian kingdom. Thus, in the sixteenth century, under the leadership of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1506-1543), Muslims from diverse tribal and ethnic backgrounds came together under the banner of Islam to resist the Abyssinians. As scholar Mukerrem Miftah has explained, while there had been sporadic Muslim-Christian wars since the arrival of Islam in the Horn, this period witnessed "the most heightened clashes" that tested the kingdom's military might. This resistance movement, if short-lived, emerged because the often-divided sultanates and tribes joined forces for the first time as Muslims to challenge Abyssinian colonial domination.[107]

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[104] Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 132-133.

[105] B. G. Martin, "Muslim Politics and Resistance to Colonial Rule: Shaykh Uways B. Muḥammad Al-Barāwī and the Qādirīya Brotherhood in East Africa," *Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1969), 472; Christine Choi Ahmed, "God, Anti-Colonialism and Drums: Sheikh Uways and the Uwaysiyya," *Ufahamu* 17, no. 2 (1989), 103-104.

[106] Abdurahman Abdullahi, "The Conception of Islam in Somalia: Consensus and Controversy," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 21, no. 9 (2021), 1.

[107] Mukerrem Miftah, "Key Dimensions in Abyssinia-Ottoman Relations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Critical Review of Literatures," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017), 265-9; Leenco Lata, *The Horn of Africa as a Common Homeland* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2004), 160.

In the twentieth century, another Somali anti-colonial leader, Muhammad Abdulle Hassan (1856-1920), rallied various tribes from northern Somalia into a 21-year armed resistance against Ethiopian and European colonial powers.[108] Like al-Ghazi, Hassan invoked Islam to unify the tribes in the fight against what they considered a Christian invasion. Hassan's conception of pan-Islamist ideas can be traced back to his early years. He began attending *dugsi* at the age of eight to study the Quran and elementary Islamic studies. At eleven, Hassan memorized the entire Quran and became a monitor, leading and teaching his classmates in the teacher's absence. Later, he traveled to all centers of Islamic learning in the country and "acquired all that the Somali and Arab *sheiks* could give him." After that, he ventured into Mecca, where he "fell under the influence" of Sheik Mahammed Salih, whose Salihiyya order had garnered followers among citizens of the Red Sea and its adjacent regions. In 1895, Hassan returned to northern Somalia to peddle Salih's teachings to the coastal and village dwellers.[109]

Five years later, Hassan became increasingly impatient with European colonial powers who "oppressed our ancient religion without cause." He mobilized thousands of armed men from various tribes under the banner of Islam. This led to the emergence of the anti-colonial Dervish movement, which fought the Abyssinians, the British, and Italians until Hassan succumbed to the 1920 influenza pandemic.[110] Today, the statues of Hassan and al-Ghazi stand tall in central Mogadishu as memorials to the first Somali nationalists who established resistance movements

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[108] C. C. Stewart, "Islam," in *The Colonial Moment in Africa*, 196. Also see Douglas Jardine's *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* and Said S. Samatars' *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism* for about the Sayyid's struggle for liberation.

[109] Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Cases of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 102-104.
[110] Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism*, 108-136.

that transcended the clan-based politics that long represented the prototypical Somali traditions in peace and war.[111]

Besides these early Somali nationalists, a number of other African leaders also used Islam to unify their followers in resisting European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[112] Take, for instance, Muhammad Ahmed bin Abdallah's Mahdist movement, which expelled Egyptian and British rule from Sudan and installed an Islamic state in the late nineteenth century.[113] Morocco,[114] Libya,[115] northern Nigeria,[116] and other colonies also witnessed anti-imperial uprisings grounded in a similar Islamic resistance doctrine. In the Americas, Black people have historically invoked Islam in their long struggle for freedom and liberation. Enslaved African Muslims "formed a community of men and women linked by Islam, transcending restrictive notions of ethnicity and nationality."[117] Many resisted by preserving their

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[111] Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History," 109.

[112] Stewart, "Islam," 195.

[113] Haim Shaked, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2. Also see P.M. Holt's *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958) and Aharon Layish's *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 6.

[114] Moroccan nationalists galvanized huge supporters in the name of Islam and formed armed resistance groups against the French colonial regime throughout the twentieth century. Also see Abdelaziz El Amrani's "Islam, Colonialism and Resistance in the Contemporary Maghreb," *Hespéris* (2019), 232.

[115] In Libya, too, Omar al-Mukhtar led a pan-Islamist movement against the Italian Empire from 1911 until his death in 1930. Also see Frank Dhont, "The Historical Figure of Omar Al-Mukhtar and Islamic Martyrdom in Indonesia," *Majalah Al-Jamiah* (2012), 75–95. https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2012.501.75-95.

[116] In northern Nigeria, a number of similar anti-colonial uprisings also took place. These were led—like those in Somalia, Morocco, and Libya—by "holy men" who claimed to have seen divine visions to drive white people away from their lands. For more, see R. A. Adeleye, "Mahdist Triumph and British Revenge in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (1972), 193-4.

[117] Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York University Press, 1998), 51. Reem M. Hilal, "Marking the American Landscape: African Muslim Slave Writings and the Place of Islam" *Journal of the African Literature Association*, (2017): 141-142.

Muslim identities and Islamic practices under the unforgiving slave laws. Others plotted revolts—with and without non-Muslim fellows—to secure freedom or to avenge abuse.[118] During the American civil rights movement, thousands of African Americans embraced Islam as a tool to resist racism and combat white supremacy.[119]

In Somalia, besides fostering new cultures and revolutionary ideas, the sea also helped develop tribal identities that categorized Somalis into distinct ancestral groups. The founders of these tribes, as legend has it, were noble Arab men who traced their lineage to the Banu Hashim tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. These men entered the northern regions of Somalia through the Red Sea and married indigenous women on the Horn. Out of these unions, as the story goes, came the largest Somali clan families: Daarod, Dir, Hawiye, and Isaaq.[120] Today, these clan families maintain an imposing presence in Somalia's political, social, and religious spheres, as well as in diasporic communities. The founders of the clans include Sheik Abdurahman ibn Ismail Jabarti and Sheik Ishaq ibn Ahmed al-Alawi. Their shrines and tombstones still hold great significance for some and serve as important sites for annual commemorations.

The arrival of Islam in Somalia, which provided Somalis with a cherished identity and culture, was only possible because of the transnational waterways that linked the country to Arabia and other parts of the world. In coastal towns and villages, Somalis embraced the cultures, beliefs, and revolutionary ideas that came with the religion. They made faith a fundamental guiding principle in their social and economic systems. Leaders such as al-Ghazi

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[118] Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 226-227. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 18.

[119] Dawn-Marie Gibson, "Making Original Men: Elijah Muhammad, The Nation of Islam, and The Fruit of Islam," *Journal of Religious History* 44, np. 3 (2020): 319–37; Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Random House, 1964).

[120] I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 4th ed. (Ohio University Press, 2002), 4-7.

and Hassan effectively used the region to mobilize various tribes in their struggles against colonialism. They won the minds and hearts of generations of Somalis. Today, secular Somalis sing the praises of al-Ghazi and Hassan as the architects of Somali nationalism, while conservative Islamists venerate them for pioneering *jihad* to challenge the invading empires of their time.

European Colonialism and the Sea

Just as the sea lines were a major factor in drawing new cultures and ideas that gave Somalia its distinct identity, so, too, they attracted European colonial powers seeking to control the region's maritime trade in the late nineteenth century. In the early years of the century, European domination on the continent was mainly concentrated in the southern and northern regions. Then, with the discovery of gold, diamonds, and other natural resources in the 1860s and 1870s, colonial powers increasingly took possession of territories throughout the continent. During the same period, construction of an important waterway linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea was completed: the Suez Canal. This meant that the vessels sailing from Europe no longer needed to cross the southern cape to reach East Africa, cutting the travel distance by ca. 7000 kilometers.[121] The canal increased foot traffic to the Red Sea and its adjacent regions.

By this time, no area of Somalia was officially under European colonial rule, although Britain had signed a series of treaties with traditional leaders in territories along the northern coastline during the mid-nineteenth century. In these treaties, the empire sought, among other things, to prevent Somalis from coming into agreement with other European powers that "might

[121] Bolt, "The Partitioning of Africa," 4-5.

be detrimental or injurious to British interests."[122] Chief among these interests was the Gulf of Aden, which served Britain as an important route for supplying fresh food to its administration and garrison in Aden. Somaliland's Berbera port was also close to Aden, and the empire wanted to ensure no rival European power came any closer.[123] In other parts of the continent, the scramble for colonies reached its zenith. So much so that major colonial powers such as Britain and France teetered on the brink of war over African territories.[124]

To settle brewing conflicts and prevent future disputes among European powers, Otto von Bismarck convened the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which formalized colonialism in Africa and allowed "various European nations to claim almost the entire continent, including resources and people."[125] Following this agreement, the French and Italian empires flexed their muscles to seize portions of the Horn through military action or treaties they signed—often by deceit, coercion, or intimidation—with African chiefs and leaders.[126] The country shared this fate with virtually the entire continent, except Ethiopia and Liberia.[127] Though their chief goal was to exploit Africa's natural resources and its peoples, colonial powers often justified their mission as a benevolent project meant to "civilize" Africans. In addition, these powers claimed to protect

[122] David Hamilton, "Imperialism Ancient and Modern: A Study of British Attitudes to the Claims to Sovereignty to the Northern Somali Coastline," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1967), 27.

[123] Hamilton, "Imperialism Ancient and Modern," 9.

[124] Bolt, "The Partitioning of Africa," 5-6.

[125] Fidon R. Mwombeki, "The Berlin Conference," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024), 392;

[126] Makau wa Mutua, "Why Redraw the Map of Africa," *Michigan Journal of International Law* (1995), 1131.

[127] Mieke Van Der Linden, *The Acquisition of Africa* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 3-4; Getachew Mengistie and Michael Blakeney, "Geographical Indications and the Scramble for Africa," *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* (2017): 199-220.

Africans from the Arab slave trade that had ravaged the continent even decades after the United States formally abolished the institution.[128]

Threatened by the French rivalry in the region, Britain officially staked its claim to northern Somalia to ensure the smooth sailing of its ships to and from its colonies in India and Arabia. The empire and tribal elders signed the formal inauguration of the British Somaliland Protectorate in 1884.[129] In this treaty, the parties "agreed (among other things) not to cede, sell, mortgage, or otherwise give for occupation, save to the British Government, any portion of their territory."[130] Even so, the empire was less enthusiastic about making the newly acquired land a settler colony, as was the case in the southern and eastern regions of the continent. Instead, it was much more interested in the coastlines, especially in maintaining its "titular control of the Zeila, Berbera, and Bulahar seaports."[131]

To the French Empire, the northwestern region of Djibouti was appealing because of its coastline, which served as a crossroad for busy shipping lines. Although the empire had been acquiring territories—first the Afar land of Obock and then the Somali territory of Djibouti—in the region since the mid-1860s, it did not establish a formal colonial administration until the final years of the century. The decision came, as historian Raphael Njoku explained, "after the British

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[128] Jutta Bolt, "The Partitioning of Africa," in *The History of African Development: An Online Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, ed. by Ewout Frankema, Ellen Hillbom, Ushehwedu Kufakurinani, and Felix Meier zu Selhausen (African Economic History Network, 2023), 3; Mwombeki, "The Berlin Conference," 392-3; Adam Hochschild: *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2020), 1.

[129] Laitin, "The Economy," 124.

[130] G. N. Sanderson, *Map of Africa by Treaty* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 409.

[131] Njoku, *The History of Somalia*, 56.

declined French ships permission to berth at the port of Aden."[132] As a result, the French turned to the colony, setting up a coaling station for merchant and naval ships.

In the 1900s, with most northern territories under British and French domination, Italy saw an opportunity to absorb the rest of the country into its rapidly expanding colonies in the Horn. By 1889, Italy had induced the Majeerteen and Hobyo sultanates in northeastern Somalia to come under Italian protection.[133] A few years later, in 1893, the Italian government acquired the Banadir region—Mogadishu, Marka, Brava, and Warsheik—in the south as a lease from the Zanzibar Sultanate.[134] The region had changed hands many times before Italy arrived. These seaport cities had once served as significant economic and cultural centers. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese, the dominant power on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, took control of the Swahili and Banadir coasts, including many cities in present-day southern Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. In the mid-seventeenth century, as Portuguese power dwindled, the Imamate of Oman joined forces with seaport natives to expel the Portuguese. The Omanis then assumed power, and a new Zanzibar Sultanate was installed to rule over East African coastal cities, including those in southern Somalia. In the nineteenth century, when British colonialism spread across Africa, the Zanzibar rule itself came under British protection. The Italian government persuaded Britain to transfer all the southern Somali seaports to her. And by the turn of the twentieth century, the entire south and central Somalia fell to Italy.[135]

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[132] Njoku, *The History of Somalia*, 58.

[133] E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1951), 12.

[134] Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia," 922.

[135] Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland*, 13-14.

The coming of European colonial administrations led to the emergence of service jobs that had never before existed in Somalia. New casual and permanent occupations emerged in major cities and towns as colonial powers cemented their presence in the country. If pre-colonial Somalis were mostly pastoralists and farmers, the colonial era produced a new generation of Somalis who attended colonial and mission schools and spoke European languages. They became part of the salaried elites working as interpreters, police, customs agents, bookkeepers, medical personnel, postal runners, and teachers.[136] Somalis shared this history with other colonies throughout the continent. In the Congo, African laborers filled "positions in European firms as mechanics, carpenters, ironworkers, and clerks."[137] In Mozambique, African laborers participated in the construction of ports, rails, roads, and communications systems.[138]

In Somalia, establishing colonial schools was not necessarily intended to produce educated, self-sufficient Somalis. Instead, colonial regimes often used education to pacify populations and ensure compliance. The historian Walter Rodney explained that education served as a vital mechanism for producing Africans eager to implement the capitalist system and to safeguard colonial interests on the continent.[139] In colonial Somalia, the highest level of education typically offered by colonial administrators was seventh grade. This was apparently deemed "sufficient for administrative and low-level technical duties assigned to the natives."[140]

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[136] Laitin, "The Economy" 124-125.

[137] Adam Ewin, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 94.

[138] Stephen J. Rockel, "New Labor History in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial Enslavement and Forced Labor," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 86 (2014), 166.

[139] Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 26.

[140] Ali A. Abdi, "Education in Somalia: History, Destruction, and Calls for Reconstruction," *Comparative Education* 34, no. 3 (1998), 331.

In British Somaliland, the colonial regime recruited police officers, soldiers, civil servants, and domestic workers from those who attended colonial schools or vocational training programs.[141] Therefore, the empire's effort to educate its indigenous populations was primarily aimed at producing a labor force that would support and further its colonial agenda.

In the process, many young Somalis perceived securing colonial employment as a superior alternative to the traditional pastoral or agricultural work rhythms. Young people often performed mundane pastoral tasks alongside family members in a patriarchal society. In this tradition, young people were often left with little or no power to independently attend to their needs. Their participation in colonial enterprises therefore provided them with an alternative: a chance to earn their own money, interact with diverse cultures, learn new languages, and showcase their traditions in more diverse urban settings. Their educational training and job titles also enhanced their social and economic status. It is no coincidence that Somalia's anti-colonial activists in the 1940s and 1950s and post-colonial political elites were mostly colonial-trained civil servants and low-level workers in urban areas. Among them were Aden Abdulle Osman, who served as a nurse and clerk under the Italian colonial regime,[142] and Abdirizak Haji Hussein, who served as an errand boy for the British administration in Mogadishu.[143] Both Osman and Hussein went on to hold prominent political positions in post-colonial Somalia, becoming, in the 1960s, the president and prime minister, respectively.

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[141] Robert Rinehart, "Historical Setting" in *Somalia: A Country Study, ed. by* Harold Nelson, 3rd edition (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 21-24.

[142] Abdi Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats: Somalia's Aden A. Osman and Abdirizak H. Hussen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 14.

[143] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 32.

However, colonial jobs were often brutal and exploitative. Colonial administrators sought to maximize efficiency at the expense of their subjects, whom they underpaid and overworked. Indeed, the colonial enterprise relied on a racial capitalistic system, in which a small number of colonial officers racialized, subjugated, and exploited the African majority.[144] Somali laborers across industries were always under the thumb of their white "masters." To the colonial officers, Somalis were inferior beings—uncivilized and savages—who deserved degradation and brutality to remind them of their place in society.[145] In many cases, the officers used coercion and slavery-like practices to enhance productivity. The prominent British feminist and activist E. Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) explained that "forced labor was a continuous feature of Italian rule in Somaliland, from the early days of the occupation until the Italian defeat in 1941."[146] Italian settlers who established plantations along the southern rivers exacted the most brutal punishment on Somali laborers. They uprooted farmers from their lands only to coerce them to work on the settlers'.[147] While forced labor in the agricultural industry has been well documented in Somalia, workers in construction and other fields also suffered greatly. As historian Iman Mohamed noted, oral history interviews indicate that officers of the Italian fascist regime "certainly used corvée labour to build public works projects in rural areas."[148]

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[144] Tatah Mentan, *Africa in the Colonial Ages of Empire: Slavery, Capitalism, Racism, Colonialism, Decolonization, Independence As Recolonization* (Oxford: Langaa RPCIG, 2017), 180.

[145] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 24; Rinehart, "Historical Setting" 21.

[146] Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland*, 88.

[147] Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland*, 88.

[148] Mohamed, "Colonial Amnesia," 928.

In southern Africa, the Portuguese colonial regime employed similar tactics against peasant cotton farmers. Historian Allen Isaacman explained that in the twentieth century, the Portuguese coerced hundreds of thousands of peasants, including children and elders, to cultivate cotton in Mozambique.[149] In the Congo, the Belgian colonial soldiers subjected African rubber gatherers to one of the most inhuman and brutal systems of labor. As historian and journalist Adam Hochschild chronicled in *King Leopold's Ghost*, workers who failed to meet the rubber quotas faced horrific punishments, which included being killed, having their hands and feet severed, or being taken hostage.[150] In South Africa, British colonial officers used "forced labor extensively" to meet labor shortage demands in railway and road construction as well as in gold and diamond mining.[151]

Despite the mistreatment and racialization they endured, many young African laborers saw their encounters with colonial authorities as opportunities to escape the confines of their homes.[152] For Somalis, the daily interactions with their colonial bosses kindled aspirations for transnational migrations, prompting many to pursue economic opportunities beyond the familiar waters of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. This was not their first endeavor to seek economic opportunities at sea. Somali life, as I have illustrated throughout this chapter, has been deeply connected to the ocean currents. Regardless of whether Somalis were nomads or urban dwellers, they relied on the sea just as much as they did on the land. Indeed, the sea facilitated their trade

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[149] Allen Issacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (London: Heinemann, 1996), 1.

[150] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 162-166.

[151] Moses Ochonu, "African Colonial Economies: Land, Labor, and Livelihoods," *History Compass*, (2013), 94.

[152] Adewale R, Aregbeshola and Ibrahim Ayoade Adekunle, "Demystifying Colonialism and Migration: An African Perspective," *Research in Globalization* 9 (2024), 4.

in livestock and natural resources, enabling them to exchange them for goods such as spices, rice, and textiles. It also brought to the Somali shore religion, culture, and revolutionary ideas, all of which shaped their identity. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these same waterways transported a new generation of Somali laborers to destinations in the Americas, Australia, and Europe. This marked the first time Somalis ventured beyond Asia and Arabia, a topic I will explore further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

Life at Sea: Somali Migrant Laborers in the Age of Empire and Steamships

> We went to Casablanca and came back to Port Talbot. There I passed on to another ship where I worked with two other Somali, a Guinean and several Indians. We were caught in such a gale, that a wave threw our boatswain under a ladder, twisting him in such a way that his leg was broken.
>
> —Ibrahim Ismaa'il, *The Life Adventures of a Somali*, 1928.

> And them days … the ship would literally go underneath, completely submerged, and it then pops back up. And it was quite unnerving for us because my father died on the ship. And he was buried at sea. They said he died in his sleep. But there were lots of stories from the old Somalis who were telling you how sometimes people just jump overboard. So, we'll never know the reality of what really happened. You have to just take it on trust.
>
> —Steve Kharieh, interviewed in Cardiff, Wales, 2022.

On a drizzly summer day in 1912, the passenger and cargo steamer *Clyde* berthed at the port of Southampton, England, ending a lengthy voyage that had taken her to Europe, the Caribbean, and South America. Along the way, the vessel made several stops, picking up passengers and signing on crew members in Lisbon, Portugal; Vigo, Spain; Saint Vincent, the Caribbean; Bahia, Brazil; Montevideo, Uruguay; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Half of the twelve crew members who embarked from Bahia were Somali and Arab migrants in their twenties. Abdul Roble, Ali Roble, Hassan Said, Ismail Noor, Mohamed Ali, and Saleh Moussa toiled in the engine room as

trimmers and firemen. Their duties included breaking coal and shoveling it into the furnaces to generate the power that propelled the vessel.[153]

Four summers later, in 1916, the cargo steamship *Armadale* came ashore in Sydney from Newcastle. Soon after, an official hastily jotted down the crew members' names, ages, birthplaces, and job titles, marking their racial identities and physical appearances for the waiting immigration inspectors. These laborers included seven Somali men—Ali Ahmed, Ali Roble, Dualy Abdi, Mohamed Elmi, Ahmed Farah, Noor, and Adam—whose ages ranged between eighteen and twenty-eight.[154] When asked about their birthplaces, they all picked the same northern Somali port city: Berbera. This ancient city once served as the administrative capital of the British Somaliland Protectorate. On that summer day, however, the laborers stood a world away from home as the raging Great War entered its second year. They were among millions of African wartime laborers and soldiers who served European empires within and outside the continent.[155] Most Somalis worked aboard merchant ships that transported food supplies,

[153] This particular crew list does not mention the ethnic background of the men. However, we can safely assume that there were Somalis and Arabs for three main reasons: First, the name "Roble" is a common Somali name, derived from *roob* (rain), and Roble is translated as "rain bearer." The rest of the names are common among all Muslim peoples, including Somalis and Arabs. Second, the crewmen listed Wales as their permanent homes of residence. During the period in question, almost all the Muslim seamen in Wales were Somalis and Arabs. Third, we encounter some of these names when many shipping companies begin listing the race, ethnicity, and birthplaces of their crewmen during the First World War. So we see many laborers with these names listing Somaliland or Aden as their home countries. See Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors: Inwards Passenger Lists (1878-1960), BT 26, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*, https://shorturl.at/dM467

[154] Inward Passenger Lists, State Records Authority of New South Wales in Australia, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://shorturl.at/itFY0

[155] Dick van Galen Last, *Black Shame: African Soldiers in Europe, 1914-1922* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 34. For more on the contributions of Africans in the First World War, see Carina Schmitt and Amanda Shriwise, "The Great War and the Warfare–Welfare Nexus in British and French West African Colonies," *Social Science History* 47, no. 4 (2023): 565–584; George Robb, "Introduction," in *White War, Black Soldiers: Two African Accounts of World War I*, ed. George Robb (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2021), 12-13. This book was written by Bakary Diallo and Lamine Senghor in French and translated by Nancy Erber and William Peniston; Michelle Moyd, "Making the Household, Making the State: Colonial Military Communities and Labor in German East Africa,"

armaments, and soldiers across the treacherous seaways, risking life and limb in the process.[156] Whatever the *Armadale* may have carried when it arrived in Sydney, the Somali crew performed the same taxing tasks as those aboard the *Clyde*: trimming the coal and tending to the firing furnace in the engine room.

Some years later, in the spring of 1920, the SS *Mongolian Prince* docked at Boston following a five-month-long journey from Cape Town. In charge of this engine room, too, were five Somali crewmen: Hersi Ahmed, Hassen Ahmed, Ali Hersi, Omer Hassen, and Ali Kalid. Before debarkation, they answered a series of questions as part of a screening process required by the United States government for foreign laborers aboard arriving vessels.[157] The process was more of a surveillance apparatus than a mere bureaucratic procedure. Indeed, in the years preceding the Great War, nativists and nationalists beat the drum for exclusionary immigration policies aimed at weeding out supposed foreign adversaries trying to infiltrate the country. Their

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International Labor and Working Class History 80, no. 1 (2011): 53–76; Oswald Masebo, "The African Soldiers Dragged into Europe's War," *BBC News*, June 3, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33329661.

[156] A number of Somalis who participated in the war received the prestigious Mercantile Marine Medal and the British War Medal for their service. To qualify for these awards, recipients had to have served at least six months and undergone at least one voyage through a dangerous zone. The Somalis who received the medals included Mohammed Tualla, Abdullah Saleh, and Gili Ali.

Medal Card of Mohammed, Tualla, 1914-1925, BT 351/1/98842, Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen, 1872-1992, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, the United Kingdom, https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D8070395

Medal Card of Saleh, Abdullah, 1914-1925, BT 351/1/298, Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen, 1872-1992, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, the United Kingdom, https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D7968548

Medal of Ali, Gili, 1914-1925, BT 351/1/50954, Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen, 1872-1992, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, the United Kingdom, https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D8018421

[157] Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004: Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Boston, Massachusetts, 1917-1943, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://shorturl.at/KTWZ6

unrelenting campaign gave way to the Immigration Act of 1917, which historian Seema Sohi described as "the most sweeping and restrictive immigration law to date." The law barred Asians[158] and other non-white immigrants, required new arrivals over the age of sixteen to demonstrate basic literacy skills, increased the entrance fee to eight dollars per individual, and outlawed the entry of the poor, the sick, homosexuals, and those with mental and physical disabilities.[159]

By the time the Somali crewmen on board the *Mongolian* arrived on that spring day, the 1917 Act had been in place for three years. The workers did not intend—at least on paper—to discharge at the port of Boston. But immigration officers at the port were determined to keep track of the laborers for fear they might jump ship and quietly vanish into the crowds. Thus, the officers documented all the necessary details to help them trace the men. This included their names, ages, height, weight, race ("African"), and nationality ("Somali"). They also recorded the laborers' "physical marks or peculiarities." Twenty-year-old Hersi Ali had a scar on the forehead. Hassan Omar, twenty-two, had a mark on the "corner of the right eye."[160] To the U.S. government, this surveillance system was a way to keep foreign enemies at bay, though, in

[158] These barred Asian immigrants included people who came from the so-called Asiatic Barred Zone, covering regions such as Afghanistan, Arabia, Asiatic Russia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Polynesian Islands. The law essentially expanded existing anti-immigration laws that had already been in place to exclude immigrants from China (under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and Japan (under the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907). The Philippines, however, did not include this category as the country was a U.S. colony.

[159] Seema Sohi, "Barred Zones, Rising Tides, and Radical Struggles: The Antiradical and Anti-Asian Dimensions of the 1917 Immigration Act." *The Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (2022), 299; Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Book, 2019), 135-138; Margot Canady, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 48-59.

[160] Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004: Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Boston, Massachusetts, 1917-1943, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://shorturl.at/KTWZ6

reality, it was meant to shut the door on non-white immigrants deemed undesirable—people who ostensibly threatened to adulterate an imagined America that was purely white and heterosexual.

The steamers in which the Somali laborers toiled were mainly headquartered in Great Britain and sailed to nearly every corner of the world, transporting people and goods and mail. The *Clyde* was owned and operated by the London-based shipping firm Royal Mail Packet Company, founded in the late 1830s by James MacQueen, a sugar plantation manager in Grenada and a staunch pro-slavery polemicist. MacQueen started the company to modernize the painfully slow mail delivery system between Britain and the Caribbean islands. Soon after its formation, the British Empire put the company in charge of the mail service in various regions, including the Caribbean islands and North America. The *Clyde* was one of fourteen new vessels the company built to transport passengers and communications across the Atlantic.[161]

The SS *Armadale*, a cargo steamer built in 1909, was among dozens of vessels owned and operated by the London-based Australind Steam Shipping Company. The ship transported goods between Europe and Australia. During the First World War, at the same time the seven Somali laborers toiled in the engine room, *Armadale* became one of numerous merchant ships the Royal British Navy commissioned as warships to support the war effort. These ships were tasked with transporting troops and supplies, including armaments and food, across treacherous waterways. In the summer of 1917, one year after it had docked in Sydney, German submarines torpedoed and sank *Armadale* en route from Manchester to Salonica, Greece. Three people lost their lives in the process.[162]

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[161] Joanna Espin, "The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company," The Postal Museum in London, March 18, 2025, https://www.postalmuseum.org/blog/the-royal-mail-steam-packet-company/

[162] Scottish Built Ships, "The History of Shipbuilding in Scotland," accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?ref=4825

The steamship *Mongolian Prince*, built in 1883, was operated under the ownership of the London-based Prince Line company. It was among a fleet of dozens of vessels that engaged in global trade. In its early years, the company operated through routes connecting Britain to Libya, Malta, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Later, Prince Line expanded its services to northern and southern America, directly connecting to New York and Brazil. By 1894, following the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal, the Prince Line became known for its direct connection from Manchester to Alexandria. Some of the cargo transported between these regions included manufactured goods, industrial equipment, cotton, and coffee. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Prince Line established yet another route connecting New York to South Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far East.[163]

As Western companies deepened their economic and colonial ties with Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, Somali laborers increasingly migrated to Europe and North America. The *Clyde*, *Armadale,* and *Mongolian* were but a few of the transnational European vessels that relied heavily on the working hands of these workers. They were the very engine—literally and figuratively—that powered the colonial steamers, transporting people and goods around the world. In some cases, the men worked alongside Arabs, Caribbeans, and South Asians, whom, like the Somalis, European empires recruited as cheap and exploitable laborers for engine room duties. Others worked as porters, interpreters, guides, drivers, soldiers, and policemen in cities and towns along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. In this chapter, I excavate the untold history

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Benjidog Historical Research Resources, "Australind Steam Shipping Company," accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.benjidog.co.uk/TheShipsList/Australind.php

Naval History, "World War 1 at Sea: British Merchant Ships Lost to Enemy Action," accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.naval-history.net/WW1LossesBrMS1917.htm

[163] The Royal Museum Greenwich, "Prince Line Ltd," accessed May 29, 2025.

of these laborers and their integral role in the global maritime economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To understand this history, I divide the encounters between Somali laborers and their colonial bosses into two categories: one, which occurred throughout the nineteenth century and was confined to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; and another, which began at the turn of the twentieth century and sent Somalis to Western countries.

The chapter consists of three sections. The first discusses the role Somali laborers played in the maritime economy, both onshore and at sea. Although most of these workers hailed from pastoral families that raised herds, they often imagined a different life in the Arabian Peninsula. As teens and young adults, Somalis increasingly turned to Arabian port cities such as Aden, Mukalla, and Port Said in the early decades of the twentieth century. In Aden and Mukalla, they established visible diaspora communities. Some worked as street vendors, selling handcrafted items such as mats, baskets, and hand-held fans, known in the Somali language as *babis*; some transported goods and people on small boats along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; and others engaged with colonial employers, securing jobs as porters, interpreters, guides, soldiers, police officers, trimmers, and firemen. I argue in this section that, while employers viewed these men as useful workers in the maritime economy, they sought to exploit them as cheap labor within the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean for most of the nineteenth century. In other words, the British Empire was unwilling to send its colonial subjects of color to the mother country. However, as demand for engine-room laborers and factory workers grew during the two world wars, British companies had no choice but to recruit these migrants for jobs aboard ships.

The second section provides an overview of the factors that contributed to the increased migrations from pastoral communities in northern Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula. For instance, tribal violence and episodic droughts that long threatened inhabitants and their

treasured livestock often forced pastoralists to migrate to Arabia. But these conditions, I argue, worsened with the advent of European colonialism, which exacerbated already volatile political and social situations. Indeed, when the British Empire took control of the country's northern region as a Protectorate, armed resistance groups, such as the Dervish movement, emerged to undermine colonial administrations. In response, the empire armed rival tribes against the resisting movement, creating renewed tensions among Somalis. This led to increased violence that devastated livestock and uprooted pastoral communities. As a result, many young people sought refuge in Arabia. On shorefronts and in markets, they encountered colonial companies and secured employment aboard steamships.

The final section explores the difficult experiences these laborers endured at sea. As trimmers and firemen on steamships, the voyages they signed onto typically lasted about six months or more without a chance to set foot on land. In a sense, the steamship was not a mere workplace; it was also a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen. This section thus provides an intimate portrait of what work-life in the deep waters meant for the laborers. It describes the deadly conditions in the engine rooms, where almost all Somalis toiled. As laborers of color, shipping companies exploited and racialized Somalis, assigning them to the least paid and most labor-intensive and dangerous positions. In the cramped and oppressive engine rooms, many Black crew members died of heart disease and heat exhaustion, and their lifeless bodies were dumped into the ocean, sometimes without informing loved ones about their tragic passing.

Somalis and the Maritime Economy

The *Clyde*, *Armadale,* and *Mongolian* were but a few of the steamships that relied heavily on the working hands of young Somali migrant workers. Since at least the early years of the nineteenth century, Somalis actively participated in the imperial maritime economy onshore and at sea.

These laborers were mainly stationed in port cities in Arabia, where they offered their services to colonial empires as seamen, porters, interpreters, police officers, and soldiers. The explorer and scholar Richard Burton (1821-1890) documented his interactions with a Somali trimmer named Mohammed Mahmud during his mid-century research travels through the Horn of Africa. Mahmud worked on board a British war-ship along the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. After laboring in the engine room for years, Mahmud became an interpreter, serving and guiding European travelers to cities and towns along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. By the time Burton met him, Mahmud had become a notable sergeant in the garrison city.[164]

During this period, Yemen housed a large population of Somali migrants. Indeed, when the American writer Joseph Osgood visited the port city of Mukalla in the 1850s, he noticed a conspicuous population of Somali residents whose "thickly settled village, composed of date leaf and pole huts," stood on the southern edge of the city. Mukalla had a population of about 20,000 at the time, with Somalis, Turks, and Arabs as the three major communities. In Aden, Somali migrant laborers were equally visible.[165] Historian Edward Alpers reported on a "striking feature of the Somali community" in Aden. Some of the Somali men came to trade livestock; others migrated to work as "coolies, servants, cooks, and even sailors." The women either performed domestic service work or established small businesses, selling traditional handicrafts—including baskets, mats, and hand-held fans—on the streets of Aden.[166]

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[164] Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

[165] Joseph Osgood, *Notes of Travel or Recollections of Majunga, Zanzibar, Muscat, Aden, Moca, and other Eastern Ports* (Salem, Massachusetts: G. Creamer, 1854), 193-195.

[166] Edward Alpers, "The Somali Community at Aden in the Nineteenth Century," *Northeast African Studies*, 8, no. ⅔ (1986), 145-146.

The city became the most significant port on the Red Sea after the British Empire seized it as a colony in 1839.[167] It became a major transit port and coaling station, attracting migrant laborers from as far as Somalia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent.[168] Though Aden had only a little over 1,500 residents when Britain absorbed it into its colonies, the population mushroomed to 25,000 when Osgood made his way there following his visit to Mukalla.[169] Some of the Somali migrant laborers in Aden once captivated the attention of an English journalist, Herbert Vivian, as he studied the streets of Aden from a hotel veranda. His eyes watched dozens of young men emptying buckets of water on thirsty roads to make the scorching day feel less hellish; porters carrying on their shoulders tanks of fresh water for the Grand Hotel de I'Univers; a chambermaid who feverishly swept hotel floors, refusing to allow any dust or debris to survive her broom.[170] The menial laborers Vivian described were among the thriving Somali laborers who played an integral role in Aden's diverse economy.[171]

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[167] John Willis, "Colonial Policing in Aden, 1937-1967," *Arab Studies Journal* 5, no. 1 (1997), 60; Osgood, *Notes of Travel*, 133-135.

[168] As Aden grew following British colonial rule, so did the Somali population. In 1839, Somalis numbered 477. In 1856, that number increased to 3,896, and then to 10,611 in 1955. See Alpers, "The Somali Community at Aden," 144-5; Janet J. Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914" *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 82.

[169] Osgood, *Notes of Travel*, 150.

[170] Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia: Through the Lion-Land to the Court of the Lion of Judah* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1901), 11-12; 27.

[171] Janet J. Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914" *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000): 83. See also Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa.* Cambridge University Press, 2011; Major H. Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somal*s. London: H.F. & G., 1921; and Gordon Waterfield's *Morning Will Come*. London: J. Murray, 1944.

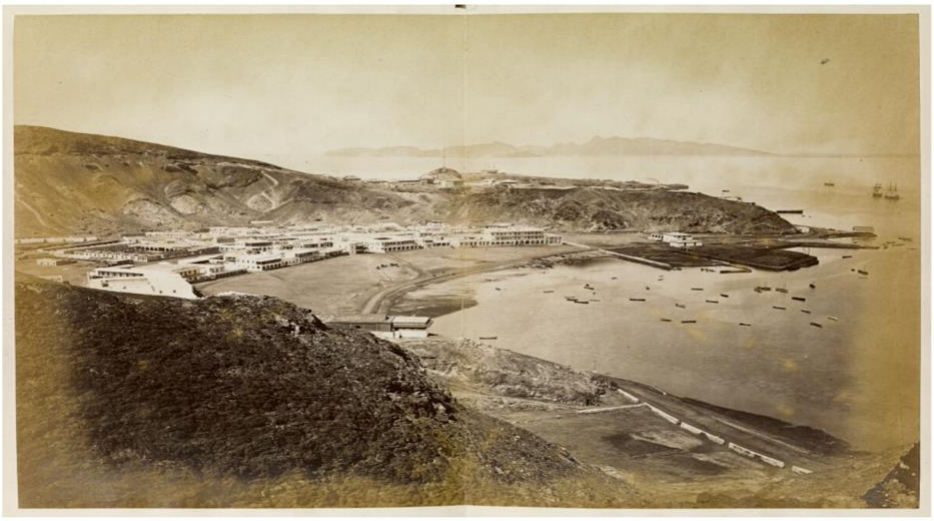


Figure 1: A photo of Steamer Point in Aden, taken in the 1870s, "An Account of the British Settlement of Aden in Arabia," compiled by Captain F.M. Hunter, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, T.11308, in *Qatar Digital Library* https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000007136.0x000001, accessed December 2, 2025.

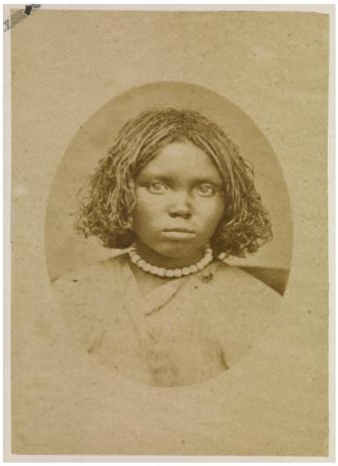


Figure 2: A photo of a "Somali Girl" in Aden from the 1870s, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers,T.11308/13, in Qatar Digital Library https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100023400730.0x000003, accessed December 2, 2025.

These Somali migrants also dominated the transportation industry as drivers and boat operators. Upon arriving in the city, Osgood quickly discovered these transportation professionals. "As soon as one lands on the wharf at Seamer Point," later remarked the writer, "he is beset by a dozen or more Somauli [sic] boys sitting astride or leading decrepit horses, infirm donkeys or lazy mules." These "boys" were the city's drivers performing the critical task of loading and unloading shipments as well as transporting people between the docks and their

destinations in central Aden. There were also Somali boatmen who operated in Aden and other cities along the Red Sea. In the mid-nineteenth century, Burton introduced a Somali named Abdy Abokar, whose "father was a wealthy shipowner." Historian Janet Ewald explained that by the 1870s, more than 700 Somalis held government licenses in Aden, "monopolizing the small boat traffic in the port."[172]

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During most of the nineteenth century, Somali migrants' maritime labor might have been limited to cities and towns along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. However, by the century's final decades—thanks to the opening of the Suez Canal—they were increasingly traversing the deep waters of the Atlantic world. Although both archival records and anecdotal accounts of Somali voyagers from this period remain scant, historian Gerold Krozewski has found glimpses of Somali presence in the engine rooms during the last two decades of the century. There was, for instance, a Somali fireman named Abdul who traveled aboard the British steamer *Sind* from Egypt to England in 1881. Abdul signed on as a replacement for Moh'd (short for Mohamed) who returned from London and decided to discharge at Port Said. Krozewski also discovered the story of another Somali laborer, Roble, who served aboard the *Port Pirie* as a seaman in 1891.[173] Except for fragmented accounts such as these, the experiences of nineteenth-century Somali maritime laborers remain largely unknown. That is partly because the shipping companies and Western governments obscured the identities of the laborers by misspelling their names and

[172] Ewald, Crossers of the Sea, 83.

[173] Gerold Krozewski, "Hidden Seamen from East Africa: Somali Firemen, European Steamers, and Global Labor Markets, 1880s– 1930s." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2022): 31-35.

leaving out their ethnicities or birthplaces, making it difficult to retrieve their documents in the repositories.

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, most governments required shipping companies to document the crew members' names, racial identities, nationalities, birthplaces, and physical descriptions. This practice became part of emerging immigration laws that most imperial powers implemented to keep out certain groups of immigrants. These immigration screening processes represented a new surveillance system that was intended to control the movements of foreign steamship laborers. Nonetheless, the resulting official records now provide clues to the presence of Somali seamen. Indeed, the crew list databases lay bare the Somalis who maintained an imposing presence on steamers that came in and out of cities across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Arabia. In addition to their presence in the engine rooms steamers like the *Clyde*, *Armadale,* and *Mongolian*, Somali crew members were aboard dozens of other vessels. For instance, the SS *Trelevan*, which berthed in Sydney in 1922, employed 16 Somali crewmen;[174] the SS *Illingworth*, which arrived in North Carolina in 1923, had four Somalis;[175] the SS *Goodleight,* which disembarked in Boston in 1934, signed on six;[176] the SS *Llanberis*, which docked in New Orleans in 1937, engaged four;[177] the SS *Pacific Start*, which

[174] Inward Passenger Lists, State Records Authority of New South Wales, Australia, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/6380361:1210

[175] Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Wilmington and Morehead City, North Carolina, 1908-1958, Record Group: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry.* https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7284981:8758

[176] Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Boston, Massachusetts, 1917-1943, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/8945869:8745

[177] Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1910-1945, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, The National Archives At Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry.* https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/6057353:7484

arrived in Vancouver in 1940, had eleven;[178] and the SS *North Anglia*, which anchored in Texas in 1949, employed seven.[179] The Somalis who worked on these vessels during this period often represented more than half, if not all, of the crew members toiling in the engine rooms.

The Somalis were part of large pool of global colonial laborers of color that kept the maritime economy running. As historian Minayo Nasiali has explained, African workers aboard steamships were "essential to the European shipping industry." As trimmers and firemen, these Africans served on British, French, German, and other European steamships.[180] Other colonial workers in the industry included those from Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean islands. In fact, some of the crewmen working alongside Somalis aboard the *Clyde*, *Armadale*, and *Llanberis* hailed from South Asia, Egypt, Yemen, and the West Indies. The colonial recruits had played an integral role in the maritime economy ever since European empires had become the uncontested power that dominated the global sealines during the early years of the nineteenth century.[181] But these empires' dependence on the colonized masses surged in the second half of the century when they expanded, and swaths of new territories in Africa, Asia, and Arabia became incorporated into their respective colonies.[182] That expansion coincided with the

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[178] Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at Seattle, Washington, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1644912:8945

[179] Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving At Houston, Texas, 1948-1954, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, National Archives At Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4222196:9220

[180] Minayo Nasiali, "A Working Alias: African Seafarers and Fungible Identities across European Empires in the Early Twentieth Century," *International Journal of Maritime History* 36, no. 1 (2024), 912.

[181] This was apparent in many parts of Africa and Arabia. In Yemen, for instance, the Empire began to recruit Somalis, Arabs, and other migrants for maritime jobs soon after it seized the port city of Aden. See more in Laura Tabili's *Global Migrants, Local Culture*, 207; Hyslop, "Steamship Empire," 50.

[182] Ana Isabel Madeira, Portuguese, "French and British discourses on colonial education: Church–State relations, school expansion and missionary competition in Africa, 1890–1930," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 41, no. 1-2 (2005): 37.

deterioration of pre-colonial pastoral and agricultural economies and the emergence of colonial employment across Africa, Arabia, and Asia. As a result, many people from pastoral and agricultural communities in villages and small towns began to flock to coastal cities that housed imperial administrations and wage-labor markets.[183]

The empires' workforce could be found onshore and at sea. Onshore, colonial laborers served as porters who loaded and unloaded cargo ships, construction workers who built roads and bridges, and farmhands in charge of cotton, grain, and sugar plantations. In the 1910s, for instance, European settlers in Uganda employed Rwandan and Burundi migrant laborers for jobs in cash crop plantations. In that decade, the country, a British Protectorate, emerged as a destination for seasonal labor migrants from neighboring East African regions. The largest population among these migrants was made up of Rwandan men and women who escaped famine and became forced labor in the Belgian colony.[184] Likewise, the British colonial power in Sudan used migrants from West Africa to work in cotton plantations in the city of al-Jazerah.[185] In Italian Somaliland, white settlers and private companies used communities along the Shabelle River to work—sometimes by coercion—on farms that produced cotton and grain for export and

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[183] This was especially true for young migrant workers from Somalia, Arabia, and the Indian subcontinent. See Diane Frost, *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century*. Liverpool University Press, 1999. Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formation in An Imperial World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Hyslop, "Steamship Empire." Bhattacharyya, "Steam and Stokehold."

[184] Ashley Brooke Rockenbach, "Contingent Homes, Contingent Nation: Rwandan Settlers in Uganda, 1911-64," PhD diss., (University of Michigan, 2018): 2-3.

[185] Andrew Roberts, "The Movement of People" in *The Colonial Moment in Africa: Essays on the Movement of Minds and Materials, 1900-1940*. (Cambridge University Press, 1986) 224-225.

domestic markets.[186] In British Somaliland, Somalis served the Empire as construction workers, domestic servants, interpreters, miners, porters, police officers, travel guides, and soldiers.[187]

Meanwhile, in the Indian subcontinent, migrant laborers were making the trek from rural regions to coastal cities in search of employment in the colonial economy. As in other European colonies, the advent of colonialism interrupted the daily lives of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. In the process, they became a crucial source of labor for the Empire's maritime, plantation, and railway industries worldwide. Many of them secured jobs as trimmers, firemen, deckhands, and cooks—laborers who came to be known as *lascars*—aboard British steamships. In the interwar years alone, according to historian Ravi Ahuja, approximately 50,000 *lascars* were employed with British shipping companies.[188] Many of these laborers hailed from pastoral and agricultural villages, where the colonial regime negatively affected their traditional lives. In Bengal, for instance, the taxation laws and the private property rights that the British Empire foisted onto the inhabitants "reduced peasants, the actual cultivators and owners of land, to the

[186] Like in many cases in the colonial labor force in Africa, the Somali laborers' entanglement with Italians wasn't a typical one. Somali laborers were coerced to work under slave-like conditions. For more, see Safia Aidid, "Women and the Somali Nationalist Movement, 1943-1960" *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 10, no. 10 (2011): 105-106. E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland* (New. York: The Philosophical Library, 1951), 81-82. Annalisa Urbano, A "Grandiose Future for Italian Somalia": Colonial Developmentalist Discourse, Agricultural Planning, and Forced Labor (1900–1940)," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92, no. 92 (2017): 80-83; Lee V. Cassanelli, "The Ending of Slavery in Italian Somalia: Liberty and the Control of Labor, 1890-1935" in *The End of Slavery in Africa*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 308-331.

[187] These Somalis not only served the Empire in Somaliland but also in Aden, South Africa, and British East Africa. See more David Laitin, "The Economy" in *Somalia: A Country Study*, edited by Helen Chapin Metz (Federal Research Division, 1993),124-125.

[188] Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900-1960," *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 51, no. S14 (2006): 1.

status of tenants."[189] These disruptions, coupled with persistent droughts and famine, uprooted the villagers and forced them into the global maritime economy.[190]

As natural disasters and colonial disruptions gained a foothold in pastoral and agricultural communities in the colonized world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shipping companies also faced internal crises. For the first time, British national labor unions emerged in protest against hazardous work conditions, employee mistreatment, and low wages. The National Seamen's and Firemen's Union, which was founded in the 1890s, was among organizations that not only successfully executed strikes but also caught the attention of sympathetic politicians in the British Parliament. The result was what came to be known as the New Unionism era, when laborers deemed unskilled, especially firemen and dock workers, organized themselves to influence significant regulations in the maritime industry.[191] However, steamship bosses were not happy about the movement and felt that "their power over British sailors had been undermined," according to historian Ravi Ahuja. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were increasingly calling these workers "insubordinate," "mutinous," "unmanageable," and "unruly,"[192] partly for their participation in the movement and reluctance to look the other way.

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[189] Despina Iliopoulou, "The Uncertainty of Private Property: Indigenous Versus Colonial Law in the Restructuring of Social Relations in British India," *Dialectical anthropology* 26, no. 1 (2001): 65–88.

[190] Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 100. Also see Rishma Johal, "Traversing Seas to Evading Proscription: South Asians, Race, and (Im)mobility in Canada and the United States, 1882–1929," *Terrae Incognitae: The Journal of the Society for the History of Discoveries* 54, no. 1 (2022): 38–63; Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960," *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 51, no. S14 (2006): 111–141; Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

[191] Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment," 58-59; Derek Matthews, "1889 And All That: New Views on the New Unionism," *International Review of Social History* 36, no. 1 (1991): 24–58. doi:10.1017/S0020859000110338.

[192] Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment," 59.

In the meantime, apprenticeship programs that previously drew young white workers to the seafaring industry gradually dried up. The once-exciting, adventurous seafaring life lost its charm in Europe and North America, as more and more people preferred working on land for better, safer opportunities.[193] As a result, many shipping companies were forced to open their doors to populations they previously did not want on board: colonial laborers from Africa, Arabia, Asia, and the Caribbean. The companies were particularly desperate to fill positions in the engine rooms, where no white crew members wanted to work. This was especially true for vessels working in tropical regions. Frank T. Bullen (1857–1915), a novelist who worked on several British merchant steamships for over a decade, chronicled the experiences of trimmers and firemen. After describing the harsh realities of the "terrible" engine room, Bullen concluded that "work in tropical seas is so utterly unfit for white men to do …. [and] it would be a good thing if stokeholds were entirely manned by negroes, who from their constitutional experience of heat must be far better fitted to endure the conditions of the stokehold."[194] Barely fifteen years after these words were printed, increasing numbers of Somalis were finding jobs on British—and, to a lesser extent, French, German, Italian, and Scandinavian—vessels.

From Herding Fields to Engine Rooms

Long before the Somali migrant laborers set foot in the engine rooms, they had lived among pastoral families in Somalia's northern regions, helping raise camels, goats, and sheep. Herds were essential possessions on which the majority of the inhabitants relied for everyday

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[193] E. W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914*. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 136.

[194] Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service*, 319-133.

consumption. As a Somali veterinarian once told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Livestock is Somalia, and Somalia is livestock."[195] These animals provided the staple traditional diet of *cad iyo caano* (meat and milk), and their hides were used to build collapsible huts and to manufacture essential household items, including *gambar* (stool), *jiinbaar* (bed), and *salli* (prayer mat). Cherished for its endurance and ability to survive for weeks without water, the camel was also a preferable means of transportation that moved goods and grains along desert roads. In addition, camels and other herds were exported to international markets across Arabia, Asia, and Africa.[196] In the late nineteenth century, Somaliland became a crucial source of meat supplies for the British Empire's garrison city of Aden. Britain incorporated Somaliland into its Empire partly to ensure the smooth and steady stream of foodstuffs into Aden.[197]

Maintaining these treasured possessions required an active labor force. This was because livestock husbandry was a challenging feat that included feeding and watering the animals, driving them to and from grazing lands, milking them twice or thrice daily, and protecting them from the grasp of rustlers or beasts. It was an around-the-clock routine that knew no weekends. Performing this work was particularly taxing, as a typical family raised hundreds of camels, goats, and sheep at once. To further complicate matters, the pastoral economy lacked the modern wage labor system to meet this massive demand for workers. As a result, the work required the full participation of every member of a household.[198] As with any economic system, there was a

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[195] John-Thor Dahlburg, "Culture: Through the Ages, the Camel Helps Somalia Over the Hump: *Los Angeles Times*, February 1993, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-02-19-mn-303-story.html

[196] David Laitin, "The Economy," in *Somalia: a Country Study Somalia* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, 1993), 121.

[197] Abdi Ismail Samatar, *State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884-1986* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 17.

[198] Samatar, *State and Rural Transformation*, 24.

division of labor among family members—a system based on the Somali patriarchal tradition. In this structure, the unattached men and older boys were responsible for embarking on long-distance camel-grazing journeys, eventful treks that could last months. They, along with married men, also led the regular seasonal movements that pastoral communities had to undertake to find water and pasture. The women, for their part, built huts, milked the animals, raised children, cared for the elderly, and drove the goat and sheep herds into their pens when dusk fell. Young boys and girls also played an important role in household duties: they drove goats and sheep to short-distance grazing fields and assisted women with household chores.[199]

Before venturing into the deep sea in the twentieth century, Somali migrant laborers had participated in these pastoral workforce arrangements as children and young adults. Many factors contributed to their escape from the pastoral lifestyle. Chief among them was persistent environmental degradation that took hold of the region during the first half of the century. These environmental crises triggered droughts and famines that strangled the pastoral economy and left many inhabitants and their animals dead. The few who survived the winds of destruction could not escape the equally devastating calamities of locust infestations and epidemics of animal diseases that wrecked their world. These deadly misfortunes led many herders to reconsider their pastoral lifestyle, forcing them to explore alternative methods to supplement their dwindling traditional income. Some, for instance, secured small plots of land to cultivate grain or joined the merchant economy that peddled dry goods between coastal and rural communities.[200] Others flocked to port cities in Arabia, where they were recruited for engine-room jobs.

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[199] I.M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy,* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 58-62.

[200] Lee Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600-1900* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 52-53; Samatar, *State and Rural Transformation*, 19; Jeremy Swift,

In addition to these natural disasters, the constant threat of clan infighting and camel raiding contributed to the making of transnational Somali maritime laborers. Tribal tensions over control of grazing lands or water wells often erupted into spear fights. There were also organized raiding parties to seize camel herds from enemy tribes. The British anthropologist I. M. Lewis once explained that Somali pastoralists considered such wars as "the proper pursuit of men." These battles and raids were not just for adventure, however. In some cases, water scarcity and limited grazing land led to violent tribal clashes.[201] In others, tribal leaders waged wars and raids to assert their political power and influence or to take revenge for old atrocities committed against their tribe. Whatever the case, pastoral violence was a common phenomenon across much of the continent, including Kenya, Tanzania, and Southern Africa.[202]

In Somaliland, violent disputes were further exacerbated by the advent of British colonialism and the subsequent anti-colonial uprisings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The charismatic *sheikh* and poet Mohammed Abdulle Hassan (1856-1920) headed one such resistance movement, which came to be known as the Dervish. Douglas Jardine, a colonial officer who chronicled Hassan's biography, noted that traditional accounts suggested that Hassan was once a fireman on a British steamship in Aden. But Jardine was skeptical about the credibility of the claim, arguing that the Somali traditional bearers of history might have mistaken Hassan for his lieutenant Haji Sudi (Ahmed Warsame), a well-known seafarer who

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"Pastoral Development in Somalia: Herding Cooperatives as a Strategy against Desertification and Famine," in *Desertification: Environmental Degradation in and around Arid Lands*, ed. by Michael H. Glantz (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1977), 280.

[201] Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy*, 27; 242.

[202] Rachel King, "Cattle, Raiding and Disorder in Southern African History." *Africa* 87, no. 3 (2017): 607–630; Carol R. Ember et al., "Rain and Raids Revisited: Disaggregating Ethnic Group Livestock Raiding in the Ethiopian-Kenyan Border Region." *Civil wars* 16, no. 3 (2014): 300–327.

worked for the Empire as an interpreter before joining the Dervish.[203] However, it remains undisputed that Hassan traveled extensively as a young man to study under prominent Islamic scholars in Harar, Mogadishu, and Mecca. From these learning experiences and his journeys through Arabia, he grew conscious of European colonialism that had been taking root across Islamic lands during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[204]

In 1899, Hassan mobilized more than 5,000 armed men to take on the invading colonial forces in northern Somalia. "You have oppressed our ancient religion without cause," he once wrote to the colonial administration in Berbera. He ordered them to leave the land, or they would taste the wrath of his sword.[205] Following this letter were two decades of armed resistance against the British, Italian, and Ethiopian empires that conquered various parts of what's now Greater Somalia.[206] But Hassan was not just fighting colonial enemies; he also turned his gun on the Somalis who were skeptical of his resistance project, or simply opted to remain on friendly terms with the empires. By the end of 1920, when Hassan succumbed to influenza and his Dervish movement was brought down to its knees, an estimated 200,000 Somali lives had been lost.[207]

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[203] Douglas Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*. East Sussex (England: Naval & Military Press, 2012), 37.

[204] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, 36-37; Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Maḥammad 'Abdille Ḥasan* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 102-103; 'Abdi Sheik-'Abdi, *Divine Madness: Moḥammed 'Abdulle Ḥassan (1856-1920)* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Zed Books, 1993).

[205] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland,* 42.

[206] Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism*, 116; Charles L. Geshekter, "Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa Before 1950" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 1 (1985): 18.

[207] John P. Slight, "British and Somali Views of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan's Jihad, 1899–1920," *Bildhaan* (2011): 17.

As political violence and environmental disasters ripped through Somaliland, many young people turned to colonial employment opportunities abroad. Among them was Ibrahim Ismaa'il,[208] whose childhood years coincided with the prolonged environmental disasters and armed conflicts that choked the pastoral economy. He was born in or around 1900 into a pastoral family that raised camels, goats, and sheep. Merely three years after his birth, the unavoidable violence sweeping the region befell Ismaa'il. First, he lost his father, Ismaa'il, to a tribal war. Soon after, his stepfather and many uncles were killed as they fought to fend off armed raiders who came to loot their animals. With the family's lifeline now severed, Ismaa'il's mother, Fatuma, fled to the neighboring village of Ad'addo in search of domestic work, leaving her baby boy in the care of an older half-brother. As a child, Ismaa'il used to accompany his brother, who carried him on his shoulders, on long-distance camel grazing treks.[209]

That childhood came to an abrupt end when Ismaa'il "began to walk and sit with the men" at the age of five.[210] It was a dramatic but indispensable passage that heralded the young herder's inevitable early transition into adulthood: a lifestyle dotted with the mundane tasks of rearing animals, digging wells, fighting enemies, and surviving wild beasts. Besides these routine activities, Ismaa'il, like many others in Somaliland during the Dervish era, had to be prepared to encounter fighters conducting military operations at random settlements. One day, as Ismaa'il

[208] Ibrahim Ismaa'il Ali's fascinating story is detailed in "The Life and Adventures of a Somali," an autobiography discovered in the 1970s by the historian Richard Pankhurst. Ismaa'il narrated the story to his friend, anthropologist Belgian Eugene Gaspard Marin. In 1928, Ismaa'il and Martin completed the 41-page autobiography, which remained a manuscript until 1977, when Pankhurst published it in the Rome-based *Africa*. The story appeared in two volumes: One: Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* 32, no. 2 (1977): 159–176. Two: Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* 32, no. 3 (1977): 335-384.

[209] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 164.

[210] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 165-166.

journeyed from Hulay to see his mother in Ad'addo, he came face to face with armed men in the thick of raiding a settlement. The fighters were not just looting livestock. There were also, in Ismaa'il's telling, murdering anyone they laid eyes on, including men, women, and children.[211] This deeply frightening scene—the echoes of flying spears, wailing babies, mourning mothers—reverberated in his mind for many years. Indeed, Ismaa'il's remembrance of the Dervish era provides a glimpse into the complicated history of the memorialized anti-colonial movement and its revered founder.

By the time he turned ten, Ismaa'il began to envision life beyond what he viewed as a demanding and violent pastoral world. He yearned for a better, more adventurous place where he could have basic life necessities his home could not provide: good food, education, and happy childhood memories. As he later admitted, "I liked town life better than life with the camels."[212] His dream came true when he found a Somali boatman loading gums and resins onto a small vessel bound for Aden. Ismaa'il had already been familiar with the bustling metropolis he affectionately called the "City of Dreams." Like many pastoral children and young adults, he had heard positive stories about thriving Somali communities in Yemen and other Arabian cities and towns. Believing that he, too, could make his mark in the City of Dreams, Ismaa'il walked up to the lone boatman, inquiring if he could sail with him to Aden. The man agreed and found a spot for the aspiring traveler among the loaded sacks.[213]

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[211] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 357.

[212] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 169-170.

[213] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 169-170.

Life in Aden turned out to be difficult for Ismaa'il, however. He was only in his preteen years, and having no money or family support, he immediately found himself among dozens of unhoused young Somali boys who begged or pilfered for a living. If Aden housed thriving Somali migrant laborers, its bustling markets and streets also sheltered poor, orphaned, and abandoned Somali children. Indeed, the city had been home to such children even decades before Ismaa'il arrived. As Frederick Mercer Hunter (1844-1898), an officer of the British Empire in Aden, reported in a study of Somali migrants in Aden, children as young as four or five years old were left to fend for themselves after their parents divorced or their fathers returned to their old pastoral life. Once abandoned, Hunter explained, the children were "compelled to earn their own living by begging, stealing, working as servants, diving, steering boats, running errands for passengers, etc."[214] Such was the situation in which Ismaa'il found himself soon after he stepped out of that cargo boat, an experience the novelist Nadifa Mohamed so vividly described in *Black Mamba Boy*.[215] In Aden, Ismaa'il wandered the streets during the day, begging for food or looking for menial work that would allow him to earn his keep. And when the sun sank low, he joined his friends on street corners and school verandas for a night's sleep.[216]

By the time Ismaa'il became a teenager, he had developed valuable work skills as a houseboy, herder, and hawker. Along the way, he had also picked up a good deal of expertise interacting with communities outside his pastoral upbringing—mostly Arabs, Indians, and Turkish—in Aden and Mukalla and al-Hudaydah. Ismaa'il used these experiences to earn the

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[214] Frederick Mercer Hunter, *An Account of the British Settlement of Aden in Arabia.* (London: Trübner, 1877), 42.

[215] Daughter of a seaman, Nadifa uses materials based on her father's life story, the autobiography of Ibrahim Ismail, and other sources to construct this fiction work. See more, Nadifa Mohamed, *Black Mamba Boy*, London: Harper Collins. 2010.

[216] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 171-174.

respect of Somali and Arab boat owners whom he later served as a porter, crew assistant, and cook during their voyages to transport grains, fruits, and sugar to cities and towns along the Red Sea.[217] On these voyages, Ismaa'il learned that Aden was more than just a place where Somali migrants came, as Vivian put it, "to acquire wealth and wives and experience" before "they return to their own gray land."[218] The City of Dreams was also a giant door through which thousands of migrants could reach faraway places in Europe, Australia, and North America.

Around 1914, when Ismaa'il was working on a cargo boat in Basra, Iraq, he heard about an abundance of employment opportunities in Europe, where life, as he saw it, "was easier," and workers earned good wages.[219] During this time of war, as the African American ethnographer Glenn Jordan, who has studied and lived among seamen in Cardiff, explained, the British Empire desperately needed laborers. So the few Somalis who had already escaped the pastoral life and resettled in the United Kingdom during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries "passed this information to their relatives and clan members."[220] Ismaa'il was among the many who answered this call. A friend who told him about the job opportunities in Europe also informed him that the best way to enter Europe would be through the port city of Djibouti, the administrative city of French Somaliland. Ismaa'il thus hastened to make his way from Basra to Djibouti en route to Aden and Berbera. Upon arrival, he realized that it was not easy for a British subject in a French colony to make the trip to Europe. To complicate matters, he had no money or proper travel documents to embark on the journey. He thus resorted to what he thought was

[217] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 175-176.

[218] Vivian, *Abyssinia*, 59.

[219] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 168.

[220] Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders*, 19.

the best option available to him: disguising himself as a cleaning crew member of a vessel bound for Marseille and sneaking into its stowage. Ismaa'il eventually reached Marseille, from where he caught a train to London and then another one to Cardiff. This coal-exporting port became the base where Ismaa'il would launch a decades-long seafaring career.

Other migrants who abandoned pastoral life during the first half of the century included Arriyeh Ali, Mohmoud Kalinle, Omar Mohamed Hassan, and Mohamed Yusuf Salad. Ali grew up among pastoralists in Somaliland, where he helped raise his family's herds. Then, one day, in the 1930s, Ali decided to find a job in Aden. This came after years of hearing relatives talk about the employment opportunities the city boasted. "So he just took a punt and went over to Zaila, and then from Zaila he went to Djibouti and then to Aden," his grandson Nasir Adam told me on a warm August afternoon in Cardiff. In Aden, at eighteen, Ali boarded a merchant ship and asked about a job. He was hired on the spot as a fireman aboard a vessel sailing for Liverpool.[221]

Kalinle, too, came from a pastoral family that raised horses in the fertile land of Gabiley, which supplied much of the food consumed in British Somaliland.[222] During his preteen years, in the early 1930s, Kalinle left his family for Djibouti to live with his uncle, Omar Guled, who served as a chef for the German Embassy there. In Djibouti, Kalinle was sent to *dugsi*, a Quranic school in which most children in Muslim societies are enrolled. In these schools, students learn to read and write Arabic texts, a skill that would later help them memorize the Quran.[223] In addition to attending *dugsi*, Kalinle was enrolled in a French missionary school that operated

[221] Interview with Nasir Adem Arriyeh by Ibrahim Hirsi on August 10, 2022, in Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[222] John W. McCarthy, Jr, et al., "Somali Soil and Water Conservation," *Agency for International Development* (1983), 2-3. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdacw524.pdf

[223] Daniel A. Wagner and Abdelhamid Lotfi, "Traditional Islamic Education in Morocco: Sociohistorical and Psychological Perspectives," *Comparative Education Review* 24, no. 2 (1980): 239.

inside a church. At age nineteen, he purchased a small boat that transported passengers between their vessels. It was during this time that Kalinle learned about Somalis going to France for employment. Soon after, he and his close friend Abdi Osman traveled to Marseilles. From there, they proceeded to Cardiff, where they secured engine-room jobs.[224]

Omar Mohamed Hassan and Mohamed Yusuf Salad also joined the maritime economy in Arabia during the first half of the twentieth century. But the two men followed different routes to get there. Born into a pastoral family in Burao, Somaliland, Hassan left for Aden at the age of fifteen. Some years later, he moved to Port Said. Then, a year after the end of the Second World War, Hassan was recruited to work on a British steamship sailing to Australia. Months later, he sailed with the cargo ship, which carried wool from New Zealand to Germany and then to England. Here, Hassan decided to resettle in Newport, Wales.[225] Salad, on the other hand, represented a small group of Somali migrant workers who were born and came of age in Aden, not Somaliland. In 1948, after many years of working ashore, he joined the SS *Indian Endeavour* as a fireman. Salad embarked on this endeavor because most of his friends were leaving the shore for sea life. As Salad remarked, no Somali person he knew wanted to take a job other than one aboard an European steamship.[226]

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[224] Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Butetown History and Arts Center), 182-183. In addition to these transcripted oral interviews, I listened to Mohamoud Kalinle's original interviews in both English and Somali at the National Library of Wales when I visited there in the summer of 2022. The interview was among many conversations recorded in the 1980s and early 2000s.

[225] Jordan, *Somali Elders*, 184.

[226] Similola Coker, "The Somali Sailors: Ethnic Communities Oral History Project" (Hammersmith United Charities, 1987-1994), 3. https://hamunitedcharities.org.uk/2018/01/10/oral-history-project/

The experiences of Ismaa'il, Ali, Kalinle, Hassan, and Salad illuminate several key factors that facilitated Somalis' global maritime migration during the first half of the twentieth century. First, we learn that the majority of laborers who joined the industry had roots in the pastoralist traditions in British Somaliland. As children and young adults, they played an essential role in developing the livestock system that sustained Somali families socially and economically. As herders, they came of age in an environment where everyone in the household, regardless of age or gender, had specific responsibilities. For instance, men understood it was their duty to drive the camels to the grazing fields, and young boys and girls knew that they were responsible for rearing the goats and sheep. In short, even as children, they mastered valuable skills—teamwork, deadlines, responsibilities—necessary for thriving in a competitive labor market. These traits no doubt came in handy when Somali laborers entered the maritime economy.

Second, the fact that Somalis were mainly herders whose lives revolved around looking for green pastures and caring for animals did not mean they were detached from the outside world. Indeed, as I have explained in the previous chapter, pastoralists historically maintained close connections with coastal communities. They interacted with each other at local markets and in the streets, where they exchanged not just merchandise but also ideas and cultural customs. For instance, long before men like Ismaa'il and Arriyeh joined the maritime economy, they were already familiar with Arabia and all that it offered. After all, members from their own pastoral world often journeyed there to conduct business, obtain education, or perform Islamic rituals. Oftentimes, these travelers brought back gifts—and stories—representing their experiences in the land of the Prophet Mohammed. Thus, romanticized ideas of Arabia, coupled with the deteriorating pastoral economy and the emergence of colonial employment, motivated young Somalis to leave behind their familiar world.

Third, the Somalis who, for the first time, ventured into the colonial economy in Arabia were often young people in their teens and early twenties. To navigate a world they only knew through stories, they required networks of experienced friends or relatives to show them the way. These networks were particularly crucial when young men decided to join the maritime industry in the Atlantic world, as they provided the informal recruitment process on which many shipping companies relied. For instance, the networks offered traveling Somalis with information about ports with the best migration routes to Europe, ships with job openings, and companies that paid good wages. What is more, the seasoned Somali seafarers vouched for their fellow Somalis in the hiring processes. It appears this informal recruitment method was somewhat similar to that of the *lascars*. As a number of scholars of South Asian seamen have shown, most steamship companies in Indian port cities used a system in which brokers known as *serangs* recruited *lascars*. The *serangs* utilized their personal and family connections in villages and towns to recruit laborers they deemed skilled and reliable.[227]

Finally, the Somali laborers who secured jobs on steamships can be divided into two main categories: a group that first traveled to Europe as passengers and then became seafarers, and another that embarked on a vessel as crew members, then disembarked and resettled in Europe. Whether they sailed as passengers or crew, most Somalis embarked from three main ports: Aden, Djibouti, and Port Said. No matter which European port the ship docked at, the migrants made their way to the United Kingdom. There were two main reasons they chose Britain: First, as residents of the British Somaliland Protectorate, they were considered "British

[227] Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment," 132-134; Ceri-Anne Fidler, "Lascars, c.1850 - 1950: The Lives and Identities of Indian Seafarers in Imperial Britain and India," PhD diss. (Cardiff University, 2011), 2-3; Michael H. Fisher, "Working Across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600–1857" *International review of social history* 51, no. S14 (2006): 23-24.

subjects," a status that gave them access to employment opportunities. Second, British steamships paid higher wages than French vessels, which explains why Ismaa'il, Kalinle, and other laborers resettled in Wales soon after their initial landing in Marseille. In Britain, the Somali migrants immediately secured jobs aboard merchant vessels as trimmers and firemen.



Figure 3: A photo of docked ships in Wales, 1900s, unprocessed collection, Glomargon Archives, Cardiff, Wales, accessed in July 2022.

Life at Sea

Steamship laborers spent most of their lives at sea. On a typical voyage, they sailed about six months—sometimes more than a year—without once catching a glimpse of land, except for the brief moments the ships halted for refueling. This meant the vessels were not just workplaces for the laborers but also living spaces. The long-distance voyages and all the difficulties that came with them were shared by all seafarers, despite their race, class, or job titles. The captains and the

chief officers, for instance, remained confined in the deep waters at the exact same time as the trimmers and firemen, the lowest-ranking crew members. In short, they all experienced the same boredom, desolation, danger, and some of those dark portraits novelist Herman Melville painted in the American classic, *Moby-Dick*.[228]

However, if the harsh realities of the sea placed crew members and senior officers in the same predicaments, manufactured racial differences separated them. From the latter half of the nineteenth century, steamships maintained a strict hierarchical structure that divided crew members into four categories: the captain and his chief officers, deckhands, saloon crew, and engine room workers. The captain and chief officers occupied the highest ranks. These positions required some formal education or specialized training.[229] During this period, access to such training was mostly limited to whites, which explains why all the captains, senior officers, and engineers on the vessels *Clyde*, *Armadale,* and *Mongolian* were white. To be specific, the captains who manned the *Mongolian* and *Clyde* were British citizens from Scotland and Wales, respectively. As the highest-ranking officials, ship captains were responsible for the safety of their crew and passengers as well as the smooth operations of the vessel. They were also in charge of hiring workers, distributing payments, and maintaining a neat record of the names and identities of people on board for immigration authorities waiting at ports of entry.[230] Under the Scottish captain of the *Mongolian* were three chief officers—one Irish and two English—who managed the deck crew.

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[228] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*. Harper and Brothers, 1851.

[229] Alston Kennerley, "Conrad's Shipmates in British Ships," *The Conradian* 37, no. 1 (2012), 59-66; Jonathan Hyslop, "Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c. 1880-1945," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009): 56; Sager, *Seafaring Labour*, 110-117.

[230] Sager, *Seafaring Labour*, 105-106.

The deckhands included stewards, carpenters, boatswains, cooks, and pantrymen. The stewards performed cleaning duties and attended to the needs of passengers and crew, while the pantrymen assisted the officers and cooks. The carpenters' duties involved maintaining and repairing the deck. The boatswain oversaw the unlicensed crew members who also worked on deck, including the able-bodied seamen (ABs), who kept watch, maintained equipment, and reported deck issues.[231] Almost all the stewards, carpenters, boatswains, and ABs aboard the *Clyde*, *Armadale*, and *Mongolian Prince* were also white. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, the racial makeup of the deckhands on board ships that journeyed along North and South America, Europe, and Australia resembled that of the aforementioned vessels.

Below deck was the engine room, or "down below," which housed the trimmers and firemen. These crewmen—often referred to as the "black gang," for the coal soot that covered their faces—were considered the lowest level of the overall steamship structural hierarchy. But in addition to that main structure, the engine room crew had another layer of a ranking system that further classified them with specific work duties. In this structure, trimmers ranked the lowest. Their main responsibilities included breaking up the coal and carting the pieces from the bunkers to the mouth of the furnaces. The trimmers also removed ash and dirt from the ash pits to ensure smooth coal-burning operations, as large amounts of ash interfered with the firing process and reduced energy output.[232] On board the *Armadale*, which weighed 3,800 tons, Noor, Ali Ahmed, and Dualy Abdi performed the trimming duties. Their work was crucial in producing the steam that powered the vessel from England to Australia.

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[231] Hyslop, "Steamship Empire," 56; Kennerley, "Conrad's Shipmates in British Ships," 65.

[232] Richard de Kerbrech's *Down Amongst the Black Gang* (2014), 71-77; Alston Kennerly, "Stoking the Boiler," *International Journal of Maritime History* 20 no. 1 (2008): 191-220.

Just a grade above the trimmer came the fireman, whose main tasks included feeding the furnaces with coals the trimmer brought. Like the trimmer, the fireman also contributed immensely to the engine room operations. Richard de Kerbrech, naval architect and author of several books that chronicled the history of shipping lines and seafarers, explained the unique skills that firemen possessed.

> The proper treatment of hand-fired, coal-burning furnaces was a skilled job, and the firemen or stokers who fed the boiler furnace played a very important part in the effective steaming of a ship. The fire had to be kept evenly spread, about 4-9in thick; the coal had to be well broken up; clinker and dirt had to be raked out; and the furnace doors should not have been kept open too long.[233]

Indeed, a fireman's duties, though often framed as unskilled work, required not just physical endurance but also the technical know-how of balancing the coal-burning operations of two or three furnaces simultaneously.[234]

Supervising the trimmers and firemen was a lead fireman—or donkeyman—who earned the role after many years of toiling in the engine room. Although Somali donkeymen sometimes oversaw their fellow Somali trimmers and firemen, it was often non-Somalis who were hired to manage the mostly Somali crew. For instance, the foreman in charge of the Somali crewmen aboard the *Mongolian* was a twenty-one-year-old Egyptian named Ali Hassen. On the *Clyde* was a forty-nine-year-old Welsh named George Dowdell.

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[233] Richard de Kerbrech's *Down Amongst the Black Gang* (2014), 25.

[234] Frank T. Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1900), 317; Kennerly, "Stoking the Boiler," 19; Bhattacharyya, "Steam and Stokehold," 168.

The hierarchical structure of the steamship crew reveals a troubling pattern of racialized workload distribution. It was no coincidence that *all* crewmen toiling in the vessels mentioned above were Black. These positions did not just pay the least; they required laborers to work in dim, cramped, sooty, and forbidding conditions. Bullen, the writer and ex-sailor, captured with gripping details what it meant to work down below. Speaking of the trimmer whose duties included wheeling coal from the bunker to the furnaces, Bullen stated:

> His labour knows no respite as he struggles to keep the firemen's needs supplied. And there is no ventilator pouring down fresh air into the bunker. In darkness only penetrated by the dim light of a safety-lamp, in an atmosphere composed of the exaltations from the coal and a modicum of dust-laden air, liable at any moment to be overwhelmed by the down-rushing masses of coal as the ship's motion displaces it, the grimy, sweat-soaked man works on. By comparison with him the coal-hewer in the mine has a gentleman's life. Darkness and danger and want of breath are his inevitable environment.[235]

And of the fireman's performance in the dangerous engine room conditions, Bullen explained:

> Seizing a shovel he lifts with it the latch of one of the doors [of the furnaces] and flings it wide open with a clang. The ship may be rolling furiously, tumbling to and fro with that peculiarly disconcerting motion that seems to a landsman the subversion of all principles of an uprightness, but he must balance himself somehow. With legs spread wide apart he stands upon that slippery iron floor and stoops and peers within at the roaring cavern of almost white-hot coals. His trained eye can see just how they are burning, where clinkers are forming, whether perfect combustion is going on or certain expert manipulation is necessary in order to make it do so. If all is satisfactory he shifts his position slightly sideways so that he can swing his shovel on one side to the bunker door, at the sill of which a heap of coal is lying, fill it, and then, with a peculiar stroke, send its contents broadcast over the lambent surface of the furnace bed.[236]

[235] Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service*, 319.

[236] Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service*, 315.

Bullen ended his engine room portrayal, noting his particular disdain for the hellish conditions trimmers and firemen endured. "The fact is that," he declared, "no man with longings for [a] decent life would or could remain in such employment." But in this articulation, Bullen was not referring to *any* man; it was only white men whom he deemed "utterly unfit" for these kinds of jobs. So, if the white man was not suited for the conditions, then who was? Bullen proposed an idea: It would be great, he opined, if the engine rooms "were entirely manned by negroes, who from their constitutional experience of heat must be far better fitted to endure the conditions." Bullen continued, "I should not be sorry to see them [working in the engine rooms], and my countrymen [white men] doing something better."[237]

Bullen's racist view, a widely accepted one among Western thinkers of his generation, ran counter to the simple fact that both Black and white workers suffered under the deadly engine room conditions. For instance, trimmers and firemen faced persistent work-induced health problems. Chief among these was the inhalation of carbon dioxide, a colorless gas that's released when coal is burned. High concentrations of these gas particles, especially when accumulated in enclosed spaces like engine rooms, can be fatal.[238] During the 1900s, the emission of large amounts of carbon dioxide into the air was a huge environmental concern. In August 1912, a New Zealand newspaper, *Rodney and Otamatea Times*, reported that steamship furnaces worldwide were burning about two billion tons of coal annually, releasing some seven billion tons of carbon dioxide. "This tends to make the air a more effective blanket for the earth

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[237] Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service*, 323.

[238] Young Bin Ok, et al., "Case of Cardiac Arrest Due to Carbon Dioxide Poisoning Following an Explosion of a Carbon Dioxide Tank." *Clinical and Experimental Emergency Medicine* 7 no. 3 (2020): 235.

and to raise its temperature," the paper warned. "The effect may be considerable in a few centuries."[239] But what the story omitted is that the reported consequences from the toxic gas were already killing laborers, many of whom suffered cardiac arrest and respiratory problems.[240] These and other health issues particularly overwhelmed the Black demographic on board steamships. As historian Laura Tabili explained, Black firemen often died of heart conditions and heat exhaustion.[241]

Likely due to such diseases, many crew members were reported to have "disappeared" or died in their sleep. In 1941, Mahomed Doali, a Somali who spent decades working as a fireman, died while enlisted aboard the SS *Oxfordshire*. Authorities noted on his death record that Doali, forty-eight at the time, died of "hemothorax and respiratory failure."[242] Another Somali migrant worker, Elmi Kharieh, also died on board a steamship. Steve, Kharieh's son, was only about ten years old when, in 1964, his father passed away in his sleep. In an oral history interview in Cardiff, Steve told me about his father's work and death:

> He was a fireman, [working] right at the bottom of the ship. And ... all he did was shovel coal into the fire. And the heat! The heat was tremendous. And them days the ship would go like that [Steve made hand gestures for waves] and the ship would literally go underneath, completely submerged, and it then pops back up. And it was quite unnerving

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[239] "Science Notes and News," *Rodney and Otamatea Times*, Papers Past, National Library of New Zealand, August 14, 1912, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ROTWKG19120814.2.56.5

[240] Kirk R. Smith, "Smoked out: the health hazards of burning coal," *The Lancet* 381, no. 9882 (2013). https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)61190-3/fulltext

[241] Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925," *The Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (1994): 66.

[242] Lists of Merchant Seamen Deaths. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, United Kingdom, accessed August 2023 via *Ancestry*. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/31238:61094?tid=&pid=&queryId=6f41601f8295c29c6669a80430afaec3&_phsrc=sTI10&_phstart=successSource

> for us because my father died on the ship. And he was buried at sea. They said he died in his sleep. But there were lots of stories from the old Somalis who were telling you how sometimes people just jump overboard [often due to strong winds, rogue waves, or suicide]. So, we'll never know the reality of what really happened. You have to just take it on trust.[243]

Mossa Hersi, another Somali fireman, also died while working at sea. Hersi, who was born in Aden in 1898, spent many years toiling in the engine rooms. On July 28, 1929, he signed on the SS *Llangollen*. Five weeks later, Hersi reportedly "died at sea, sickness unknown."[244] Such sudden and sometimes unexplained deaths were common among Somali migrant workers in the maritime industry. After death, their bodies were immediately tossed into the sea, and the ships moved on with their journeys, sometimes without even notifying family members. For Steve's family, the passing of Kharieh only became known when Eleanor, Kharieh's wife, went to pick up the weekly allowance Kharieh intended for his family. As Steve explained: "Every Friday my mother would go to the dockboard and collect her wages." Then came one day when Eleanor was told, "No wages for you," which meant her husband had died. "Nobody would tell you," Steve said. "There would just be no wages."[245]

If the Somali migrant laborers survived the deadly engine room conditions, they could not avoid getting expelled from their employment when they were no longer strong enough to perform the demanding duties. Yousef Shire, for instance, was sent home in March 1928, "owing

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[243] Author interview with Steve Kharieh (son of a seaman) August 1, 2022, Cardiff, UK.

[244] Letter from Sara Hersi to Arthur Henderson, M.P. March 19 1930, CO 535/90/9, Somaliland: Original Correspondence, The National Archives in the U.K.; "Interview with Stella Hersi," The National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, accessed August 2022.

[245] Author interview with Steve Kharieh.

to sickness." Born in Somaliland in 1900, Shire began working for the British Royal Navy in 1917. He joined a British fleet that patrolled the Red Sea, protected the strategic Suez Canal, and promoted the Empire's interest in the region as the war raged on. The Red Sea Patrol warships were meant to transport food supplies, soldiers, diplomats, and ammunition. They were also meant to help Arab allies in the region and to "safeguard communications and shipping in the Red Sea." Shire served on board these ships until 1919. After the war, he continued his maritime career, working for various British merchant ships, including the SS *Nethergate* on which he served at the time of his dismissal.[246]

Like Yousef Shire, Ahmed Abdullahi was "forced to give up this employment owing to ill health, when he contracted Diabetes." Born in Aden in 1913, Abdullahi began working on European steamships at the age of fourteen. He labored aboard these ships for three decades. In 1956, he became a laborer at the docklands of Cardiff, probably loading and unloading imported and exported goods. Four years later, Abdullahi was dismissed from his job for developing diabetes.[247]

Yousef Shire, Ahmed Abdullahi, and dozens of other Somali men, who lost their jobs or simply walked away from the harsh life of the steamship, established seamen's lodging houses, restaurants, and cafés in Butetown, a dockland in Cardiff. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, these businesses attracted more Somali migrant workers who arrived in

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[246] Letter from Cardiff Police Department to the Acting Chief Clerk at the Passport Office in London, March 23, 1932, DCONC/7/5/1-3 - Licensing Records for Lodging Houses, 1909-1964, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, UK; John Johnson Allen, *T. E. Lawrence and the Red Sea Patrol: The Royal Navy's Role in Creating the Legend* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2015), 1-3; Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920* (The Pennsylvania State University, 1992), 93.

[247] Letter from the Chief Public Health Inspector to the Chief of Cardiff Police Department, December 18, 1961, Licensing Records for Lodging Houses, 1909-1964, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, UK.

European coastal cities on board steamships. In Butetown, they established lodging houses and restaurants and cafés. Here, they also married English and Welsh women and formed multi-ethnic families that made the neighborhood home to the largest concentration of racial minorities in the United Kingdom.[248] From Butetown, also known as Tiger Bay, thousands of Somalis and others from British colonies around the world launched their transnational seafaring voyages. The six Somali and Arab firemen, who arrived with the steamer *Clyde* when it docked at the Port of Southampton on that 1912 summer day, listed Wales as their permanent residence. Upon arrival, they might have headed straight to their Tiger Bay lodging rooms to relax and recharge for a few days or weeks before they returned to the engine rooms for the next voyage.

[248] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 33-34.

CHAPTER THREE

Putting Down Roots: Somali Migrant Laborers in British Dockside Settlements

> I was born in Buro in 1928. I left Somaliland in 1948 and stayed in Aden for a year; then I came to this [Britain] country. My father and uncle were seamen before me. We had about one hundred camels, but I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my uncle and my father and become a seaman. I joined my first ship in Liverpool, and my first trip was to Australia.
>
> —Mohamed Hashi Halig, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales*, 2004.

In the spring of 1929, twenty-eight-year-old Yousef Shire[249] applied for a license to operate a seamen's boarding house in Butetown, Cardiff, Wales.[250] Butetown, also known as Tiger Bay, was a dockside neighborhood that primarily housed migrant laborers from British colonies in Africa, Arabia, and the Caribbean. These workers were among the large streams of migrants who came to Britain during the first half of the twentieth century to meet the empire's wartime labor shortages. Many of them hailed from present-day northern Somalia and occupied menial jobs in the maritime and steel industries.[251] Shire saw an opportunity in the growing Somali population

[249] In official documents, Yousef Shire's last name appears in different spellings: Sarara, Shara, Shirra, Sharah. It was common for government agents to misspell or westernize unfamiliar names. I use the version "Shire" throughout my work for accuracy and consistency. Shire is a Somali name that comes from the word *shir*, assembly.

[250] Letter from the Office of the Chief Constable to the Detective Division, Cardiff City Police, March 27, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales.

[251] My analysis of oral history interviews, crew lists, and other sources shows a dramatic increase in the presence of Somali laborers in Britain during and after the First World War. They mostly came to meet the demand of the workforce shortage during the war. This analysis is supported by secondary sources that have shown an unprecedented increase in colonial migration in the period in question. For more, see See Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, "The Construction and Negotiation of Racialized Borders in Cardiff Docklands" in *Gendering Border Studies*, edited by Jane Aaron, Henrice Altink, and Chris Weedon (University of Wales Press, 2010), 224; John E. Roemer, Woojin Lee, and Karine van der Straeten, *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution : Multi-Issue Politics in Advanced Democracies* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 135; Glenn Jordan, *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Cardiff, Wales: Butetown History and Arts Center, 2004), 1.

in Tiger Bay and converted his property at 7 Nelson Street into a lodging and café tailored for fellow Somali laborers.[252] Creating such an establishment was a remarkable feat for a Black man who had come of age in a distant world and toiled aboard steamships for more than a decade. Obtaining a boarding house license required applicants to undergo a rigorous screening process involving law enforcement and sanitary agencies.

Shire first submitted his application to the sanitary department, which then forwarded the material to the police department, which was tasked with running background checks on applicants. The department dispatched a detective "to ascertain the character of the applicant … with regard to honesty, morality and sobriety."[253] An important part of the screening process was to ensure that the proposed house would not become a meet-up spot for Somali men and white women. In Butetown, like other docklands, it was typical for local authorities to use surveillance as a controlling mechanism, which was essential for the empire's broader race-based anti-immigration policies and practices.[254] Such policies and practices became more pronounced following the 1919 "race riots" which erupted in docklands across Britain. As the First World War came to a close, millions of returning white veterans found themselves in an unexpected financial predicament, thanks to a severe post-war economic crisis. But the real causes of the

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[252] Police Detective Robert Fleming to the Office of the Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, April 14, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales.

[253] Letter from the Office of the Chief Constable to the Detective Division, Cardiff City Police, April 2, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales.

[254] While race played a huge role in scrutinizing lodging houses in Tiger Bay and other areas with a large number colonial migrants of color during the first half of the 1900s, authorities also surveilled white-occupied lodging houses to prevent over crowdedness, sanitary issues, and exploitation of young girls by seamen. Historian Stuart Laidlaw traced this history to the 1800s, focusing on Glasgow as an important case study. See Stuart Laidlaw, "Glasgow Common Lodging Houses and the People Living in Them," PhD Diss. University of Glasgow, 1955), 70-71.

economic turmoil did not matter to many white Britons.[255] They launched mob attacks on the docklands, blaming colonial migrants of color for their unfortunate post-war realities. Following these events, the British Empire painted the migrants as the problem, implementing a set of anti-immigration policies that brought them under state surveillance.[256]

Consistent with this racist treatment and state surveillance, the detective, Robert Fleming, made "frequent visits to No 7 Nelson Street at all times" as part of the screening process. After these surprise visits, Fleming submitted his findings to the police department. In the report, he began with a brief biography of Shire: He was born in British Somaliland in 1900, served on British ships patrolling the Red Sea until the war's end, and later settled in Cardiff as a seaman. The report continued: Throughout his seafaring career, Shire returned to his home base in Butetown between voyages, and his discharge books described him as a "very good" employee. After Shire's background information, Fleming explained the condition of the proposed business: The boarding house was "well kept and conducted in a proper manner" under the care of Mrs. Hersi, a domestic servant. Fleming concluded his report with a suggestion that Shire's property was indeed suitable to accommodate guests.[257]

Fleming's superior in the department was not satisfied with this conclusion, however. The deputy chief of police had more questions for the detective. First, he wanted to know more

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[255] John E. Roemer, Woojin Lee, and Karine van der Straeten, *Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution: Multi-Issue Politics in Advanced Democracies* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 135; Carlton Wilson,"Britain's Red Summer: The 1919 Race Riots in Liverpool," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 15, no. 2 (1995), 26-7.

[256] Laura Tabili, *We Ask British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 31.

[257] Letter from Police Detective Robert Fleming to the Office of the Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, April 4, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales.

about Mrs. Hersi. The deputy was particularly curious about her age, her husband's whereabouts, and her "reputation." Second, aware of existing Somali lodges in the city, the deputy inquired about the need for yet another one and wondered whether Shire "would farm it out to Somalis and white women."[258] The deputy's conviction to "protect" white women from Black men has guided the racial order in Western societies for centuries. The legacy of slavery included the enduring racist attitudes toward interracial relationships.[259] Even decades after slavery, many of the twentieth-century racial segregation laws and practices were created to prevent sexual relationships between whites and people of color. As scholar Reginald Oh has explained, separation based on race "prevented the development of social, romantic, or sexual relations between white men and black women and between white women and black men."[260] To prevent this, white societies branded Blacks as innate predators of white women, making white men the natural protectors of *their* women.[261] This dominant social dogma justified the lynching of Black people and violent attacks that destroyed thriving Black communities in the U.K. and the U.S.[262] It was this view that animated the deputy's question about the potential mixing of Somali men and white women in the proposed lodge.

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[258] Letter from the Office of the Deputy Chief Constable to the Detective Department, Cardiff City Police, April 11, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[259] Kenneth James Lay, "Sexual Racism: A Legacy of Slavery," *National Black Law Journal* 13, no. 1 (1993), 1665.
[260] Reginald Oh, "Interracial Marriage in the Shadows of Jim Crow: Racial Segregation as a System of Racial and Gender Subordination" *UC Davis Law Review* 39, no. 3 (2006), 1348.

[261] Carol A. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in US Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32-33.

[262] Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin: The Persistence of White Womanhood and the Preservation of White Manhood," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15, no. 2 (2018): 257–294; Marika Sherwood, "Lynching in Britain," *History Today*, March 1, 1999.

Fleming thus returned to the field to address the deputy's additional inquiries. Upon gathering new materials, he wrote back to the deputy. Regarding Mrs. Hersi, he offered a brief report: The woman had since left the job because her husband had returned from sea and told her "not to work out any longer."[263] Although the detective failed to mention her birth name or backstory, Mrs. Hersi was indeed Sarah Slapper, a thirty-one-year-old Russian Jew, and was married to Moosa Hersi, an Aden-born Somali seafarer. By then, the couple had four children aged one to five.[264] With his return home, Slapper likely decided to spend some time with her family until Hersi embarked on the next voyage. Yet in the narrow view of the law enforcement officers, even ordinary interactions between white women and colonial men of color triggered fears of sexual impropriety, despite their visible nurturing of the bonds that tied them as partners who together raised children and sometimes managed flourishing businesses. According to this view, Somali men and their white partners were somehow incapable of forming and maintaining legitimate relationships similar to those of the perceived superior white couples.

Reporting on why Shire wanted to establish the lodging house, Fleming explained that Somalis in Butetown naturally preferred to room with "their tribesmen." In other words, each clan member sought a boarding house owned or operated by a fellow tribe member. In British historical scholarship, the presence of Somali migrants remains overshadowed by narratives of migrants from Arabia, the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. However, the

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[263] Letter, Fleming.

[264] I was able to trace "Mrs Hersi" through different archives in the U.K. In an Aberystwyth library, I found an oral history of her daughter, Stella Hersi, who discusses the history of her parents and how they met. This interview leads directly to 7 Nelson Street. In addition, in the National Archives in London, I found a letter "Mrs. Hersi" sent to a colonial official after the death of her husband. Through these, I was able to connect the dots and discover that "Mrs. Hersi" is indeed Sarah Slapper or Sara Hersi. Also see, Letter from Sara Hersi to Arthur Henderson, March 19, 1930, Somaliland: Original Correspondence, CO 535/90/9, National Archives, London, United Kingdom; "Interview with Stella Hersi," The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, accessed in August 2020.

various clan-based lodging houses provide clear evidence of a substantial Somali population. In Butetown, each tribe managed its own separate house, with some owning two or more lodges. On this dockland, as was the case for most Somali migrants at the time, the Somali population consisted of three main groups: Dhulbahante, Isaaq, and Warsangeli.[265] In 1929, when Shire applied for the boarding house, the Isaaq, the largest of the three, had multiple lodges in Butetown alone, as did the Warsangeli. The Dhulbahante, to which Shire belonged, had just one. Concluding his investigation, Fleming advised the department that a second house would be a welcome addition to accommodate the growing Dhulbahante population.[266]

Shire eventually got the license—after a twenty-one-day background check.

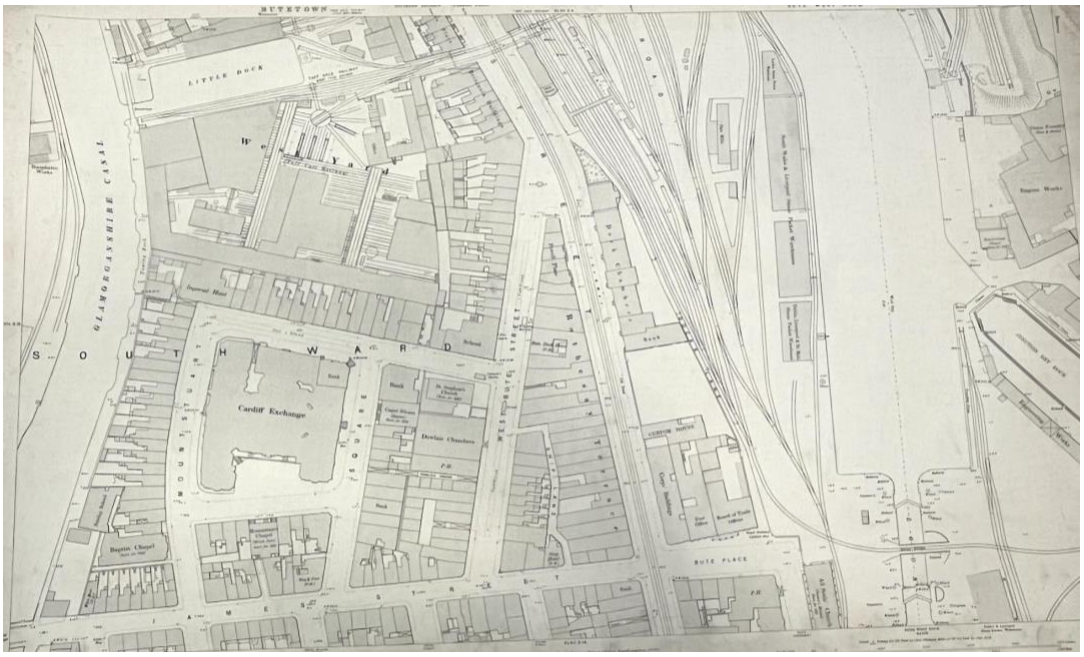


Figure 4: A 1900 map of Butetown in Cardiff. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, U.K.

[265] These were the main tribes that made up the British Somaliland population. They were also the main migrant groups who turned to the colonial maritime economy and resettled in Yemen, Europe, and North America during the period in question. For more about the formations of tribal identities in Somaliland, see I. M. Lewis' *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*. 4th ed. Oxford: James Currey, 2002.

[266] Letter, Fleming.

This chapter explores the history of Somali migrant laborers in Britain and the crucial role seamen's boarding houses played in cementing the Somali presence in Wales and across Britain. Somalis began arriving in Britain in the late nineteenth century, though very few established permanent residence at the time.[267] This changed in the twentieth century when news about job opportunities attracted more Somali migrants to dockside neighborhoods in Wales and England.[268] Butetown, one of the largest dockside settlements, quickly transformed into an important economic and social hub, where Somalis established a vibrant community. The dockland, however, was not the only place that tightly held the laborers to her bosom. Somalis settled in similar neighborhoods across Britain.[269] Historical accounts and popular narratives often label these early Somali laborers as "seamen," as if seafaring were their sole occupation. This assumption is misleading and undermines their diverse contributions across various sectors of the economy. Though many did participate in the maritime industry, others worked as factory laborers, drivers, porters, cooks, and even lodging-house owners and operators.

The chapter consists of four sections. The first traces the history of Somali laborers in the U.K. and analyzes the factors that facilitated their migrations. I argue that one of the chief factors was Britain's colonial ties to the Horn of Africa. Prior to the nineteenth-century colonial period,

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[267] Deborah Sporton, Gill Valentine, and Katrine Bang Nielsen, "Post Conflict Identities: Affiliations and Practices of Somali Asylum Seeker Children," *Children's Geographies* 4, no. 2 (2006), 20; Similola Towry-Coker, "The Somali Sailors: Ethnic Communities Oral History Project," *Hammersmith United Charities*, 2018, accessed June 15, 2025, https://hamunitedcharities.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Somali-Sailors.pdf.

[268] Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 206-210.

[269] Somali presence was visible in various port cities across Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, working in the maritime and steel industries. See Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture*, 2006-210; Towry-Coker, "The Somali Sailors," *Hammersmith United Charities*; "Somalis in Cardiff," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jan/23/britishidentity.features11.

hardly any Somalis traveled beyond the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. However, with the advent of colonialism at the end of the century, they began to migrate to Britain in increasing numbers as part of global colonial networks. The British Empire recruited these exploitable laborers to further expand and strengthen its economy at home and abroad.[270] This section pays close attention to the circumstances that placed most Somalis in British dockside settlements, as well as their encounters and interactions with other colonial laborers, including those from Arabia, Africa, and the Caribbean. The section also illuminates the ways in which these colonial settlements and their inhabitants were racialized and became targets for episodic mob attacks and institutionalized surveillance.

The second section explores the history of Somali seamen's boarding houses, which developed in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1929, the year Shire applied for the license, fifty-seven other boarding house owners and operators from diverse ethnic backgrounds also submitted their applications to local governments in Cardiff.[271] For Somalis and other migrants in dockland settlements, the boarding houses represented more than a place for a night's sleep. They were integral to the formation of a permanent colonial diaspora in Britain. After toiling aboard steamships for months, Somalis returned to their lodging houses—where they connected with fellow tribesmen, shared stories about their voyages, discussed business ideas, reminisced about their native country, performed religious duties, played card and dice games, enjoyed familiar meals, met local women, and raised multiracial families. These

[270] Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture,* 206-210.

[271] Letter from Chief Sanitary Inspector W. G. Pyatt to Chief Constable J. A. Wilson, Cardiff City Police, March 26, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

amenities and networks, which they could not have found in mainstream British lodges,[272] drew Somalis to Tiger Bay even when their voyages ended at faraway cities. In short, the boarding houses offered Somalis not just a safe space where they felt truly at home; they cemented the Somali presence in Britain.

The third section explains the interracial unions Somali migrants formed with local women in Butetown. I argue that these marriages and cohabitations firmly grounded Somalis in the country, transforming the once-transient seafarers into permanent family men. Like other colonial migrants, Somali men formed partnerships with working-class white women. Some of these women labored in the same boarding houses where the men resided, making their beds, cleaning their clothes, and keeping their belongings in their absence.[273] For the women, the interactions and observations of the men in the boarding houses laid bare more nuanced aspects of the Somali people. Contrary to the racist depictions that had been perpetuated in pseudoscientific theories and travel narratives—e.g, savage, immoral, primitive—the women likely found them ordinary men doing ordinary things that were familiar to anyone: They went to work, paid bills, appreciated the little things in life, yearned for stable family life. Despite the ostensible racial hierarchy that compartmentalized Western society, and in spite of the anxious gaze of authorities who wanted to segregate them, these men and women found a common rhythm in their everyday life. As working-class people, their shared mission to forge a better

[272] Kenneth Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations in English Society.* (London: Hunt, Barnard, and Co., 1947), 38.

[273] Letter from Police Detective Robert Fleming to the Office of the Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, April 4, 1929, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales; Letter from Detective Robert Fleming to the Deputy Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, March 31, 1930, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom; Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture,* 220-224.

future brought them together. In the end, they formed relationships that resulted in the formation of interracial unions and multiethnic families and thriving businesses.

Although the boarding houses and the multiethnic families that Somali migrants formed were important institutions that cemented their presence in the U.K., some migrants maintained transnational networks. The final section of the chapter argues that migration was not a one-way phenomenon for many laborers; they went back and forth between Somalia and Britain. By the 1950s, Somali men began to bring Somali wives. Until then, the migrants mainly comprised three categories: single men, men in interracial unions, and men with families in Somaliland. Laborers Ali Aw Noor, Madi Ali Gass, and Ariyyah Ali were among the first to bring their spouses to the U.K. In 2022, I met with their children and grandchildren in Cardiff. These descendants, many of whom are now accomplished scientists, politicians, and public servants, represent the first generation to emerge from endogamous unions. They were born and grew up in shared apartments and boarding houses in Liverpool, Newport, and Cardiff. As children, they had fathers who worked at sea and in factories, and mothers who raised them in the Somali culture, teaching them the language and traditions of their forefathers.[274]

Establishing New Lives in Britain

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, news of ample employment opportunities drew Somali migrant laborers to Britain, mainly settling in dockside neighborhoods in Wales and

[274] Nasir Adem Arriyeh (son and grandson of Somali migrant workers), in discussion with the author, Cardiff, Wales, August 2022.

Dr. Ahmed Ali Aw Noor (son of a Somali migrant worker), in discussion with the author, Cardiff, Wales, August 2022.

Zainab Mahdi Gass (daughter of a Somali migrant worker), in discussion with the author, Cardiff, Wales, July 2022.

Kharieh, Steve (son of a Somali migrant worker), in discussion with the author, Cardiff, Wales, August 2022.

England. Butetown, one of the largest docklands, soon became a significant economic and social destination for them. But it was not the only place that housed these laborers. Like other colonial migrants, Somalis settled in similar docklands across various cities and towns—including Barry, Newport, Liverpool, Sheffield, and South Shields.[275] Historian Laura Tabili once hypothesized that laborers often picked these dockside locations because their "historical transiency and disrepute perhaps made them more hospitable" than the "respectable" white neighborhoods.[276] It could also be added that these neighborhoods were preferred by laborers for practical reasons. For instance, staying close to the ships was more convenient as seafarers could access shipping companies and employment recruiters. This was particularly crucial as many Somalis did not have guaranteed employment contracts, and their chances of obtaining jobs depended on word of mouth. For this reason, they, along with other colonial laborers, formed visible communities in dockside neighborhoods such as Butetown.

Although these colonial laborers—especially those from the British colonies of Somalia, West Africa, and Aden—primarily lived together in waterfront enclaves, it was not uncommon to find specific communities maintaining a more prominent presence in specific areas. For instance, Liverpool's southern docklands emerged as a significant destination for West African seafarers in the first half of the twentieth century, and Kru migrants from Liberia's Monrovia and Sierra Leone's Freetown comprised the city's main ethnic group.[277] Before arriving in Britain,

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[275] Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture*, 2006-210; Towry-Coker, "The Somali Sailors," *Hammersmith United Charities*; "Somalis in Cardiff," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jan/23/britishidentity.features11.

[276] Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 140.

[277] Lynn Schler, "Becoming Nigerian: African Seamen, Decolonisation, and the Nationalization of Consciousness: Becoming Nigerian." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* no. 11 (2011): 47-48.

the Kru people were well known for their centuries-old connection to the maritime economy across the continent's western coast. As historian Diane Frost has explained, they were skilled fishermen who had dominated "the lucrative" fishing industry. These skills made them useful laborers when American and European slave ships came to transport Africans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[278] The shipping companies considered Kru men the best fit for the most grueling tasks in the maritime industry. In 1855, one observer remarked that they were "of great use in doing the heavy work on board and for boat service, thus saving the European seamen from exposing themselves too much to the sun rays."[279]

Kru men once again proved useful as European colonialism took hold across the continent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Shipping companies found Kru men ready laborers for colonial jobs at home and abroad. They soon became visible actors in the British and French colonial labor force across the western port cities, including Lagos, Accra, and the Ivory Coast. Here, thousands of Kru men participated in jobs onshore and at sea. Onshore, they joined the lumber, petroleum, and construction industries.[280] At sea, they served as firemen and trimmers aboard steamships that sailed to and from both sides of the Atlantic. By the second decade of the twentieth century, many Kru seafarers had jumped ship and settled in Britain. There are two main explanations for why they chose Britain over their homeland. First, shipping employers paid laborers who engaged their vessels in colonial ports far less than they

[278] Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 7-8.

[279] *Nautical Magazine*, "Memoirs on the Trade to the West Coast of Africa" (1855), p.408, quoted in Diane Frost, "Racism, Work and Unemployment: West African Seamen in Liverpool 1880s-1960s" in *Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK* (Routledge, 2019), 23.

[280] Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers*, 18-21.

paid those who were hired at British ports.[281] Second, Britain had abundant wartime employment, drawing workers from various British colonies. These jobs provided higher pay and better options than those in the colonies.[282] The Kru and other migrants from the western coast of Africa—especially Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria—were among these migrants.

Liverpool became a destination for these laborers mainly because they often worked for Elder Dempster Lines, a major shipping company that maintained a direct line between West Africa and Liverpool. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the company, founded in 1868, recruited its engine room crew from Monrovia, Freetown, and Lagos. When the laborers first arrived in Liverpool, they occupied an all-Black company hostel, located in the city's South Docks area.[283] By this time, during the early years of the twentieth century, as scholar Paul B. Rich has noted, "a general consensus on the inheritance of racial differences" had taken root in the consciousness of white societies, including those in Britain. These societies followed the so-called "great chain of being" template, which placed "the White Anglo-Saxon race in the topmost position, Mediterraneans and Southern Europeans in a lower position, followed by Indians, Chinese, Africans, and non-white races in general."[284] Guided by this template, British governments and institutions implemented legislation regarding racial separation and

[281] Frost, "Racism, Work and Unemployment, 23.

[282] Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers*, 190-191.

[283] Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 52; Ian Law, "White Racism and Black Settlement in Liverpool: A Study of Local Inequalities and Policies with Particular Reference to Council Housing," PhD Diss. (University of Liverpool, 1985), 86-8.

[284] Paul B. Rich, "Doctrines of Racial Segregation in Britain: 1900–1944," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 12, no. 1 (1984): 75.

discrimination, othering people of color and denying them basic civil and human rights: freedom, citizenship, protection, equality, employment.

This burden of the world's darker masses was so conspicuous at the time that the pan-Africanist scholar-activist W.E.B. Du Bois bemoaned "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."[285] It was in this context that Elder Dempster confined African laborers in that all-Black lodge. In doing so, the company reinforced the established racial segregation practice by separating Black laborers from the rest, while simultaneously providing them with a living space by the seaside. This living arrangement, of course, was not intended as a social investment to benefit the African workers. Far from that, it was a tool the company used to retain and recruit exploitable colonial laborers of color. Thus, keeping African workers within a company's establishment made it more convenient for the employer to access them. As sociologist Ian Law explained, African laborers were paid off in Liverpool to meet the demands of the shipping companies that sought to maintain "a reserve of cheap labour in the port."[286]

Over time, African laborers in the all-Black lodge in Liverpool developed networks of friends and relatives that extended beyond the maritime economy and the hostel's confines. Some of the networks lived in African-operated boarding houses, while others formed interracial relationships with local women in regular residential homes or operated flourishing small businesses.[287] These ethnic enterprises included nightclubs migrants named after their ethnicities and nationalities. For instance, some clubs carried the names "Ghanaian," "Yoruba," and

[285] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 1.
[286] Law, "White Racism and Black Settlement in Liverpool," 88.

[287] Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers*, 190-191.

"Igbo."[288] As a diaspora community in a distant, unfamiliar land, they reinvented these ethnic names to recreate a sense of home and familiarity in Liverpool. Despite the African continent being under European colonialism at the time, and in spite of being labeled as simply "native subjects" of the Empire, these migrants never lost sight of their ethnic and national identity. In many ways, they had no option but to hold tight to their ethnic and national identities because of the widespread racism that rendered them outsiders.

If Liverpool served as the hub for West Africans, South Shields was home to one of the first and largest Arab populations in Britain. These migrants mainly lived in the city's Holborn and Laygate dockside neighborhoods. Although Arabs had been traveling to Britain at least since the nineteenth century, most of them established permanent residency around the turn of the twentieth century.[289] It was during this period that British merchant ships began recruiting laborers from Aden and Port Said for jobs as firemen and trimmers on steamships bound for both sides of the Atlantic.[290] By the first two decades of the century, Arab seafarers maintained a visible presence in various British port cities. South Shields, a coal-exporting city, became the "center of supply for Arab seamen."[291] Like African laborers in Liverpool's dockside areas, these Arab migrants married local women and formed interracial families in Holborn and Laygate.

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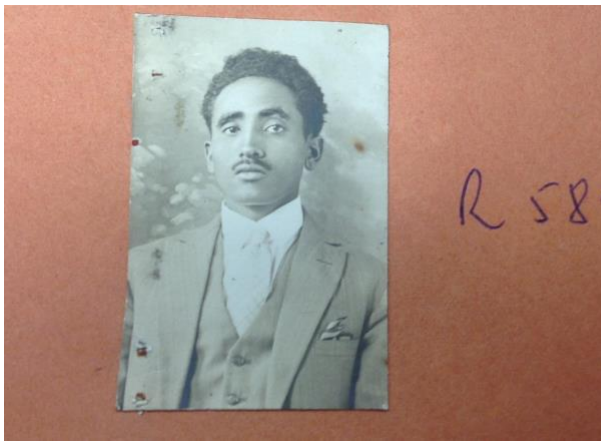
[288] Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 21, quoted in Schler, "Becoming Nigerian," 48.

[289] David Byrne, "The 1930 'Arab Riot' in South Shields: A Race Riot That Never Was." *Race & Class* 18, no. 3 (1977), 262-3.

[290] Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 207; BBC, "The North East's Yemeni Race Riots." *BBC Nation on Film*. September 24, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/nationonfilm/topics/family-and-community/south-shields-yemeni-riots.shtml.

[291] Neama Alamri, "Long Live the Arab Worker: A Transnational History of Labor and Empire in the Yemeni Diaspora," Ph.D. Diss., (University of California, Merced), 22.

They also established service businesses such as boarding houses, cafés, and shops for Arab workers and their multiethnic families.[292]



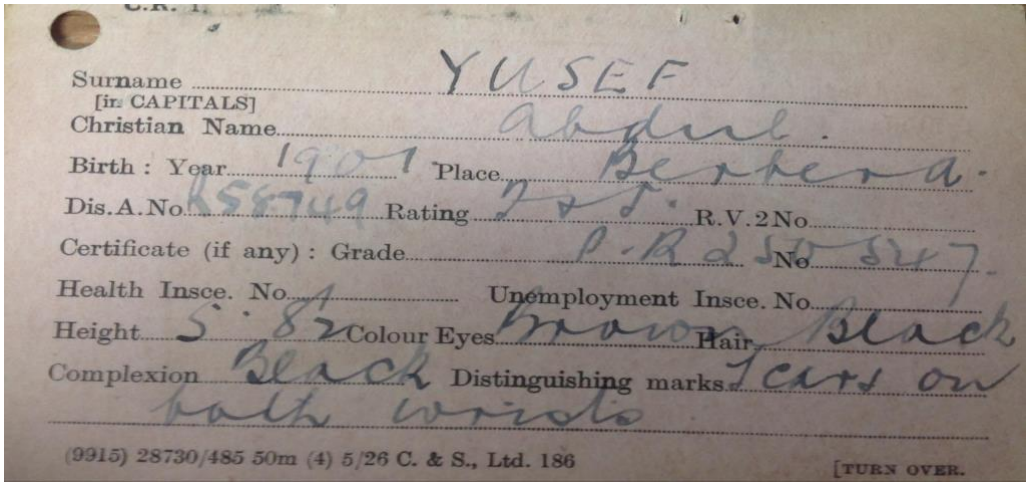


Figure 5: A passport photo of Abdul Yusef (top) and a page from his discharge book (bottom), which was considered an employee ID for seafarers. From the author's private collections, donated by Steve Khaireh, of the Horn Development Association, Cardiff, Wales.

[292] Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture,* 212-227.

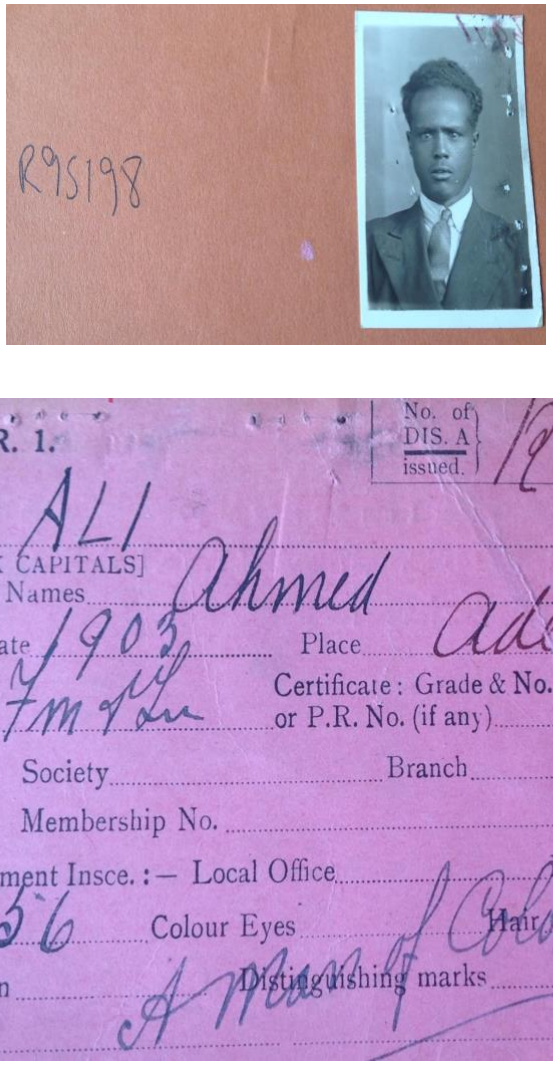
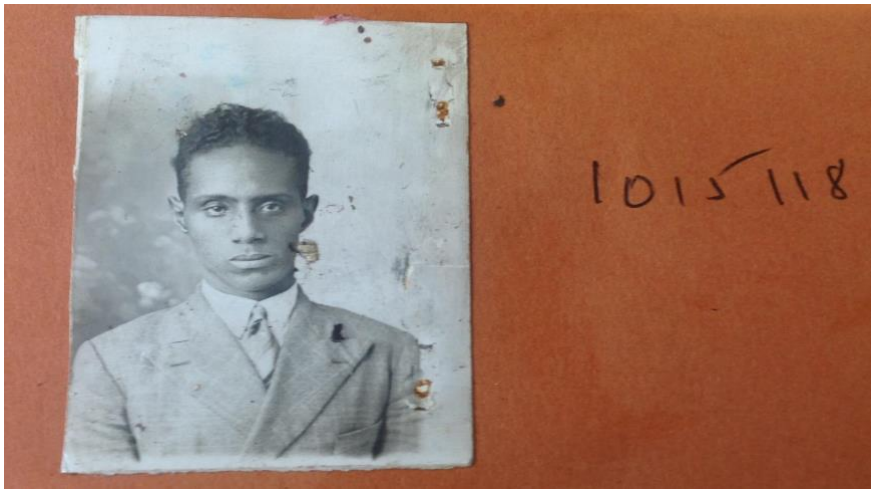


Figure 6: A passport photo of Ahmed Ali (top) and a page from his discharge book (bottom), which was considered an employee ID for seafarers. From the author's private collections, donated by Steve Khaireh, of the Horn Development Association, Cardiff, Wales.



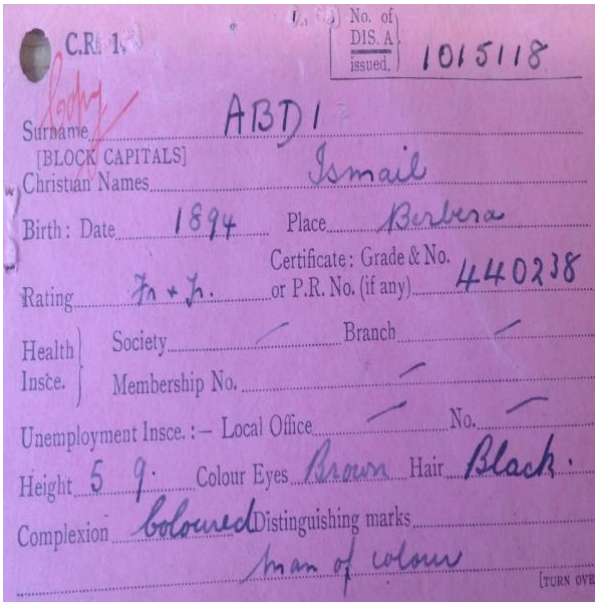
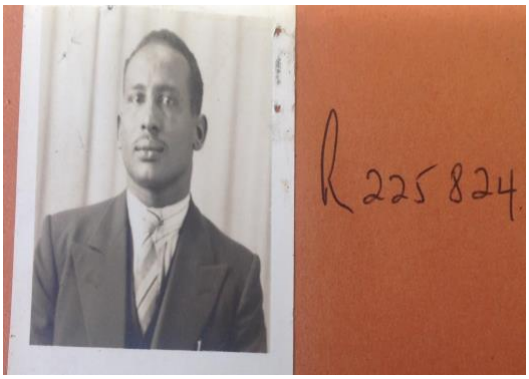


Figure 7: A passport photo of Abdi Ismail (top) and a page from his discharge book (bottom), which was considered an employee ID for seafarers. From the author's private collections, donated by Steve Khaireh, of the Horn Development Association, Cardiff, Wales.



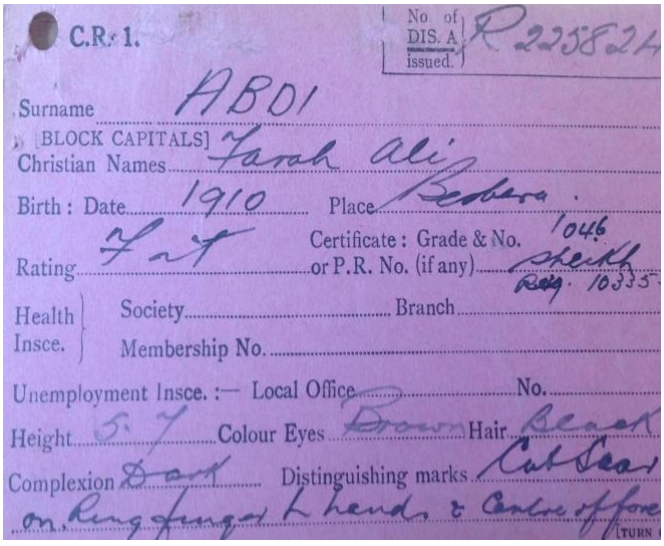


Figure 8: A passport photo of Abdi Farah (top) and a page from his discharge book (bottom), which was considered an employee ID for seafarers. From the author's private collections, donated by Steve Khaireh, of the Horn Development Association, Cardiff, Wales.

And then there was Butetown. This dockside community mainly housed laborers from the British colonies in Somalia, Arabia, and the Caribbean.[293] Though Somali migrant workers had settled throughout Britain, most of them lived in Cardiff, which they chose for the same reason other migrants did: job opportunities. At the turn of the twentieth century, as the migrants

[293] Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 140.

established permanence in the neighborhood, South Wales—a metropolitan region consisting of Cardiff, Newport, Swansea, and Barry—emerged as the "most productive coalfield" in the world.[294] This productivity peaked in 1913 when South Wales produced nearly 60 million tons of coal. In some cities, the coal industry accounted for a whopping 90 percent of existing jobs.[295] In addition to mining jobs, the sector also created opportunities for workers who loaded the black gold onto freight trains and tramp steamers. Domestic consumers, railway companies, and steamship owners regarded Welsh coal as superior for its quality: The coal produced high-temperature heat and burned with less flame and smoke.[296] To meet this global demand, South Wales attracted workers not just from nearby British cities and towns but also from faraway places: Somalia, Yemen, Egypt, Liberia, China, the Indian subcontinent.

Aside from mining and seafaring jobs, as anthropologist Kenneth Little theorized, the year-round mild weather made Cardiff particularly attractive to people from tropical regions.[297] Though the warm temperature might have been a welcome addition, it was not a deciding factor for Somalis. As migrant laborers, they did not have the luxury of choosing a place based on its temperature or environment. After all, as explained in chapter two, Somalis spent most of their time not on land but at sea, performing the most grueling tasks on the steamships. Neither was

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[294] William R. Price and Mark Alan Rhodes, "Coal Dust in the Wind: Interpreting the Industrial Past of South Wales," *Tourism Geographies* 24, no. 4–5 (2022): 838.

[295] Price and Rhodes, "Coal Dust in the Wind," 839.

[296] Travers Merrill and Lucy Kitson, "The Political and Economic Context of Coal Mining in South Wales" in *The End of Coal Mining in South Wales: Lessons Learned from Industrial Transformation*. (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2017), 4. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14778.5; Richard de Kerbrech, *Down Amongst the Black Gang: The World and Workplace of RMS Titanic's Stokers* (Cheltenham, United Kingdom: The History Press, 2014), 31-33.

[297] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 34-35.

their decision to settle in the city accidental. Good wages initially brought them to the city since laborers there earned more pay than those, say, in Liverpool and London. As one Kru migrant explained, Africans often left Liverpool for Cardiff "because wages paid [to Africans] was the same as white."[298] Mindful of these pay differences, Somalis often chose cities that offered the highest pay. For instance, when the vessel that took Ibrahim Ismaa'il from Djibouti moored in Marseilles, he believed that French ships paid poorly. Thus, he made his way to London. On the train ride, Ismaa'il learned that Cardiff boasted much better opportunities. Once again, he changed his mind and made his way to Butetown.[299]

* * *

As dockside settlements attracted colonial laborers of color, local authorities maintained close oversight of these migrant communities through formal surveillance systems. In Butetown, police officers regularly patrolled the streets and conducted unannounced inspections of boarding houses. These establishments were legally obligated to grant government officials immediate access upon request. According to the seamen's boarding house bylaws, authorities must be able "at all times … of the day or the night [to] enter and inspect any house" and every owner or employee was required to provide them with "free access."[300] Once inside, officers could demand to see operating licenses or interrogate lodgers. To justify their surprise visits, the government claimed they intended to ensure legal compliance and prevent so-called "vice" activities, including gambling or the presence of sex workers. Despite what authorities claimed,

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[298] Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers*, 78; Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture, 230;* Law, "White Racism and Black Settlement in Liverpool," 87.

[299] Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismail, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* 32, no. 3 (1977), 373.

[300] "County Borough of Cardiff Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, By-laws as to Seamen's Lodging Houses," DCONC/7/5/1-3, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

the surveillance policy served to strip colonial migrants and their businesses of privacy and autonomy, even within their own living and working spaces.

By the end of the First World War, dockside settlements were no longer just sites of surveillance; they had become targets of violent attacks, ultimately culminating in the so-called "race riots" of 1919. Throughout the summer and fall of this year, white mobs across various port cities launched coordinated attacks on colonial laborers, accusing them of "stealing" their jobs and women. The migrants were chased through the streets, their homes and businesses looted, and their properties set ablaze.[301] Scholars have theorized possible explanations for the eruption of the violence. For instance, Historian Jacqueline Jenkinson has pointed to the "post-war social and economic dislocation" as a significant cause of the racist attacks.[302] In the immediate aftermath of the war, unemployment rates in the maritime industry soared. The colonial laborers who had been essential to wartime production were now deemed expendable, and most merchant vessels that had previously relied on colonial migrants shifted hiring preferences to returning white servicemen.[303] This employment crisis was further exacerbated by the large-scale demobilization of soldiers and military personnel, which flooded the civilian labor market—especially the maritime and steel industries—and strained housing and

[301] St. Clair Drake, "The Colour Problem" In Britain: A Study of Social Definitions," *The Sociological Review* 3, no. 2 (1955), 198.

[302] Jacqueline Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace: The 1919 Seaport Riots in Perspective," in *Minorities and the First World War: From War to Peace*, edited by Jacqueline Jenkinson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 175.

[303] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 57.

employment infrastructure.[304] As a result, colonial migrants and returning veterans were pitted against one another in a desperate struggle for increasingly scarce resources.

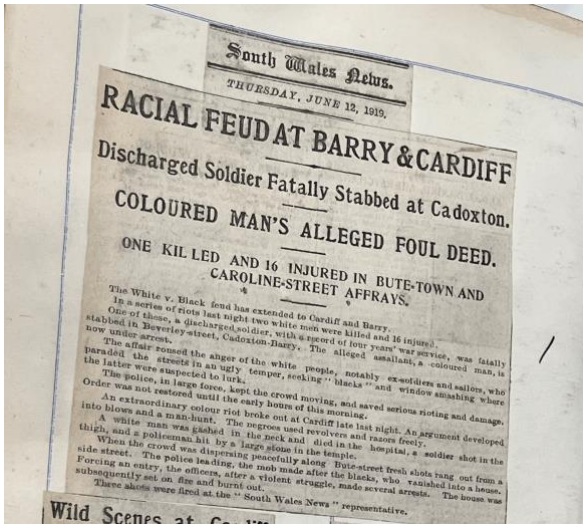
Even though post-war economic turmoil and chaotic demobilization were clearly consequential factors of the unemployment and housing shortages, white Britons leveled their hostility at colonial migrants. They resented Somalis and other migrants for establishing a more stable and prosperous life for themselves. During the war, migrants had managed to build this lifestyle in which they enjoyed lucrative employment that allowed them to save more than they could on pre-war wages. They became proud owners of boarding houses and small businesses, which became visible to any dockland visitor by the war's end. In addition, the migrants married or cohabited with white women, with whom they raised children in these boarding houses.[305] The relative financial and family stability that migrants maintained apparently enraged white veterans and seamen who found themselves in predicaments after the war. At labor union meetings and employment offices, blue-collar white laborers invoked racist and xenophobic language, pointing to how foreign men of color had stolen "their jobs and women."[306] The finger-pointing finally led to the infamous race riots across dockside settlements, including Butetown.

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[304] Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace," 181-182.

[305] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 57; Lucy Bland, "White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War," *Gender & History* 17, no. 1 (2005), 34.

[306] Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd, 2010), 240, quoted in Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace."



South Wales News.

THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1919.

RACIAL FEUD AT BARRY & CARDIFF

Discharged Soldier Fatally Stabbed at Cadoxton.

COLOURED MAN'S ALLEGED FOUL DEED.

ONE KILLED AND 16 INJURED IN BUTE-TOWN AND CAROLINE-STREET AFFRAYS.

The White v. Black feud has extended to Cardiff and Barry.

In a series of riots last night two white men were killed and 16 injured.

One of these, a discharged soldier, with a record of four years' war service, was fatally stabbed in Beverley-street, Cadoxton-Barry. The alleged assailant, a coloured man, is now under arrest.

The affair roused the anger of the white people, notably ex-soldiers and sailors, who paraded the streets in an ugly temper, seeking "blacks" and window smashing where the latter were suspected to lurk.

The police, in large force, kept the crowd moving, and saved serious rioting and damage.

Order was not restored until the early hours of this morning.

An extraordinary colour riot broke out at Cardiff late last night. An argument developed into blows and a man-hunt. The negroes used revolvers and razors freely.

A white man was slashed in the temple, a soldier shot in the thigh, and a policeman hit by a large stone in the neck and died in the hospital.

When the crowd was dispersing peacefully along Bute-street fresh shots rang out from a side street. The police leading, the mob made after the blacks, who rushed into a house. Forcing an entry, the officers, after a violent struggle, made several arrests. The house was subsequently set on fire and burnt out.

These shots were fired at the "South Wales News" representative.

Wild Scenes at

Figure 9: A front-page *South Wales News* article about the "race riots" in Cardiff and Barry, June 12, 1919, DCONC/5/58 Police Newscuttings, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, U.K.

Similar violent scenes had simultaneously unfolded that summer on the other side of the Atlantic. White mobs orchestrated a series of attacks on Black communities in more than twenty cities in the United States, including Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The riots came in the form of lynchings, indiscriminate shootings, and property destruction. The American writer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson dubbed these brutal events the "Red Summer" for the resulting carnage.[307] Just as the white rioters in Britain blamed colonial migrants for the country's economic crisis, their American counterparts pointed fingers at Black Americans, many of whom had fled racial violence in the South. These were among the early waves of a massive exodus that would become known as the Great Migration. More than 7 million made the trek to northern states between 1915 and 1970.[308] However, it was not just the oppressive Jim

[307] Robert L. Stevens, "African-American Soldiers Welcomed Home: Red Summer of 1919 Washington Race Riot," *Social Studies Review* 58 (2019): 99–104; Timothy M. Neeno, "Red Summer, United States, 1919," *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* (2009). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198073.wbierp1244.

[308] Leah Platt Boustan, "The Great Black Migration: Opportunity and Competition in Northern Labor Markets," *Focus* 32 no. 1 (2015): 24-27.

Crow laws that brought these migrants to the North; an abundance of wartime employment also lured them. In fact, as Spencer R. Crew noted, this migration "might never have occurred" had it not been for the ample wartime opportunities. Like the Somalis in Britain, African Americans secured menial employment in the manufacturing, meatpacking, and construction industries. Soon after the war ended, however, returning white veterans unleashed their anger at the Black newcomers, whom they felt had replaced them while they were away.[309]

In Britain, during the 1919 riots that swept through seaports, the central government and local authorities quickly forgot the wartime contributions of colonial subjects. Somalis and other migrant laborers, once hailed as selfless heroes, were suddenly unruly aliens to be expelled. Rather than confronting the real postwar challenges—mass demobilization, the collapse of the economy, and the broader fallout of the war—the government, like the white mobs, found it easier to scapegoat colonial migrants. Officials insisted that the violence stemmed from Black men competing with white men for jobs and women.[310] That narrative, convenient as it may sound, ignored the deep structural problems Britain faced. Drawing on a long imperial tradition of legal restrictions dating back to 1793, lawmakers first responded with the Aliens Restriction Act of 1919 and then the Aliens Order of 1920.[311] These measures extended the reach of the Aliens Restriction Act of 1914, which targeted enemy aliens by requiring registration with the police, restricting movements, and enabling expulsion. By 1919, those same laws—meant

[309] Spencer R. Crew, "The Great Migration of Afro-Americans, 1915-40," *Monthly Labor Review* 110, no. 3 (1987): 34–36.

[310] Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 137.

[311] David LuVerne Ferch, "The English Alien Acts, 1793-1826," MA diss. (College of William and Mary, 1978), 2; E. S. Roscoe, "Aliens in Great Britain" *Transactions of the Grotius Society, 1930, vol. 16,* Problems of Peace and War, Papers Read Before the Society in the Year 1930 (1930), 66-67.

initially for wartime enemies—were being used to control all foreign-born residents, especially colonial migrants, many of whom, in fact, were legally British subjects.[312]

As if the 1919 and 1920 provisions were not severe enough, the government introduced yet another anti-immigration measure: the Coloured Alien Seamen Order of 1925. Unlike previous laws, which broadly defined "aliens" as undocumented migrants regardless of their ethnic or racial background, this order was explicitly racial in its intent. The government was now targeting a specific group of people: non-white laborers from British colonies in Africa, Arabia, and the Caribbean. It was a blatant act of racism that exposed the Empire's deep-seated intolerance toward migrants of color. Indeed, among Britain's many exclusionary immigration policies, this order stands out. Historian Laura Tabili has described it as "the first instance of state-sanctioned race discrimination inside Britain to come to widespread notice."[313] The law made it increasingly difficult for seamen of color to migrate to and legally settle in the country. Those already in Britain were required to register as aliens with the police or produce documentation proving their citizenship—even if they came from the Empire's colonial territories. Failure to do so meant automatic designation as an alien, a category that not only limited employment opportunities but also heightened the risk of deportation.[314]

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[312] Jacqueline Jenkinson, "Black, Arab and South Asian Colonial Britons in the Intersections Between War and Peace: The 1919 Seaport Riots in Perspective," in *Minorities and the First World War: From War to Peace*, edited by Jacqueline Jenkinson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 183; Christiane Reinecke, "Governing Aliens in Times of Upheaval: Immigration Control and Modern State Practice in Early Twentieth-Century Britain, Compared with Prussia." *International Review of Social History* 54, no. 1 (2009), 47.

[313] Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference," *The Journal of British Studies* (1994), 56.

[314] Letter from the Colonial Office to the Board of Trade. January 14, 1932. CO 535/94. The National Archives, Kew, London; Letter from the Colonial House to Glamorgan County Council. June 26, 1930. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales; Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Black 1919: Riots, Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain* (Liverpool University Press, 2009), 158-160.

As a result of these post-war anti-immigration laws, many Somalis quickly fell into the abyss of unemployment and, ultimately, destitution. The Board of Trade, labor unions, and shipping companies were united in one position: white workers came first. When Somali migrants raised their concerns with the Board of Trade, an officer bluntly responded that companies gave "preference of employment to British seamen belonging to this country, and the Board would not be prepared to suggest that they should do otherwise."[315] Institutionalized racial discrimination in employment, coupled with restrictive immigration laws, stripped Somali workers of their dignity and means of survival. Their worsening conditions soon caught the attention of colonial government departments in the twenties. The India Office wrote to the Colonial Office about "a considerable number of Somali seamen" stranded in Barry, Wales, unable to find work. Amidst these harsh realities, Somali-run boarding houses emerged as vital spaces of mutual aid and solidarity, offering support where the state utterly failed.[316]

Creating Boarding Houses

How did these ethnic boarding houses arise, and what role did they play in sustaining migrant communities? The emergence of Somali-run boarding houses was the result of widespread racist practices that defined Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Soon after arriving in Cardiff, Somalis learned that their migration to the U.K. was only the beginning of multifaceted challenges that awaited them. First among these obstacles was finding a place to live. As in other port cities in Britain, seafarers in Cardiff primarily stayed in designated seamen's boarding houses. As people of color, however, colonial laborers were often excluded

[315] Letter from the Board of Trade. April 3, 1932. CO 535/94. The National Archives, Kew, London.

[316] Letter from Henry Bosanquet, secretary of King George's Fund for Sailors. June 10, 1921. CO 323/879. The National Archives, Kew, London.

from white-occupied lodges.[317] Racial discrimination and segregation practices—commonly referred to as the Color Bar—were rampant in Britain. Although race-based residential segregation practices were not formally legislated, as was the case in the southern states of the United States, Black people encountered racism in many aspects of their daily lives—including at workplaces, nightclubs, and lodging houses. Even though these establishments did not display the "No Negro" and "Whites Only" signs, they verbally communicated the message, like the day a Manchester pub told the boxing legend Len Johnson they "did not serve coloured people."[318]

Racism has been a lifeline for the creation and existence of colonial and imperial powers and their capitalist system that relegated colonial laborers to the margins. For these powers to survive, even thrive, it was—and still is—necessary to create racialized segments of society that help fuel systems of domination: slavery, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism. As historian Robin Kelley and others have argued, "colonial extraction, the processes of proletarianization, the violence of dispossession and discipline were structured by racism."[319] Historically, colonial regimes relied on the invention of ideas that racialized and minoritized certain groups to justify their existence through the extermination, dispossession, or forceful assimilation of native peoples. For the British Empire, racism was necessary for its imperial domination and exploitation of colonial subjects. Indeed, for Somali migrant laborers, their experiences with racism and racial capitalism did not begin with their arrival in Britain. It can be traced back to when the empire turned their land into a British Protectorate and its dwellers became

[317] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 38.

[318] Shirin Hirsch and Geoff Brown, "Breaking the 'Colour Bar': Len Johnson, Manchester and Anti-Racism," *Race & Class* 64, no. 3 (2023): 37.

[319] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Racial Capitalism: An Unfinished History" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 16 (2023), 3563.

incorporated into the exploitative capitalist system that confined them to the treacherous engine room conditions.

In Cardiff, racism forced Somalis to establish their own lodging houses. In the early years of the twentieth century, when their population was too small to develop their own spaces, they roomed with Arab men, who formed some of the earliest Muslim-run lodges in Britain. These spaces provided migrants "a physical, social, religious and economic base."[320] However, as the Somali population increased in the first and second decades of the century, so did the number of boarding houses in Tiger Bay. These lodges provided migrant laborers with supportive networks and community bases that boasted familiar *halal* eateries, entertainment hubs, and prayer spaces. By this time, the Somali laborers had grown into a community that was able and willing to pay for the services. Owners of these lodging houses were often former firemen and trimmers who had spent decades toiling aboard British steamships. They were among Somalis who had left seafaring jobs and invested their life savings in the service sector. As official documents show, boarding house operators purchased or sublet existing residential buildings, partially occupying some rooms and renting the rest. They hired fellow Somalis as cooks and baristas. For the entrepreneurs and their employees, running community-based businesses was perhaps a lifelong dream and a preferred alternative to the harsh conditions in steamship engine rooms. In these jobs, they could set up their own schedules, stay in their community, and collaborate and interact with their kin and friends. In short, they were at home in these dockland settlements.

Still, Somali lodging houses that operated before the Great War numbered only a handful. Their numbers would increase substantially as the Somali population grew during the Interwar

[320] Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Jody Mellor, "Bilād Al-Welsh (Land of the Welsh): Muslims in Cardiff, South Wales: Past, Present and Future: Bilād al-Welsh (Land of the Welsh)" *The Muslim World (Hartford)* 100 (2010), 452.

period.[321] Before the war, as I have detailed in chapter two, most Somali migrants were based in British Somaliland, Arabia, and Djibouti, working for boats and ships carrying people and goods along the Red Sea. Soon after the war began, some were recruited to serve aboard the British navy and merchant ships that traveled around the world. Others followed these ships as passengers and stowaways to Britain, where they joined the maritime and manufacturing industries.[322] Despite their occupations, Somali laborers in Cardiff turned to Tiger Bay boarding houses for accommodations. By this time, many had spent decades in the British workforce and were economically and socially well-established in the dockside communities. Therefore, boarding house owners saw an opportunity in the increase of Somali migrants that began during the war and continued into the Interwar years and beyond.[323]

Yousef Shire, whom we have encountered in the opening pages of this chapter, was among dozens of former seafarers who took the leap into the boarding house business during the Interwar period. Others included Hussien Adam, who at the age of forty in 1937, obtained a license to keep 37 Maria Street as a boarding house. An Egyptian named Mohamed Fattah operated the lodge for many years before transferring it to Adam. Arab and Somali laborers shared a history of migration that took them throughout the world. They served in the same sectors of the colonial economy in Arabia and Europe, where they were active participants in the maritime, construction, and steel industries.[324] In Tiger Bay and other British dockside areas, Somali and Arab workers shared neighborhoods and boarding houses. They also engaged in

[321] Letter, Fleming.

[322] Tabili, Global Migrants, 208.

[323] Blad, "White Women and Men of Color," 34.

[324] John Willis, "Colonial Policing in Aden, 1937-1967," *Arab Studies Journal* no. 1 (1997): 60.

business transactions, buying properties and businesses from one another. Adam obtained the house on Maria Street from that Egyptian after working on steamships for more than two decades. At the time, while Somali-operated lodging houses existed, there were not enough to accommodate the growing number of Somali laborers. So much so that many found themselves in crowded Arab boarding houses. In the application, Adam told authorities that he wanted to obtain a license to alleviate the "insufficient accommodation" Somalis faced in Tiger Bay.[325]

Hassan Ahmed Farah also transitioned from the seafaring industry into the maritime service sector. In 1945, Farah arrived in Britain as a laborer working on the SS *Empire Lionel*. He disembarked at Newcastle and made his way to Cardiff, where he continued his seafaring career with British merchant steamships, staying in Tiger Bay between voyages. In these post-war years, as historian Christopher Roy Zembe has explained, Britain's Black demographers witnessed a significant transformation with the arrival of a new generation of migrants from Africa and the Caribbean. "Post-war economic expansion that needed a guaranteed supply of mainly unskilled or semi-skilled workforce," Zembe continued, "had provided the opportunity for Blacks from either the British colonies in Africa or the West Indies to forge a visible and settled presence in Britain."[326] Farah was among these migrants. Three years after his arrival, he did what Yousef Shire, Hussien Adam, and dozens of Somalis had done: He obtained a boarding house and catering business. Farah paid £700 for the property, which sat just five blocks from Adam's lodge on Maria Street.[327]

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[325] Letter from the Detective Department to the Deputy Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, November 6, 1937. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[326] Christopher Roy Zembe, "Deceptive Diplomacy and Racism in Post-War Black British Immigration: Hallmarks of the Legacies of Slave Trade and Colonisation" *Black Histories* 1, no. 1–2 (2023), 91.

[327] Letter from the Cardiff City Police to the Chief Sanitary Inspector, March 16, 1948. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

Like Farah and others, Ibrahim Hersi switched from seafaring to entrepreneurship. Born in British Somaliland in the late twenties, he attended a mission school in Hargeisa. Sometime in the Second World War, at the age of seventeen, Hersi followed the stream of Somali laborers who had joined the colonial maritime economy in Arabia. Soon, he secured a job as a fireman on British steamships. Hersi remained in the seafaring industry until he settled in Cardiff around 1948.[328] Three years later, he became a licensed keeper and took the helm of a boarding house at 42-43 Maria Street, which had been under the management of a Somali-Adenese named Ali Haji Hassan. In 1956, Hersi relinquished the house due to illness. After leaving the business, he joined laborers who loaded and unloaded cargo ships at Cardiff's docks.[329] In 1964, he resumed his career in boarding houses. This time, Hersi took charge of properties at 13-14 Hodges Square. When local authorities had to decide whether to award Hersi the license, they considered his prior management experience and granted it to him.[330]

These boarding houses offered Somalis not just affordable rooms but spaces where they could perform religious obligations. South Wales did not acquire a stand-alone mosque until the late 1930s.[331] Even though Muslims had lived and worked in Britain since the nineteenth century, they lacked the numbers and resources to establish and maintain purpose-built *masajid*. Therefore, they improvised prayer spaces inside the boarding houses. In his autobiography, Ibrahim Ismaa'il recalled frequenting "a small mosque which an Arab boarding house-keeper

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[328] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, May 17, 1964. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[329] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, November 13, 1951. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[330] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, May 17, 1964. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[331] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, "'The First Registered Mosque in the UK, Cardiff, 1860': The Evolution of a Myth," *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 2 (2010), 461.

had fixed up at the bottom of his courtyard."[332] We can glean from this observation that these "mosques" had neither dedicated buildings nor sufficient space to accommodate large congregations. Still, the boarding houses were the first and only places where Muslims could gather for prayers during the early decades of the century. In the Somali community were *sheiks* and *imams*—including Hadji Mahomet—who guided the faithful in their prayers.[333] It would not be until the late 1930s that the Tiger Bay Muslim community managed to purchase and build the first stand-alone mosque, Noor El-Islam.[334]

In addition, the boarding houses served as something akin to present-day social and employment service centers. Lodging operators assisted newly arrived Somali migrants, who often arrived penniless and with little English, in obtaining informal credit lines until they could stand on their own feet. These support systems and networks made Tiger Bay an attractive destination for Somali laborers. Ismaa'il's experience is a living testament to the crucial role boarding houses played in sustaining these migrants—and cementing their presence in Cardiff. Soon after his arrival at the end of the Great War, a man whom Ismaa'il and his companions met at the train station led them to boarding houses. But the guide did not take the newcomers to just *any* house. As was customary, he led them to two lodges, one for each tribe. "We, Warsangeli, went to Faarah Samakaab's boarding house," Ismaa'il remembered, "while the Isaaq were led to 'Aabi Faarah, who is of the Habr Awal tribe."[335]

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[332] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 376.

[333] Hadji Mahomet, "a Somali priest," first emerged in news accounts during the so-called race riots. Mahomet, who was married to a white woman, reportedly hid in a drain-pipe as mobs ransacked and destroyed his house. See, "Cardiff Race Riots: Wild Scenes in Streets," *The Star*, August 27, 1919.

[334] Gilliat-Ray and Mellor, "Bilād Al-Welsh," 461-2; Christopher Catling, "Wales's first purpose-built mosque," *Royal Commission*, https://rcahmw.gov.uk/waless-first-purpose-built-mosque/

[335] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 373.

Observing these tribal practices, British authorities disparagingly labeled Somalis as a "very clannish" community.[336] Their scant knowledge of the complex Somali tribal system only yielded to the violent clan-based wars that have persisted for centuries. However, tribal practice was a double-edged sword. Indeed, if Somalis used tribes to wage wars and raids in twentieth-century Somalia, the same system meant something more meaningful in Britain. In the new environment, the identity-based living arrangements provided struggling migrants with a vital support system. It protected them from the imperial grip and sheltered them from anti-immigration policies that legitimized their detention and expulsion as "alien" or "destitute."[337] That is, new Somali migrants understood that only their respective tribesmen could truly sustain them as they found their footing in the strange land. The housekeepers, on their part, shouldered the burden of their lodgers, whom they treated not as distant clients but as close relatives. Their contribution especially stood out in the 1920s, when the British government rolled out anti-immigration laws that rendered colonial laborers aliens, leaving many Somalis penniless and desperate. The only source these migrants could rely on was the mercy of Somali boarding housekeepers who sustained them for months without pay.[338] Henry Bosanquet, secretary of King George's Fund for Sailors, a nonprofit organization founded to support seafarers and their families in the First World War, once praised the housekeepers for "their generous treatment" of

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[336] Fleming to the chief constable office, April 14, 1929.

[337] The central government deported destitute migrants or those it found undesirable. Although such exclusionary policies had existed in Britain for centuries, the post-1919 race riots introduced specific laws that targeted Somalis and other migrants of color.

[338] Letter from the Secretary of State of India, India Office. June 18, 1930.

the unemployed.[339] Thus, the tribe-based practice authorities dismissed as primitive was, in fact, a silent response to the Empire's apparatus that banished colonial subjects. The practice was part of an unwritten rule that held the fabric of the Somali diaspora together, especially in trying times: established migrants guided and looked out for their fellow countrymen.

Ismaa'il experienced this when he arrived at the Warsangeli boarding house in Cardiff. "We were all welcomed by our countrymen, who gave us food and lodging on credit," he explained. "Somali housekeepers help their kin in every way they possibly can and trust they will pay them when and if they can."[340] Like Ismaa'il, Arriyeh Ali received his relatives' generous support when he came to Liverpool on one frigid winter day in 1937. His grandson Nasir Adem recalled Ali's experience:

> He said it was absolutely freezing. He didn't have winter clothes because he was from Africa. Then one of the Somali elders saw him. He told him: "Have my jacket." The men also gave him shoes and a couch in the basement of a three-bedroom house. If it weren't for them, he would have died because of the cold.[341]

Indeed, at a time when anti-immigration sentiment was at its peak in Britain, established Somali migrants looked after the vulnerable ones, providing them with food, shelter, and guidance until they could become self-sufficient. These networking and support systems were often possible only within the parameters of tribal affiliation.

Besides providing shelter and food, Somali-run boarding housekeepers helped their clients obtain jobs. As former firemen and trimmers, housekeepers maintained professional

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[339] Letter from Henry Bosanguet, secretary of King George's Fund for Sailors. June 10, 1921. CO 323/879. The National Archives, Kew, London.

[340] Pankhurst and Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," 373.

[341] Nasir Adam in discussion with the author.

relationships with employment recruiters who frequented Somali and Arab lodges in Butetown. They introduced their unemployed new clients to the recruiters and even vouched for them when necessary. Employers often selected Somali and Arab crewmen for the least-paid, grueling engine room jobs that white workers did not want. There were several reasons companies preferred hiring them. For one, knowing that the newcomers were often racialized colonial laborers, the companies exploited them, taking advantage of their vulnerabilities to overwork and underpay them. As David Byrne explained, recruiters generally preferred these crewmen and their Arab counterparts for firemen and trimmer positions because "they could be made to work overtime without being paid for it."[342] In any case, employers' preference for Somali laborers made it easier for the boarding house owners to connect recruiters with their desperate clients.

However, this does not mean that housekeepers' efforts were always benevolent. Sometimes, they gave recruiters "backhanders" to secure jobs for their men.[343] In return, their clients would pay them a small percentage of their earnings after their return from sea.[344] Some scholars have framed this exchange as "exploitation" by the housekeepers.[345] The practice might be exploitative—even illegal—if viewed from an outsider's perspective. However, given the complex entanglements and informal exchanges these men maintained, it's important to consider other interpretations. For instance, it is possible to view such arrangements as mutually beneficial. After all, boarding house owners and their clients seldom adhered to Western-style

[342] Byrne, "The 1930 'Arab Riot' in South Shields," 263.

[343] Byrne, "The 1930 'Arab Riot' in South Shields," 263.

[344] Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 142.

[345] Byrne, "The 1930 'Arab riots' in South Shields," 267.

landlord-tenant agreements. Theirs was a much more fluid contract, based on traditional practices and mutual understanding.

Forming Interracial Unions

The Butetown boarding houses were crucial spaces in which migrant laborers and British working-class women—most but not all white—formed interracial relationships, marriages, and cohabitations. The women either resided in the dockland neighborhood or worked as domestic servants and bookkeepers in the Somali and Arab lodging houses. Here, they came in contact with colonial seafarers who had stayed in the same houses in between voyages. In the 1920s, Sarah Slapper, that Russian immigrant who worked at the boarding house on Nelson Street, met Moosa Hersi in the same lodge. She came to Britain with her family in 1898 at the age of six.[346] Slapper and her family were among an estimated 120,000 to 150,000 Eastern European Jews who, between 1881 and 1914, fled religious persecution and economic turmoil and put down their roots in Britain. During this period, nearly 3 million more Eastern European Jewish refugees established themselves in various Western European countries.[347] Slapper's parents first resided in London, where they established a tailor shop and raised their children. When Slapper was in her early twenties, she relocated to Cardiff, joining the growing Somali, Arab, and Caribbean migrant populations. In Butetown, she worked for various boarding houses, cleaning the rooms and doing the dishes and laundry.

Slapper was one of many white women who served in Somali and Arab boarding houses across British dockside neighborhoods. But their responsibilities were not limited to scrubbing

[346] "Interview with Stella Hersi."

[347] David Dee, "'The Sunshine of Manly Sports and Pastimes': Sport and the Integration of Jewish Refugees in Britain, 1895-1914," *Immigrants and Minorities* 30, no. 2–3 (2012), 321.

floors and making beds. Because lodging owners were often unlettered, the women took on the management side of the businesses, keeping records of the comings and goings of their clients, reading and responding to correspondence, and assisting with the license application processes. In fact, their role in these businesses was so crucial that local authorities considered it when deciding whom to license. For instance, when an Arab man named Said Kaid requested license renewal in March 1930, the granting authority relied heavily on Alice Olney, a fifty-six-year-old white woman who had worked for Kaid for the previous six months. Olney was married to Frank Olney, "an old aged pensioner." During her tenure at the lodge, which housed "a good number of Arabs," the business was well managed. In deciding whether to renew the license, the authority acknowledged that Kaid was "illiterate," an indication that he was somehow incapable of running the establishment, even though all of his clients were Arab and he could have managed the business with no problem. In the end, the authority decided to overlook Kaid's illiteracy problem so long as "the records will be kept by Mrs Olney."[348]

Like Olney, Slapper worked at various seamen's lodges in Cardiff, including the one on Nelson Street, where she met Hersi. As was the case for most migrant-run houses, the lodge was an important spot for Somali laborers. Here, they slept, ate, prayed, and played card games. Perhaps the housekeepers frequently ran into these men in the lodging courtyards, exchanging flirtatious glances. Or maybe they served tea and snacks as the men passionately roared and howled with every win or loss of their card and dice games. In any case, the boarding houses provided both Somali men and white women plenty of opportunities to interact. One day, as Slapper performed her cleaning tasks at the boarding house, her eye caught Hersi, a seafarer who

[348] Letter from Detective Robert Fleming to the Deputy Chief Constable, Cardiff City Police, March 31, 1930, DCONC/1/1/6, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

was born in the same year she was. Like many Somali and Adenese migrants, he joined the colonial maritime economy that eventually brought him to Cardiff. Although Slapper and Hersi belonged to two different racial and religious groups, their shared experience as migrants in a working-class community was enough to convince Slapper that he was the one. Soon after she laid eyes on Hersi, Slapper told everyone around her, "I'm going to marry that man."[349] And marry she did. Together, the couple had four children—Stella, Omar, Ali, and Maria—and remained married until Hersi died at sea of an unknown cause in 1929.[350]

It was not only housekeepers who married migrant men they met in boarding houses; sometimes their daughters, sisters, or friends did so as well. These unions likely occurred with the approval or arrangement—direct or indirect—of the housekeepers, who could attest to the character of their clients or bosses. For instance, just two years after Kaid applied for the license renewal in 1930, he informed local authorities that he had an additional resident in his lodge: a 23-year-old single mother named Matilda Maud Mules, with whom he intended to tie the knot. Mules, a Cardiff native, was the daughter of Olney, that reliable employee who managed Kaid's boarding house. Before meeting Kaid, Mules frequented the house her mother kept, where she met a man named Said Hassen, with whom she had a child. Later, Mules broke up with Hassen and married Kaid.[351] In twentieth-century Britain, a male-dominated world in which working-

[349] "Interview with Stella Hersi."

[350] Letter from Sara Hersi to Arthur Henderson, March 19, 1930,

[351] Letter from the Chief Sanitary Inspector to the Cardiff City Police, July 8, 1932, Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

class women remained shut out of employment opportunities,[352] these boarding houses provided women not just jobs but also financially stable partners with whom they could raise families.[353]

This happened so often that some observers mistakenly assumed that British women preferred Black men over their white counterparts. For instance, the police chief in Cardiff once explained that the "good wages" colonial migrants had earned and the properties they had purchased during the First World War gave them a lifestyle so mesmerizing that some white women threw themselves at them.[354] Little, the British anthropologist, echoed a similar sentiment when he noted that the "temporary" wartime prosperity that colonial migrants had enjoyed captured the "attentions of the fair sex."[355] Both the police chief and Little articulated their interpretations in the context of the post-war race riots. In any case, the argument that financial incentives were British women's driving motive to enter into partnerships with colonial migrant men undermines the deep commitments these couples shared. As partners, they nurtured their children, managed flourishing businesses, and spent lifetimes together. These marriages or cohabitations, needless to say, were in no way unique: British women had for centuries married foreign men, including Germans and Swedish immigrants, who came before and after colonial workers of color. Their choices to enter into partnerships with colonial migrants were universal. In twentieth-century British patriarchal society, they picked whomever they found faithful,

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[352] Mary Abbott, review of *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918–1950*, (review no. 574) https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/574. Date accessed March 20, 2024.

[353] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 57.

[354] Letter from the Cardiff City Police Chief Constable to the Home Office's Under Secretary of State, 13 June 1919, HO 45/11017/377969/5, The National Archives, London, United Kingdom. https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/1919-race-riots/1919-race-riots-source-2/

[355] Little, *Negroes in Britain*, 57.

generous, hardworking, and reliable. As one white woman once remarked about her migrant husband, "He has always been kind to me. He treats me as a husband would."[356] These relationships were no more or no less successful than those of other racial groups: like all partnerships, theirs shifted with life's ebbs and flows. Sometimes, they ended prematurely; other times, only death did them part.

These partnerships were in many ways crucial for Somalis and other mobile workers. For instance, the marital and cohabiting unions provided seafarers—transients by nature—with domiciles to which they returned and stayed between voyages. As a result, dockland areas like Butetown were no longer mere destinations for jobs. They became important spaces that housed seafarers' wives and children and properties. If the migrants were nothing more than laborers when they first arrived in Britain, they became fathers and husbands and uncles and in-laws. The institution of marriage thus cemented Somali migrants' presence, transforming them from mere transients to permanent residents. In addition, in the eyes of the state, married migrant men were deemed more respectable compared to their single peers, whom the government viewed as drifters. As husbands and fathers, they were considered responsible members of society. This reputable status helped married migrants access numerous institutional benefits, including lodging licenses, citizenship, and passports. This was because, as Tabili has explained, some government officials "tended to give married men the benefit of the doubt" in certain bureaucratic processes.[357]

[356] Tabili, *Global Migrations*, 222.

[357] Tabili, *Global Migrations*, 221.

Interracial unions led to the formation of multiracial families across British dockside settlements. In Butetown, as elsewhere, the boarding houses that once sheltered only migrant laborers transformed gradually into family dwellings, where multiethnic children came of age. These children and their parents often lived in the lodging houses with the seafarers, whom the kids referred to as "uncles" out of respect. Stella, the daughter of Slapper and Hersi, grew up in a three-story house with six bedrooms. The family rented out some of their rooms to migrant laborers who frequented the sea.[358] Stella helped her mother clean the rooms, scrub the floors, and safeguard the seafarers' belongings in their absence. In the shared spaces of the lodges, the seamen were more than just tenants. They watched over family matters and cared for the children as their own, especially when fathers were away at sea. Steve Khaireh, the son of a Somali father and a British mother, recalled his experience with the boarding house where he was born and came of age. "There was a community," he said of the lodge. "Everybody was close, all the seamen, and I felt like they were my uncles. They looked out for you."[359]

Transnational Family Formations

Although the boarding houses and the multiracial families they housed were crucial factors in creating a permanent Somali presence in Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the laborers never really severed ties with their homeland. They maintained transnational connections with loved ones in British Somaliland, sending them money, gifts, and personal news. Some even returned occasionally to reunite with their families. Somalis shared

[358] "Interview with Stella Hersi."

[359] Steve Khaireh (son of a Somali migrant worker) in conversation with Ibrahim Hirsi on August 10, 2022 in Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

this phenomenon with virtually all other labor migrants—Arabs, Chinese, Algerians, Turks, Mexicans—in Europe and America. Despite establishing lives and deep social networks abroad, as sociologist Ernesto Castaneda has argued, the bond that tied the laborers with their families back home remained strong.[360] After all, their migration abroad was never meant to last forever. For Somalis, the main goal was to accumulate enough money to invest in the pastoral communities they had left behind. Or so they thought.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Western writers wove into their accounts glimpses of Somali returnees they had encountered in Arabia and Somaliland. Before returning home, these Somalis lived and worked in places like Aden, Port Said, Bombay, Cape Town, Cardiff, London, New York, and Baltimore. Herbert Vivian, who wrote about the subject at the turn of the century, documented his observations of the Somali migrants he encountered. He posited that the Somali men journeyed to Aden for three specific reasons: "to acquire wealth and wives and experience." Soon after they had accomplished their mission, he added, they crawled right back "to their own gray land."[361] Some four decades later, Gordon Waterfield echoed a similar sentiment about Somali migrants from Europe and America. In his view, the migrants were either incapable of or unwilling to establish permanent residency outside their familiar "native village," despite how far they had traveled. "Having earned good money abroad and tasted the pleasure of the west," he remarked, "the Somali returns to Somaliland in his

[360] Ernesto Castaneda, "Living in Limbo: Transnational Households, Remittances and Development," *International Migration*, 51 (2013), e13.

[361] Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia: Through the Lion-land to the Court of the Lion of Judah* (London: C. A. Pearson, ltd., 1901), 59.

western finery, and after entertaining his friends handsomely he puts on the native *tobe* and goes back to his native village, investing his capital in camels and sheep."[362]

In their narratives, however, Vivian and Waterfield left unexplained the root causes that might have contributed to the migrant laborers' return home. Did they go back out of love for their native villages? Or did the persisting racist policies and practices of twentieth-century Britain, Australia, and America force them to go back to their homeland? It was no coincidence that the return of these men coincided with the many harsh anti-immigration laws that took root across Western industrial powers. In Australia, for instance, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which came to be known as the White Australia Policy, barred Asians and other migrants of color.[363] In the United States, the Immigration Act of 1924 excluded non-white immigrants from entering the country through a racist quota system.[364] In the United Kingdom, the Coloured Alien Seamen Order of 1925 targeted laborers of color, leaving many Somalis unemployed and destitute in the post-war years.[365] Indeed, race and racism shaped immigration policies globally. These powers lured in and exploited migrants of color when needed for the labor force. However, they soon became dispensable when demand in the workforce declined. In the case of Britain, the same people whom the empire hailed as heroes during the war became "aliens," subjected to humiliation and deportation, despite their legal rights to live in the mother country

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[362] Gordon Waterfield, *Morning Will Come* (London: John Murray, 1944), 58.

[363] David C. Atkinson, "The White Australia Policy, the British Empire, and the World," *Britain and the World*, 8, no. 2 (2015): 204–224.

[364] Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 78-79; Margot Canady, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2009) 33-35.

[365] Laura Tabili, "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925," *The Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (1994): 54–98.

as British subjects. Thus, contrary to the assumptions that portrayed Somali migrants' return home as a personal choice, it is likely that exclusionary immigration policies, as well as racial segregation and discrimination laws, forced the migrants to seek refuge in their old pastoral life.

That said, not all migrants were forced to return home. Many went back to reunite with their loved ones, especially their wives and children. Unlike the migrants who married or cohabited with British women in Britain, these men maintained long-distance marriages with Somali women in Somalia and Arabia. The experiences of Artan Said, Ibrahim Hersi, and Ali Haji Hassan serve as important case studies for understanding the transnational networks Somali laborers maintained. Born in 1884, Said worked aboard British merchant steamships from 1914 to 1955. For most of this time, he stayed in boarding houses in Cardiff between voyages. But unlike many Somali migrants, Said did not start a family with a British woman. Instead, he kept a wife, with whom he had two children, in Aden.[366] Likewise, Hersi, the entrepreneur who ran the boarding house in Cardiff, maintained a family outside Britain. As he explained to a detective in the license application process, he had a wife and two children in Somaliland.[367] Hassan also kept transnational family connections. In 1956, he reported to authorities that he had a wife in Aden, where his father ran a business.[368]

The significant family ties that Hersi, Hassan, and others maintained with their homeland lay bare the true nature of twentieth-century Somali migrations: they often undertook back-and-forth journeys between the homeland and Britain. And this was the case not just for those who

[366] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, November 13, 1956. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[367] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, May 17, 1964. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

[368] Letter from the Cardiff City Police, November 13, 1956. Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

maintained immediate families back home. It was also so for those who purchased homes and put down roots in Britain. Indeed, the migrants' transnational connections indicate that they viewed the people and the places they had left behind not merely as a thing of the past but as relevant markers of their identity, which sustained them in Britain and elsewhere. The migrants nurtured their bond to their homeland in various ways. For example, they sent money and gifts and even returned there, often taking with them stories about the strange lands they had traversed, their hard-earned savings, and the latest clothing fashion trends: shirts and suits, celluloid collars and ties, leather boots, and jackets.[369] For many, the visit lasted only a few weeks or months, after which they returned to work in Britain.

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Until the 1950s and early 1960s, the married Somali migrants in Britain could be grouped into two main categories: those who established families with British wives and others who maintained cross-border households. But by mid-century, a third group emerged: men who brought their Somali wives to Britain. This marked a significant shift in British immigration history. Prior to this period, colonial migrants who arrived on British shores were primarily single men seeking work. Then, in 1948, the empire enacted the British Nationality Act, which granted colonial migrants of color the right to enter the country legally as British citizens.[370] This was partly because, in this post-war period, the government needed workers to help rebuild the country's economy and infrastructure.[371] Somali migrant laborers, therefore, took advantage of

[369] Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, 23.

[370] Randall Hansen, "The Politics of Citizenship in 1940s Britain: The British Nationality Act," *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 1 (1999), 67.

[371] Zembe, "Deceptive diplomacy and racism in post-war Black British immigration," 91.

this policy and brought their partners and Somali-born children. These women, like their husbands, hailed from pastoral and agricultural communities in Somalia, where they had reared goats and sheep and performed domestic work as children. Others were born and came of age in Aden, which housed a large Somali labor force and entrepreneurial community. In their teenage years, they caught the eyes of Somali bachelors eager to get married. Some of these men had lived in British Somaliland or Aden, where they participated in the colonial economy or operated their own businesses. Others returned from overseas to get married—often through family arrangements.

In 1959, when Ali Aw Noor left Somaliland for Britain, he was married to Ibado Hashi Roble, with whom he had a son. Before his departure, Noor owned and operated a shop in Hargeisa that sold groceries and household goods. Some years later, he relinquished the business and followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Hassan, who had lived in Cardiff as a seaman. Here, Noor secured a job as a park attendant, performing tasks that included clearing pathways, maintaining equipment, painting fences, and mowing grass. A year or so later, he left the park to become a forklift driver at Llanwern Steelworks, located five miles east of Newport, the second-largest city in Wales after Cardiff. Noor chose this job because Steelworks was a reputable company that provided decent pay and competitive benefits. Soon, Noor purchased a house in Newport with his brother and brought his wife and son from Somalia. Ibado became the first Somali woman to set foot in Newport and perhaps in Britain.[372]

Two years later, Madi Ali Gass took a similar path to get his wife and son to Britain. Born in 1925, Gass grew up in a village near Hargeisa. Like most young Somali boys, he

[372] Dr. Ahmed Ali in discussion with the author.

attended Quranic schools, where he learned to read and write Arabic. In his early teens, after his father's death, Gass entered the workforce to support his family. He first worked as a peddler, "selling homemade cakes and other odd things." Once he had saved enough, Gass purchased a truck to transport goods between Somalia and Ethiopia.[373] In 1948, he left for Britain, chasing the same dreams that had drawn his peers since the turn of the century. After a stint in Cardiff and Sheffield, Gass established himself in Birmingham, where he became a steelworker for the General Electric Company. In the two decades Gass worked at the GEC, he used his vacation to visit Somalia. In 1960, he met and married Amran Akli Ahmed. Two years later, Gass brought her and their infant son to Birmingham.

Like Noor and Gass, Arriyeh Ali brought his wife to Britain. Before coming to Liverpool in 1937, Ali worked at his family farm in British Somaliland. As a teenager, he followed the stream of migrants seeking employment opportunities in Arabia. After working numerous odd jobs in Aden, Ali secured work as a fireman on a British steamship bound for Liverpool. Here, he settled with Somali laborers and continued his seafaring job. Between stints on ships, Ali stayed in Liverpool, which was home to diverse ethnic groups from Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Yemen. Like most migrants, Ali remained in contact with family and relatives and sometimes returned home whenever he could. In the late 1940s, Ali married a Somali woman in his village. By the early fifties, he brought her to Liverpool, where the couple had their first child, Adam. Some years later, the young family moved to Cardiff to be closer to the more established Somali community. Here, the couple had three more children.[374]

[373] Zainab Mahdi Gass in discussion with the author.

[374] Nasir Adam Arriyeh in discussion with the author.

The arrival of these wives—the first Somali women to settle in Britain—represented a new dawn for the community. Their presence further fortified the bond that tied Somalis to Britain and cemented the community's permanence. For instance, the Somali women were integral in maintaining the Somali tradition and culture in their household in ways that the white wives of Somali men did not—and could not. Indeed, most of the children who came out of exogamous unions "disappeared" into the dominant culture. As soon as they transitioned into adolescence, their fathers' origins and traditions had little relevance. This was because their fathers were often away for work, while their British mothers, central in their upbringing, had little understanding of the Somali culture. Conversely, the Somali mothers made it their mission to educate their kids about their parents' origins and teach them the Somali language and culture. In addition, these mothers maintained connections with the homeland, often traveling back and forth with their children. The kids then returned to Britain with a deep sense of their identity: they were Muslim, Black, British, and Somali—all at once.

If British dockside neighborhoods, especially Butetown, mainly attracted single Somali men at the turn of the twentieth century, they blossomed into bustling family dwellings a few decades later. The boarding houses that once housed seafarers became households where multiethnic children came of age. By the late 1950s, the community boasted children from both exogamous and endogamous unions. Despite their mothers' racial or ethnic backgrounds, the children attended the same schools, played in the same playgrounds, and biked on the same streets. Today, more than a century after the first Somali diaspora was established in Cardiff, Somalis still maintain a prominent presence. In addition to the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of former colonial laborers, the city has drawn many recently arrived immigrants

and refugees from Somalia. In a way, the twentieth-century migrant workers created a bridge that contemporary Somalis still cross to reach Britain.

CHAPTER FOUR

Settled in America, Fighting for Somalia: Early Somali Laborers and Their Role in the Homeland's Decolonization Struggle

> Once I met a tall lean Somali who spoke to me in American. He had lived in America after sailing the world as a stoker, and had been a cocktail barman in Baltimore for some years. …This was Jibreel, Wallie Richie's interpreter.
>
> —Gerald Hanely, *Warriors, Life and Death among the Somalis*, 1971.

On March 24, 1919, federal immigration officials in Cleveland, Ohio, sent Owad Mousse to the Ellis Island detention center. It was the beginning of a deportation process that would take the Somali back "to the kraals of his fathers in British Somaliland." Mousse had arrived in the United States in the mid-1910s as a steamship laborer but soon found himself unemployed. In New York City, he spent most of the first two years going in and out of jail—apparently for being too poor to support himself. "Each time he was released," the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reported, "he drifted further West and wound up here [in Cleveland] as a ward of the Associated Charities." Early on, the paper continued, those who encountered Mousse mistook him for "an ordinary American negro," until he spoke in the limited British English he had picked up while working in the maritime economy. Once immigration officials discovered he was a foreign-born Black laborer in violation of the so-called "public charge" rule, they moved quickly to deport him. In his final hours in Cleveland, Mousse reportedly expressed his gratitude to immigration inspector A. J. Fluckey, who was in charge of his deportation. "I will tell my king about you and

he will remember your kindness," Mousse promised Fluckey. "Perhaps my king will send you an elephant tusk."[375]

How Mousse felt at the moment of his deportation, we will never know. Nor will we know whether he actually spoke those parting words to the person overseeing his removal. But one thing is certain: no one travels halfway around the world just to be expelled for being poor. As a seafarer, Mousse likely abandoned the lonely, demanding, and oftentimes dangerous engine room duties in favor of onshore jobs that offered a more traditional work routine.[376] Yet in an increasingly racist and anti-immigrant climate in twentieth-century America, that dream never materialized. After several humiliating years in New York and Ohio, the Somali may have felt some relief on his way out, knowing that he was being returned to a familiar place where, at the very least, he would be fed rather than jailed. And if he did say those words to the official, Mousse—wittingly or not—echoed the racial stereotypes many held about the African continent: a wild arena where animals and people roamed in unison and where natural resources like ivory were bountiful. This may help explain why he promised the deporting official an elephant tusk as a token of thanks.

In any case, Mousse was among hundreds of Somali migrant laborers who lived and worked in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. They were part of an

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[375] "Somaliland Native Begins Trek Home," *Plain Dealer*, March 25, 1919.

[376] As discussed in Chapter Two, life at sea—especially for those working in the engine room—was difficult and often deadly. Crew members worked long hours, lived at sea for months on end, contracted—and died from—diseases such as tuberculosis. For these reasons, it was not uncommon for seafarers to abandon maritime life for onshore employment. See, for example, Michael Quinlan, "Precarious and Hazardous Work: The Health and Safety of Merchant Seamen 1815-1935," *Social History* 38, no. 3 (2013): 281–307; Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013; Paul Davenport, "Dangerous, Courageous, Invisible: Non-White Seafarers in the Merchant Navy of the 1940s and 1950s," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 4, no. 1, (2011) 51–64; Jeffrey A. Weiss, "Maritime Disasters through the Ages," *Journal of Maritime Law and Commerce* 32, no. 2 (2001): 215–40.

estimated 10,000 colonial workers in various parts of Africa, Arabia, and Europe. Most of the U.S. Somalis had worked aboard British steamships before leaving the sea for onshore employment. They were integral to the global maritime economy and worked alongside laborers from European colonies in Africa, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean islands. As natives of British Somaliland, these workers traversed transnational waterways, often toiling in the engine rooms as firemen and trimmers. Once they reached American shores, they settled in northeastern and midwestern industrial metropolitan regions, including Buffalo, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Youngstown, Ohio; and Detroit, Michigan. In each of these areas, the migrants secured low-wage jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors, becoming part of a racialized and exploited labor force composed of African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African migrants.[377]

[377] Mahmood Faheh, oral history interview by Ibrahim Hirsi, October 2021; Suleiman in discussion with the author; Duale Mohamed Hassan, oral history interview by Ibrahim Hirsi, January 2021; Hussein, *My Role in the Foundation of the Somali Nation-State*, 103-4.



SOMALILAND NATIVE BEGINS TREK HOME

Deported to African Home After Telling His Story to Immigration Officer.

Owad Mousse yesterday began the long trek to the kraals of his fathers in British Somaliland, on the east coast of Africa.

In what little English Mousse had picked up on British tramp steamers, he told Immigration Inspector J. A. Fluckey that he had shipped as a seaman from Berbera, Somaliland, on a British merchantman several years ago and had been a wanderer since.

In New York he had been lost and people taking him for an ordinary

Figure 10: The story about Oward Mousse's deportation from Ohio to British Somaliland. "Somaliland Native Begins Trek Home," *Plain Dealer*, March 25, 1919.

This chapter excavates the history of these early Somali migrants. It examines the economic and political forces that brought them to the United States, especially in the years surrounding the two world wars, during which the majority arrived. Before setting foot in the U.S., some had spent years in British dockside neighborhoods, including those in Cardiff and Liverpool, toiling in the belly of British steamships. These voyages took them around the world, and by the early decades of the twentieth century, many chose to leave their ships to pursue industrial jobs in the United States. Their numbers grew from a handful to hundreds during the First World War, as laborers like Owad Mousse were drawn to the wartime production boom. Indeed, with millions of Americans enlisted in the armed forces, the demand for working hands

in manufacturing and service sectors opened rare opportunities for women and workers of color, both American and foreign-born.[378] The arrival of Somalis in the industrial heartland coincided with the Great Migration, which brought millions of Black Americans from the South. Like other laborers of color, these southerners were often restricted to the hardest and lowest-paying jobs.[379]

The chapter also examines how Somali migrants negotiated the racist immigration laws that excluded migrants of color. As natives of a British-protected territory, Somalis were technically citizens of the British Empire and should have been allowed to enter the United States. However, they often could not prove their citizenship, as the only documents they carried were the so-called discharge books, which served as employment credentials for seafarers. These documents allowed them to enter the country temporarily—often between voyages.[380] To obtain permanent residency or extend their stay, U.S. officials required migrants to present valid passports.[381] For Somalis, even for colonial subjects already living in Britain, securing such documents was difficult.[382] For instance, those applying for passports had to prove their

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[378] Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1-3; Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (Penguin Books, 2010), 152-200; Christopher L. Foote, Warren C Whatley, and Gavin Wright, "Arbitraging a Discriminatory Labor Market: Black Workers at the Ford Motor Company, 1918–1947," *Journal of Labor Economics* 21, no. 3 (2003): 497.

[379] William P. Jones, "The Essential Worker: A History from the Progressive Era to COVID-19," *Labor in Working-Class History* 20, no. 4 (2023), 9; Duchess Harris and Kate A. Conley, *The Great Migration*, North Mankato: Minnesota: Abdo Publishing, 2020; Christopher Robert Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity: Black Migration to Chicago, 1900-1919*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

[380] Jenkinson, Jacqueline, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2020), 107.

[381] Acting Secretary of State to the Diplomatic and Consular Officers, "Joint Order Requiring Passports and Certain Information from Aliens Who Desire to Enter the United States during the War," *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918*, Supplement 2: The World War, doc. 922, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp02/d922.

[382] Jacqueline, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War*, 107.

subjecthood, in part, by demonstrating that they were born in a British colony or protectorate—an especially cumbersome process for former pastoralists who did not keep formal birth records.[383] Moreover, the application fees and the maze of paperwork made the process more challenging. As a result, most Somalis entered the country only one way: by deserting their ships. Then they disappeared into crowded pavements in places like Baltimore and Boston and New York City.[384] This kind of intentional maneuvering around immigration laws was also common among other ethnic seafarers, including those from the Caribbean.[385] Upon disembarkation, however, their lack of legal status soon rendered them undocumented, exposing them to racial profiling, limited job opportunities, and the constant threat of deportation.

By the 1940s, Somali migrants had established what would become the first Somali diaspora in the heart of Black cultural and political life: Harlem. This chapter traces how that community took shape in this Black mecca and the role they played in the struggle for Somali independence at the end of the Second World War. By then, activists in Somalia had been mobilizing under the Somali Youth League, the country's first and most effective anti-colonial organization, which regularly sent representatives to Europe and the United States to advocate its political agenda.[386] In cities like London and New York, Somali migrants were often the first to meet these envoys. In Harlem, they offered financial support and connected them with African

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[383] Diane Frost, Frost, Diane. "Racism, Work and Unemployment: West African Seamen in Liverpool 1880s-1960s," *Immigrants & Minorities* 13, no. 2–3 (1994), 28.

[384] John Cameron, letter to Esmé Howard, British Ambassador to the United States, August 13, 1929, CO 725/21/1, National Archives, London, United Kingdom.

[385] Rose Mary Allen, '"Learning to be a Man': Afro-Caribbean Seamen and Maritime Workers From Curacao in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," *Caribbean Studies* 39, no. (2011): 43–64.

[386] Cedric Barnes, "The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea, c.1946-48" *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): 277–91.

American journalists, intellectuals, and anti-colonial organizers.[387] These working-class laborers, as this chapter demonstrates, helped sow the seeds of solidarity between Black Americans and Somali anti-colonial activists—a relationship that endured through Somalia's independence in 1960. This history challenges the assumption that has treated Somali migration to the United States as a recent phenomenon, revealing instead a much longer history of Somalis' involvement in global maritime labor, anti-colonial politics, and Black transnationalism.

Lured by Promising Job Opportunities

The presence of Somali people in the United States dates back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a small group of seafarers left their vessels in search of job opportunities in the growing industrial economy. Their migration began in the 1890s as a trickle—no more than a dozen individuals—but increased to hundreds by the mid-twentieth century.[388] Prior to this period, most Somali laborers were confined to cities along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. They lived and worked in places like Aden, Yemen; Port Said, Egypt; and Djibouti. Some labored as stevedores, loading and unloading colonial merchant ships; some were domestic workers, street vendors, interpreters, soldiers, and police officers; and others were traders and boatmen, importing and exporting dry goods and livestock and passengers across Arabian and East African coastal cities.[389] Then came the 1900s, when British shipowners began

[387] Faheh in discussion with the author, October 2021; Suleiman in discussion with the author; Hassan in discussion with the author, January 2021; Hussein, *My Role in the Foundation of the Somali Nation-State*, 103-4; Abdi Ismail Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats: Somalia's Aden A. Osman and Abdirazak H. Hussen* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 48.

[388] This figure refers to the estimated number of individuals present in the U.S. at any time between the 1890s and 1960; it does not imply that they were all in the same place or present simultaneously. Faheh in discussion with the author, October 2021; Suleiman in discussion with the author; Hassan in discussion with the author, January 2021.

[389] Edward A. Alpers, "The Somali Community at Aden in the Twentieth Century," *Northeast African Studies*8, no. 2/3 (1986), 144-68; Pankhurst Richard, "The Trade of the Gulf of Aden Ports of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3, no. 1 (1965): 36–81.

recruiting thousands of Somalis and Arabs to crew in the bowels of cargo steamships. As firemen and trimmers, laboring alongside other colonial subjects, they cut coal and fed the furnaces to fuel vessels that transported everything from people and armaments to dry goods and grains.[390]

After years aboard steamships, some Somali seafarers eventually settled in the United States as part of broader internal and external migration in the country.[391] Their decisions to leave the sea were probably easy given the forbidding conditions they had endured in the engine rooms: the deadly soot that filled their breathing air, the extreme heat that blew from seething furnaces, the poor wages paid for the tedious fireman and trimmer jobs, and the racist treatment they faced at the hands of their bosses.[392] To be Black aboard British steamships meant enduring particularly harsh conditions, a fact that numerous maritime scholars illustrated in depictions of a hierarchical structure that placed laborers of color at the bottom of the ship.[393] For instance, historian Alan Gregor Cobley has explained that Black laborers were disproportionately confined to the engine rooms "largely because of a racist belief on the part of shipowners that blacks

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[390] Gerold Krozewski, "Hidden Seamen from East Africa: Somali Firemen, European Steamers, and Global Labor Markets, 1880s–1930s," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2022): 21-43; Laura Tabili, Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 207-8.

[391] Other laborers included Arabs from Ottoman provinces in the Middle East, whites from eastern and southern Europe, Blacks from the Caribbean islands, Asians from the Indian subcontinent, and African Americans from the southern states. See Dominique Cadinot, "Integrated Laborers but Marginal Figures: The Untold Story of Early Syrian-American Factory Workers" *Labor History* 63, no. 2 (2022): 237.

[392] See also Chapter Two of this dissertation; Jonathan Hyslop, "British Steamship Workers, c. 1875–1945: Precarious before Precarity," *Labour History* 116, no. 1 (2019): 23-4; Quinlan, "Precarious and hazardous work"; Frank T. Bullen, *The Man of the Merchant Service* (*New York: Frederick A. Stokes company, 1900)*, 319.

[393] Laura Tabili, *"We Ask for British Justice": Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Sara Caputo, "'Complexions of Every Varied Hue': Racial Beliefs, Biopower, and Acclimatisation," in *Foreign Jack Tars: The British Navy and Transnational Seafarers during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, 117–42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Jonathan Hyslop, "Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c.1880—1945," *Journal of Asian and African Studies (Leiden)* 44, no. 1 (2009): 49–67.

worked better in the stifling heat than whites."[394] Behind this logic was the distorted assumption that Africans could somehow weather the elements better than whites because they came from tropical countries. That is, if they or their ancestors had endured the sweltering temperatures under the African sun, they surely could handle the hellish conditions in the engine rooms.

Escaping these brutal steamship conditions, Somalis abandoned the sea life for jobs in the United States.[395] As was the case for other immigrants and migrants entering the country, New York served as a natural first stop, thanks in part to New York Harbor, which was the primary East Coast shipping port for goods and passengers. It was the country's main immigration station, where federal authorities worked around the clock to carefully winnow the crowds, taking in those whom they deemed desirable and tossing out the rest.[396] This was the same period, 1880-1930, in which the United States saw a massive wave of immigration not just from the usual northern and western regions of Europe but also from the continent's southern and eastern regions, as well as from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.[397] Indeed, approximately 143,000 Black migrants—most of them West Indians—entered through Ellis Island during this period.[398] Another unknown number of Black migrants, Somalis included, also jumped ship in New York and in various other U.S. port cities, quietly vanishing into the crowded streets. In

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[394] Alan Gregor Cobley, "That Turbulent Soil: Seafarers, the 'Black Atlantic,' and Afro-Caribbean Identity," in *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 159.

[395] Faheh in discussion with the author, October 2021; Suleiman in discussion with the author, June 2024.

[396] Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (Harper Perennial, 2010), 14.

[397] Pyong Gap Min, "Introduction," in *Mass Migration to the United States: Classical and Contemporary Periods*, ed. by Pyong Gap Min (AltaMira Press, 2002), 1.

[398] Ronald Bayor, *Encountering Ellis Island: How European Immigrants Entered America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 17; Cannato, *American Passage*, 404.

New York, after passing through Ellis Island, Somalis often made their way to Buffalo, then one of the largest industrial cities in the country.[399] The city housed numerous manufacturing companies—including Bethlehem Steel, Buffalo Forge Company, and Niagara Machine & Tool Works—all of which drew laborers from Europe, Greater Syria, and Yemen.[400]

One of the main factors contributing to the arrival of Somalis in the United States was the Great War, which opened new employment opportunities for laborers of color and women who had limited job prospects in post-war America. In addition to Somalis and other foreign-born migrants of color, these jobs drew African Americans escaping racial violence as well as unemployment and underemployment in the Jim Crow South. The Jamaican American poet and writer Claude McKay remembered what this era looked like for Black laborers in the North. "There was less race discrimination in the ranks of labor and factory gates swung open to the Negro worker," he explained. "There was plenty of money to spare."[401] While McKay's keen observation explains the emergence of unprecedented opportunities for American laborers of color, it is important to remember that racism and anti-Blackness were also rampant in the North. It was no coincidence that Black workers were often confined to low-level jobs in the service and public works sectors. As labor historian William P. Jones has noted, "despite the seemingly endless demand for their labor, Black men and women were still restricted to low-wage jobs that offered little opportunity for advancement."[402] These laborers mainly held positions in cleaning,

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[399] Robert Holder, *The Beginnings of Buffalo Industry*. Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, 1960.

[400] Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977; Eugene Obidinski, "Polish Americans in Buffalo: The Transformation of an Ethnic Subcommunity," *The Polish Review* 14, no. 1 (1969): 28-39.

[401] Claude McKay, "Garvey as a Negro Moses," *The Liberator* 5 no. 4, April (1922), 9.

[402] Jones, "The Essential Worker," 20.

bartending, housekeeping, and elevator operation. In essence, these workers served as the pulse of the U.S. economy as millions fought in the war overseas. No doubt the workers McKay reported as enjoying abundant employment opportunities were mainly Caribbean and Black Americans from the South. However, we now know that Somalis, lured by the same menial jobs, also reached America's northern and midwestern shores about this time.

Among these Somalis was Mohamed Jama, who caught the attention of *The New York Age* in the fall of 1915. The paper offered a quick synopsis of the life of the Somali: He was born in British Somaliland, had lived in New York for three weeks, and was attending night school there.[403] *The New York Age* was one of dozens of Black-owned media outlets that covered a broad range of issues concerning Black people in the United States and beyond. Since the 1827 founding of the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, the Black press has worked to amplify Black voices and deconstruct racist narratives about their communities. This mission was especially crucial during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because, in the words of historian Patrick Scott Washburn, "white newspapers virtually refused to cover blacks unless they were athletic stars, entertainers, or criminals." As a result, he continued, "blacks were forced to read their own papers to learn about everyday black life in communities across the country."[404] It was because of this conviction that we now know—if only briefly—about the experience of Jama. He likely worked as a fireman before leaving the sea behind. Unlike most Somali migrants who remained stuck in menial jobs, Jama was determined

[403] "News of Greater New York," *New York Age*, October 7, 1915.

[404] Patrick Scott Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 5; D'Weston Haywood, *Let Us Make Men: The Twentieth-Century Black Press and a Manly Vision for Racial Advancement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 13.

to improve his employment prospects through formal training, probably in the steel industry. In the same decade, another Somali, Heresy Roblay, came aboard the SS *Masonia*, established permanent residency in New York, and secured employment on American ships, working as a fireman or engine wiper. Some years later, Roblay became a naturalized U.S. citizen.[405]

* * *

On a warm summer afternoon, I met Abdi Mohamed Suleiman—one of many interlocutors I consulted alongside newspaper accounts, official sources, and crew lists—in a quiet café nestled in Minneapolis' Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Suleiman stood over six feet tall, with close-cropped gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard, speaking accented English with ease. Though we had spoken twice over the phone, this was our first in-person meeting. This time, I was armed with a recorder, a notebook, and a host of questions about the migrants he had encountered some forty years earlier. But first, I wanted to understand his own journey to the United States and how he came into contact with the early migrants.

Suleiman arrived in 1982 on a student visa to study engineering at the City University of New York at the age of twenty-three. He was among thousands of Somali and other African students who sought higher education in the United States and the Soviet Union beginning in the early 1950s.[406] While these students primarily pursued education to improve their lives and

[405] Petitions For Naturalization From the U.S. District Court For the Southern District of New York, 1897-1944, Series: M1972; Roll: 1399, The National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, accessed in August 2024 via Ancestry.

[406] Anton Tarradellas, "African Students in the United States: Circulations, Politics and Transfers in the Global 60s," *Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports*, May 2020, https://shorturl.at/CaBEW; Lyubov Ivanova, "Somali Students in the Soviet Union (1960-1978)," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 18, no. 8 (2019), 71; Cawo Abdi, "The newest African Americans?: *Somali Struggles for Belonging, Bildhaan: An. International Journal of Somali Studies*, 11 no. 12 (2012), 95; Eric Burton, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and Africans' routes to higher education overseas, 1957–65" *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 1 (2020), 184-5.

contribute to their newly independent nations, the superpowers receiving them had their own agenda: to extend their influence across the rapidly decolonizing continent by training future leaders who, in return, would promote capitalist or communist ideologies at home.[407] Most students benefited from government scholarships, but Suleiman financed his education by working part-time between classes. He and several friends who arrived with him found an apartment in Harlem. Before his arrival, Suleiman was unaware of the existence of seafarers in the U.S. and was stunned when, on his first day in Harlem, he encountered an older Somali on 116th Street—at the time one of a few aging former seafarers who had lived in the country for decades. Later, Suleiman became interested in the histories and experiences of these seafarers. While most of the men he met had arrived after the Second World War, some had come decades earlier. Among the most prominent was Yousuf "Hajji Siteen" Ahmed, a leader and entrepreneur known for his generous support of new Somali migrants.

The recollections of Suleiman and others, however, confirmed my suspicions about the challenges of oral history methodology. Although every informant I spoke with regarding Somali migrants had either met or known of Hajji Siteen, their accounts differed in certain details. For instance, Suleiman told me that Hajji Siteen was among the first Somalis to arrive in the United States, placing his presence in New York around the turn of the twentieth century. Suleiman himself had never met Hajji Siteen, who died in the 1970s, but he learned about him through a

[407] Constantin Katsakioris, "The African Student Movement in the Soviet Union during the 1960s: Pan-Africanism and Communism in the Shadow of Nation-States" *Cold War History* 24, no. 1 (2024): 109–29;Tsvetkova Natalia *The Cold War in Universities: U.S. and Soviet Cultural Diplomacy, 1945-1990* (Leiden, Netherlands ; Brill, 2022); Constantin Katsakioris, "Return from the USSR: Soviet-Educated Africans, Politics and Work, 1960s-2000s" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 55, no. 2 (2021): 267–86; Burton, "Decolonization," 183; J.C. Harper, "Tom Mboya and the African Student Airlifts: Inclusion, Equity and Higher Education Among Kenyan Women and Men," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 9 (2017): 92; Maxim Matusevich, "Journeys of Hope: African Diaspora and the Soviet Society" *African Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (2008): 53–85.

friend named Farah Guyobe, who had known Hajji Siteen for decades. According to Suleiman, Guyobe worked as a seaman but left that life behind in Seattle in 1918 at the age of eighteen. Accompanying Guyobe was Arteh Ghalib, the future father of Omar Arteh Ghalib, a prominent figure in the Somali political scene from 1969 to 1991. After learning about the Somali migrant community in New York, Guyobe and Ghalib boarded a train from Seattle to Buffalo, where "hundreds of Somalis" held wage jobs in manufacturing factories. There, the men joined the laborers on the production lines.

One of my other interlocutors, Mahmood Fateh, who arrived in the U.S. in 1963 to study engineering at Montana State University, met Hajji Siteen and Guyobe in Harlem, where he visited during winter and summer breaks.[408] Fateh, a distant nephew of Hajji Siteen, recalled their stories differently. According to his version, Hajji Siteen and Guyobe, part of a large population of Somali migrants, labored in Yemen until the early 1910s. In 1911, they were recruited to fight for Italy in the Ottoman-Italian war over Trablusgarp, present-day Tripoli, the capital city of Libya.[409] Italy invaded the Ottoman province to extend its colonial empire into northern Africa. By 1880, as part of what came to be known as the Scramble for Africa, most of the continent had fallen under the control of European empires, particularly those of Britain, France, and Portugal. Italy joined this rush for African colonies, obtaining Eritrea in 1882 and portions of Somalia in 1889. In 1895, Italy tried in vain to consolidate Ethiopia into what it

[408] For many young Somali students dispersed across the country, Harlem was a preferred destination for two main reasons. First, students from smaller states often wanted to spend their breaks in big cities, and as the largest city in the country, New York City was an obvious choice. Second, NYC was home to Harlem, a historic Black neighborhood with a sizable community of Somali laborers. Here, students could stay with relatives, share rooms, and enjoy meals and culture.

[409] Mahmood Fateh (nephew and cousin of Somali seafarers) in discussion with the author, October 2021; Abdi Hashi (a relative of Somali seafarers) in discussion with the author, October 2021.

envisioned to be Italian East Africa, but suffered a humiliating defeat.[410] In 1911, Italy set out to snatch Libya from the Ottomans, enlisting Somali, Eritrean, and Libyan troops in the yearlong war that ended in its favor. European empires often recruited colonial subjects to advance their ambitions. The British, for instance, deployed their Indian and African subjects to maintain dominance, and the French depended on their Moroccan and Senegalese subjects. Indeed, as historian Massimo Zaccaria has explained, every empire was "created with a strong recourse of colonial troops."[411] If Fateh's account of Hajji Siteen and Guyobe is correct, they would be among the thousands of Somalis who served in the colonial armies for Italy, Britain, and France in various conflicts around the world, including the two world wars.

After the Ottoman-Italian war in Libya, according to Fateh, Hajji Siteen and Guyobe returned to the sea, likely working on British steamships that eventually brought them to the U.S. in the 1920s, rather than the first decade of the century as Suleiman remembered. Two key differences stand out from the two interlocutors' retellings of the Hajji Sitten biography. First, Suleiman believes that Hajji Siteen and Guyobe arrived in the United States separately, whereas Fatih contends they came together. Second, Suleiman places Hajji Siteen's arrival at least a decade before the Great War, while Fatih situates it during the Interwar period. These contradictory narratives expose the limits of oral history as a historical source. Nonetheless, these narratives do not undermine the broader validity of an early Somali presence in the U.S. In fact, both interlocutors agree on the most crucial and relevant aspect of this chapter: Hajji Siteen

[410] Stefan Hock, "'Waking Us from This Endless Slumber': The Ottoman–Italian War and North Africa in the Ottoman Twentieth Century." *War in History* 26, no. 2 (2019): 204–26. doi:10.1177/0968344517706729.

[411] Massimo Zaccaria, "Italian Colonialism in Africa as a Connected System: Institutions, Men and Colonial Troops," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47, no. 4 (2019): 729, doi:10.1080/03086534.2019.1596238; Gabriele Esposito, *Italian Colonial Units, 1882-1960* (England: Osprey Publishing, 2022), 3-6.

and Guyobe were part of a sizable community of U.S. Somali migrant laborers during the first half of the twentieth century.

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Most Somali migrants entered the United States the same way—by deserting their ships.[412] Three reasons explain why they jumped ship and dodged immigration inspections at ports of entry. First, as British subjects, they seldom possessed passports. Instead, they carried discharge books, which had basic but important personal information: a headshot, date of birth, place of birth, height, weight, eye color. Because Somalis often signed on at ports in Britain or its colonies in Africa or Arabia, ship companies did not require them to carry passports. Since these employers needed cheap labor, they often took in anyone who claimed to have been from a British colony or protectorate.[413] In the United States, however, the laborers needed more than discharge books to prove their British subjecthood, which would exempt them from the national-origins quotas that greatly restricted immigrants from Africa. To remain in the country lawfully, they also needed to adhere to other immigration laws that required immigrants to avoid becoming public charges. To avoid risking detention or expulsion, most Somalis chose to desert.

The second reason they deserted their ships was to evade the persistent exclusionary immigration laws meant to prevent non-white foreigners from entering the country. The restrictive laws were rooted in anti-Black racism and xenophobia.[414] By the time Somali

[412] Interview with Fateh and Suleiman.

[413] Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2020), 42.

[414] Maddalena Marinari, "The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts a Century Later: Roots and Long Shadows," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (2022), 272; Erika Lee, "Epilogue: A New Era of Anti- Immigrant Hate and Immigration Restriction," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (2022), 401; Llana Barber, Anti-Black Racism and the Native State," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 42, no. 4 (2023), 7; Kunal M. Parker, *Making Foreigner: Immigration and Citizenship Law in America, 1600-2000* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

seafarers arrived during the Great War, the Immigration Act of 1917 was in place. Citing national security concerns, federal legislators passed the legislation not just to regulate the flow of immigrants but to restrict immigration. As historian Erika Lee has noted, the law "actively tried to reduce the number and types of immigrants coming into the United States rather than merely keeping records of new arrivals." It did so by imposing a literacy test on adult immigrants, raising the payment of head tax, and expanding the category of those considered undesirable, including poor people and those with mental and physical disabilities.[415] The law did not explicitly call for the restrictions of African migrants, Somalis included, as it did for Asians from the so-called Asiatic Barred Zone.

Still, it impacted them. When the *Mongolian Prince* arrived in Boston on April 5, 1920, immigration officials asked the six Somali crew members on board—Ahmed Hersi, Bashir Ali, Ahmed Hassen, Hersi Ali, Hassen Omar, and Kalid Ali—if they could read, to which they replied *no*. For these laborers, the question of their literacy skills, a prominent feature of the 1917 immigration law, was irrelevant, as they had already scheduled their next voyage out of the country.[416] However, the law likely deterred future migrants and forced those already lurking at the gates to resort to the only option available to them: deserting their ships.

The 1917 Immigration Act, as it turned out, was intended to do more than just eliminate perceived wartime national security threats. It also set a precedent for more expansive and harsher policies that the government enacted in the 1920s.[417] Indeed, even after the end of the

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[415] The list is long and includes sex workers, polygamists, and criminals. See more in Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 136-137.

[416] Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors: Inwards Passenger Lists (1878-1960), BT 26, The National Archives in Washington, DC, accessed in August 2023, via Ancestry.

[417] Marinari, "The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts a Century Later," 277.

Great War, the government continued to refine and harden many exclusionary wartime elements in the law to target yet other immigrant groups: Italians and Eastern Europeans. In 1921, Congress enacted the Emergency Quota Act, which reduced immigration from southern and eastern Europe and created an annual immigration admission cap of 355,000 for the first time in American history.[418] By this time, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had been in place for nearly four decades and was effective in its mission to root out those deemed unassimilable and belonging to the "degraded and inferior race."[419] Now, with the 1921 legislation, the first U.S. law to establish numerical limits on immigration, lawmakers on Capitol Hill sought to address what they viewed as increasingly uncontrollable migrations from southern and eastern Europe.

Three years later, convinced of the effectiveness of the numerical limitation featured in the Emergency Quota Act, Congress once again unveiled a more restrictive policy: the 1924 Immigration Act. If previous policies focused on targeting specific ethnic groups, this legislation introduced a sweeping approach that "unquestionably legitimized immigrant exclusion and restriction on the basis of race as an acceptable policy—even a respected tradition—in the United States."[420] The law further reduced the annual cap to 155,000 through a newly created quota system based on national origins. The quota allowed 2 percent of the number of immigrants from a specific country already living in the United States, most of whom were people from northern and western Europe. While this system substantially reduced the flow of immigrants from around the world, it effectively excluded almost anyone outside northern and western Europe. By

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[418] Lee, *America for Americans* 140.

[419] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 89.

[420] Lee, *America for Americans*, 141-142.

design, as historian Carly Goodman has argued, the 1924 law was a racist law that set out to make America white.[421] Thus, even if the Somali seafarers seeking to enter the U.S. were literate and had legitimate documents, they would still have been excluded under the 1924 law, which set the annual quota for each African country at hundred.[422]

As Black migrants, Somalis faced anti-Black racism that served as the driving force of the immigration regime. Restrictive immigration policies historically affected not only foreign migrants but also native-born Blacks. As historian Llana Barber has noted, even decades before what immigration scholars commonly describe as the first federal immigration law targeted Chinese migrants, there had been laws meant to restrict and control African American mobility. In 1803, Congress enacted legislation to exclude enslaved or free Blacks from certain states. Four years later, Washington passed yet another policy restricting the importation of enslaved Africans. Barber has argued that while these restrictions are not typically categorized as immigration laws, they nonetheless serve similar functions. That is, enslaved Africans may not be immigrants; however, they became "the first foreigners excluded through federal policy, and these laws form the foundation of the architecture of exclusion."[423] Indeed, anti-Blackness has always been central to immigration policy. The twentieth-century exclusions against Somalis and other migrant laborers did not emerge in a vacuum—they were part of centuries-old, racialized border control that was particularly unforgiving to Black people.

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[421] Carly Goodman, *Dreamland: America's Immigration Lottery in an Age of Restriction.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 15.

[422] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton University Press, 2005), 27-28.

[423] Barber, "Anti-Black Racism and the Native State," 9.

The third reason Somalis deserted their vessels was that they identified a loophole in the increasingly tightening immigration regime. Almost all the immigration policies the federal government espoused since the nineteenth century focused primarily on ship passengers—the *immigrants*—coming aboard vessels to settle. These laws provided a framework for dealing with them upon arriving at immigration stations such as Ellis Island and Angel Island. Left unsaid in these laws was how to decide the fate of the ship laborers—the *crewmen*—if they deserted their vessels. In 1907, the Supreme Court decided a case involving an Austrian crew member who came on the *Slavonia* and deserted in New York. After a lower court convicted him on the basis of the Immigration Act of 1903, the court overturned the conviction, arguing that the law's "principal object is to deal with alien passengers or alien immigrants," not the deserting seamen on shore leave.[424] This left a loophole in the restrictive law. Indeed, following the decision, thousands of crew members and stowaways from around the world deserted their vessels.

By 1912, just five years after the court case, the desertion issue had become a critical agenda item in the United States House of Representatives. The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, led by John L. Burnett, explained in a report that more than 9,800 and 6,590 seamen deserted their ships during the fiscal years of 1910 and 1911, respectively. The report called on lawmakers to propose a bill that, if signed into law, "will go a long way toward the abatement of these grave evils."[425] Although the immigration laws of 1917 and 1924 included provisions excluding foreign crews, desertions continued to occur in large numbers. In the years

[424] Holmes, Oliver Wendell, and Supreme Court Of The United States. U.S. Reports: Taylor v. United States, 207 U.S. 120. 1907. Periodical. https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep207120/.

[425] United States Congress. House. Committee On Immigration And Naturalization, and John L Burnett. Immigration law relative to alien seamen and stowaways ... Report. [Washington, Govt. print. off, 1912] Pdf. https://www.loc.gov/item/44017138/.

between 1921 and 1932, more than 500,000 seamen walked out of their vessels and quietly disappeared into crowded streets.[426] Explaining how these men escaped immigration inspectors, Andrew Furuseth, a representative of the International Seamen's Union of America, exposed their tactic. After their ships disembarked, he explained, they simply tell immigration officials: "Yes, I'm on this ship; and I'm going on that ship; and I'm going to go back on this ship." Furuseth continued that these verbal cues were enough to give deserting migrants "the right to come ashore."[427] By 1929, according to an official with the British Consulate in Michigan, 99 percent of U.S. Somalis were deserters.[428]

The experience of a Somali seafarer named Ibrahim Ismaa'il offers a glimpse into the desertion process. After residing in Cardiff for about two years, Ismaa'il considered a future in the United States. In the winter of 1920, he sailed as a fireman from Wales to Italy and then on to North America. Like many of his Somali peers, he believed that in America, "money was very plentiful and easy to earn." So, when his ship disembarked in Virginia's Norfolk, Ismaa'il went for a stroll to get a feel for the America he hoped to stay in. As he recalled:

> I wished to go ashore and have a look at the place and decide whether I would leave the ship there. I jumped on a tram which was going from the dock to the town but I had not reached the middle of the car, when the conductor pushed me back, and, in a most uncivil manner showed me a seat at the back where the coloured people had to sit. There I sat down silently and thought to myself: "America may keep its many dollars." I bought a few things in the town and hastened back to the ship.[429]

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[426] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Immigration, *Deportation of Certain Alien Seamen*, Before the *Committee on Immigration*, 72nd, Cong., 1st sess., (1932), 9.

[427] Ibid., 9.

[428] Letter from John Cameron, British Consulate, Detroit, Michigan, August 10, 1929.

[429] Richard Pankhurst and Ibrahim Ismaa'il, "An Early Somali Autobiography," *Africa* 32, no. 2 (1977): 375.

Ismaa'il's account shows that seafarers could easily venture inland. Even if immigration inspectors stopped them, they could promise to return in time for their next departure. In his case, Ismaa'il left the ship intending to establish a permanent residence in America. Still, Jim Crow—which denied him even the basic right to choose his own seat—forced him to reconsider. Legalized racial segregation and discrimination had existed in the South, but in Virginia, enforcement intensified in the 1900s, when the state expanded existing laws and passed new ones. Among them was a 1904 law that authorized train operators to bar Black passengers from dining areas as well as sleeper, parlor, or chair cars."[430] In any case, Ismaa'il's desertion plan succeeded. He returned to the ship, which sailed to Liverpool, not because he had been caught or prevented from staying, but because of Jim Crow segregation.

For Somali migrants, deserting their ships was a way to resist racist immigration laws. By evading immigration authorities at the ports of entry, they effectively denied the government the power to document their personal information—occupational, racial, ethnic, literacy, health backgrounds—needed in the screening process to weed out those deemed undesirable. This required migrants to anticipate how they would be treated at the screening stations, prepare for the questions inspectors would ask, and rehearse acceptable responses. Instances of excluded migrants were all around them. They might have heard of the unfortunate fate of a dozen Bengali

[430] Charles E. Wynes, "The Evolution of Jim Crow Laws in Twentieth Century Virgin," *Phylon*, 28, no. 4 (1967), 418; Warren E. Milteer, "Being Indigenous in Jim Crow Virginia: Powhatan People and the Color Line" *The Journal of American History* 111 no. 2, (2024,), 365-365; Gianluca De Fazio, ed., *Lynching in Virginia: Racial Terror and Its Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024); Daniel B. Thorp, *Facing Freedom: An African American Community in Virginia from Reconstruction to Jim Crow* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017); Rosemary Pearce, "Mobilised Emotions: Public Transportation in the Jim Crow Era, 1896–1964" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2017), 26-7; William P. jones, *Black Ulysses: Africam American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); ; June Purcell Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia: a Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).

Muslim peddlers who came to New York aboard the *St. Louis*. Upon arrival, immigration inspectors denied the men entrance and placed them in a makeshift detention facility. Conditions in the facility were so awful that a reporter described it as "more suggestive of an enclosure for animals than a receiving station for prospective citizens."[431] To avoid similar traps, most Somali migrants left their ship and disappeared into northeastern and midwestern states.

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Desertions might have helped migrants escape the watchful gaze of immigration authorities, but not the hardships that followed once onshore. Indeed, their decision to evade contact with law enforcement automatically turned Somalis into undocumented migrants, a status that subsequently made them susceptible not just to deportation but also to abuse and exploitation. Their plight surfaced for the first time in 1927 when a man identified in official documents as Mr. Farah and two other unnamed Somalis sounded the alarm about a sprawling blackmail scheme that targeted dozens of Somali and Adenese migrants in various states. For several years, Mr. Farah told the officials, men armed with federal immigration badges and pistols had posed as agents, targeting vulnerable Somali workers—and Adenese—toiling in assembly lines in Buffalo, Detroit, and Youngstown.[432] Mr. Farah and others mentioned in the report resided in Youngstown, though we do not know of their precise occupations.

Most likely, they worked in the steel industry that had long defined Youngstown and its inhabitants. Youngstown and the surrounding towns in the Mahoning Valley had been drawing workers to their steel industry since the early nineteenth century. By the 1890s, according to one

[431] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 13-14.

[432] Letter from Esmé Howard, British Ambassador to the United States, December 20, 1929, CO 725/21/1, National Archives, London, United Kingdom.

historian, the region had emerged as one of America's leading steel producers, ranking "second only to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the tonnage of pig iron produced annually." Companies such as Republic Steel, Carnegie Steel, and Youngstown Sheet and Tube propelled the region's economic growth. As Youngstown's productivity increased, so did its population, which grew from about 80,000 in 1900 to more than 130,000 in 1920. The majority were working-class immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who saw opportunities in the town.[433] The Somalis in Youngstown were part of this primarily foreign-born population. It was here that they encountered extortionists who wasted no time in exploiting their vulnerabilities and precarious lives. Posing as federal immigration inspectors, they targeted undocumented Somali and Adenese migrants. In many cases, the conspirators arrested and detained the migrants, falsely promising them that they would set them free if they just paid ransoms. Once they had pocketed the money, however, the impostors often handed the victims over to immigration officials, who were in collusion with them and who placed the migrants in official deportation proceedings.[434]

The alarm that Mr. Farah and other Somalis sounded was crucial not just in leading to multiple criminal charges in the Youngstown cases. It also exposed a similar blackmail and extortion scheme that impacted many other vulnerable migrants in nearby and faraway cities, including Columbus, Canton, Detroit, Dearborn, and Buffalo. The alleged ringleaders in the blackmail and extortion scheme included Philip George, Abdul Gallil, Abdul Oleel (Syrians), Yabia Salah, Mohamed Ahmed, Hassan Ahmed (Yemenis), and Mohamed Hassan (Adenese).[435]

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[433] Donna M. DeBlasio, "The Immigrant and the Trolley Park in Youngstown, Ohio, 1899-1945," *Rethinking History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, pp. 75–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520010024172.

[434] Howard, December 20, 1929.

[435] Letter from Cameron to August 10, 1929; Letter from Cameron to November 30, 1929.

Some of these men wielded great power and influence within the Arab community and maintained connections in federal immigration offices in Cleveland and Detroit. Months-long federal criminal investigations yielded charges, arrests, and even convictions. Several ringleaders reportedly "disappeared" after being charged. But at least two of their subordinates were convicted and sentenced. Mohamad Ali was found guilty of impersonating an immigration officer and extorting money from a migrant, and Ali Hadi was convicted of threatening to kill a witness who testified against a suspect in the blackmail case. Ali received 18 months in prison, and Hadi received 2 years.[436]

In January 1930, nearly three years after Mr. Farah and other Somalis reported the blackmail and extortion cases, a senior British official celebrated the two convictions his team had secured and the unprecedented "local interest" the investigations "aroused" across the impacted cities and towns. Even though the official might have been devastated by the fact that several "members of a blackmailing gang appear to be still at large," he was sure that the criminal charges, arrests, and convictions would help end most of the abuse and exploitation problems many Somalis and other undocumented migrants had endured.[437] If these achieved outcomes warranted any celebration, the true heroes in the struggle were the victims themselves: those who first reported the abuse, collected the necessary evidence to portray their plight, sacrificed their working hours to collaborate with government authorities, and faced their predators in the court of law. Indeed, if the Somali migrants had broken the immigration law by deserting their ships when they first entered the country, they were more than willing to use the legal system to resist exploitation and abuse.

[436] Letter from Cameron, September 10, 1929; Letter from Cameron, November 2, 1929.

[437] Letter from Howard, January 16, 1930.

In doing so, the Somalis had to navigate the system carefully and be strategic about whom and how they reported the case. As undocumented migrants, navigating the legal system and confronting powerful extortionists meant risking not only detention and deportation but also a potential danger to their lives. This was because the blackmailers and extortionists had often lived in the country longer than their prey and maintained connections with federal immigration officials. So, when the Somalis decided to sound the alarm about the extortionists, they did not go to their local law enforcement agencies or the United States government. As unauthorized migrants, they understood that the law condemned them to expulsion. Instead, Mr. Farah phoned the British Embassy in Washington, D.C. because they saw themselves as British—even if the empire refused to see them as such.

In charge of the embassy when that desperate call came was Esmé Howard, a decorated diplomat who held high-profile ministerial and ambassadorial roles in a decades-long career that had taken him to Crete, Greece; Berlin, Germany; Budapest, Hungary; and Madrid, Spain. In these positions, Howard represented and promoted the empire's strategic interests and economic goals, "conducting diplomacy so as always to be in accord with London's policymakers, whose so-called big picture he always kept in mind."[438] Howard was just two years into this job when Mr. Farah phoned. The embassy was not necessarily interested in advocating for the struggling Somali laborers to secure British citizenship so they could freely live and work in the U.S. as British subjects. At the time, following the 1919 riots, a big question mark hung over the status of the Somali migrants working in Britain. If the empire denied Somalis British subjecthood in

[438] Roger Adelson, review of *Esme Howard: A Diplomatic Biography*, B. J. C. McKercher, *American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (1991): 878.

Britain, Howard would not secure it for them in America to avoid, as he always did, contradicting his colleagues in London.

However, the ambassador was more than willing to protect the Somali migrants from the blackmailers and extortionists. In correspondence with his subordinate officers, John Cameron and Ronald Campbell, Howard explained that he was committed to preventing "British subjects or persons entitled to British protection … from being illegally imposed upon or having money taken from them under false pretenses."[439] He, therefore, instructed his officers to investigate in collaboration with U.S. federal law enforcement agents. In the months and years following that fateful phone call, Cameron and Campbell dispatched updates on the cases from the streets and courtrooms in Cleveland, Youngstown, Detroit, and Buffalo. In these reports, the officers discussed their efforts to collaborate with blackmailed victims and recruit witnesses for the prosecution team. In the end, the years-long investigations led to multiple criminal charges and convictions—giving the vulnerable Somali migrants their hard-earned freedom from abuse.

Somalis in Harlem

Somali migrant laborers were scattered in various cities, but the majority resided in New York. They lived among ethnic communities in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that emerged in the 1920s as a cultural and social hub for Black people.[440] The emergence of this Black mecca, however, was no coincidence. Black people were relegated to second-class citizenship, confined to impoverished, segregated neighborhoods, excluded from opportunities for upward mobility,

[439] Howard, December 20, 1929.

[440] Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Years History From Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 282-283; Paula J. Massood, *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Alain Locke, ed., Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1980).

and treated as inherently dangerous and criminal. For centuries, unhinged white supremacists weaponized pseudoscience and religious theories that justified their distorted claims that Black people were inferior beings. As historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad has noted, this "pursuit of racial knowledge through the scientific study of the body reached unprecedented heights" in the mid-nineteenth century.[441] These narratives paved the way for the stigmatization and criminalization of Black bodies, which led to racist policies and practices in both southern and northern states.

Between the 1910s and the 1970s, Harlem became a distinctive Black neighborhood as millions of African Americans escaped racial violence, segregation, and unemployment in the South. During the Great Migration, these migrants sought to start anew in both large and small cities across the northern, midwestern, and western states.[442] Some of these migrants were rural residents toiling on tobacco farms, rice fields, and cotton plantations. Some were townspeople working as tradesmen, teachers, and pastors. All ventured into the unknown in search of safety and job opportunities. Journalist Isabel Wilkerson described this movement as a "leaderless" and

[441] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Harvard University Press, 2011) , 22; Gerald Horn, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in 17th Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018).

[442] William J. Collins, "The Great Migration of Black Americans from the US South: A guide and interpretation," *Explorations in Economic History* 80 (2021): 101382; Christine Leibbrand, Catherine Massey, J. Trent Alexander, Katie R Genadek, and Stewart Tolnay, "The Great Migration and Residential Segregation in American Cities during the Twentieth Century" *Social Science History* 44, no. 1 (2020): 19-55; Leah Platt Boustan, "The Great Black Migration: Opportunity and Competition in Northern Labor Markets," *Focus* 32 no. 1 (2015): 24-27; Harris, Laurie Lanzen. *Great Migration North, 1910-1970*. 1st ed. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Incorporated, 2011; Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 152-200; Joe William Trotter Jr., "The great migration." *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 1 (2002): 31-33.

"silent pilgrimage," with migrants often following in the footsteps of old friends or heeding newspaper columns that pointed them toward such destinations as Chicago and Philadelphia.[443]

As African Americans migrated to these cities, so too did foreign-born Black migrants. According to historian Nemata Blyden, voluntary African migrants began arriving in the final decades of the nineteenth century. An estimated 350 Africans came as students, visitors, and missionaries between 1891 and 1900. Some of them became permanent residents among African Americans in the South, often due to the Jim Crow segregation. For instance, James Kwegyir Aggyre, a Ghanaian student who came to study at Livingstone College in North Carolina in 1898, decided to remain in the country, serving as a professor and administrator at the college. "Until his death in 1927," Blyden reported, "Aggyre was considered the preeminent 'African' in the United States."[444] Educated African students and missionaries, such as Aggyre, were part of the elite Africans who had attended European colonial schools and worked closely with colonial governments as clerks, teachers, and missionaries. Their migration was thus facilitated by missionary organizations aiming to produce African Christians capable of spreading the gospel among their people.[445]

However, not all these early Africans belonged to the elite, educated class. Cape Verdean migrants arrived as cheap laborers in the whaling industry. For centuries, their homeland—the Cape Verde islands—served as a supply station for the American whaling fleet. At these stations, Cape Verdeans came into contact with American seafarers through trading and employment. By

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[443] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 8-9.

[444] Nemata Amelia Ibitayo Blyden, *African Americans and Africa: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 135-6.

[445] Blyden, *African Americans and Africa*, 140.

the 1830s, when New Bedford, Massachusetts, emerged as a major whaling port, Cape Verdeans increasingly joined the fleet, which maintained a direct link to the islands.[446] New Bedford soon became home to the largest concentration of Cape Verdean migrants in the United States. As historian Marilyn Halter noted, these migrants represented the largest group of voluntary African migrants between 1820 and 1975, a population numbering an estimated 35,000 to 45,000.[447] In addition to working in the whaling industry, these migrants maintained a conspicuous presence in various other sectors, including the cotton mills, domestic work, and cranberry farms. This was especially true in the late nineteenth century, when the decline of the maritime industry gave way to the emergence of the industrial economy.[448]

Meanwhile, Black laborers from the Caribbean were also migrating to the United States, settling mainly in Harlem, Boston, and Miami. Before their arrival, severe economic conditions forced them to undertake interterritorial migrations. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Trinidad, Tobago, Panama, and Cuba emerged as coveted destinations for higher wages in the sugar and cotton plantations and the construction sector.[449] Soon after the Panama Canal construction ended in 1914, Afro-Caribbeans began migrating in increasing numbers to New

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[446] Russell G. Handsman, Kathryn Grover, and Donald Warrin, "New Bedford Communities of Whaling: People of Wampanoag, African, and Portuguese Island Descent, 1825-1925," (New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, 2021), iv.

[447] Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1, 45; J. Marlena Edwards, "The Cape Verdean Who Emigrates Never Puts Down Roots: Slavey, Colonialism, and Transnationalism in Shaping Cape Verdean Identity," in *New Frontiers in the Study of the Global African Diaspora: Between Uncharted Themes and Alternative Representations*, ed. Rita Kiki Edozie, Glenn Anthony Chambers, and Tama Lynne and Hamilton-Wray (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 149-162.

[448] Handsman, Grover, and Warrin, "New Bedford Communities of Whaling," iv; Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity*, 136.

[449] Irma Awatkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 11-13.

York in search of opportunities, a trend that also drew Somalis and African Americans, making Harlem their home. Between 1920 and 1930, the Harlem population grew from 84,000 to 200,000. By the next decade, that number swelled to more than 250,000, with some parts of Harlem becoming all-Black.[450] The history of twentieth-century Harlem and its Black dwellers has been the subject of numerous academic investigations.[451] However, these discourses often emphasize the lives and works of the more prominent African American and Black Caribbean communities: people like W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey, and Hubert Harrison who left behind enduring legacies in Black radical tradition, literature, and music that still reverberate in the contemporary mind.

Erased from such historical narratives about Harlem are Somalis who lived and worked right under the noses of those Harlem Renaissance heavyweights. Mostly illiterate and semi-literate, Somali laborers may not have wielded the literary power and academic credentials of their African American and Caribbean counterparts, but this does not diminish their significance in immigration history. Indeed, as Black Americans and Caribbean migrants were becoming established in Harlem, Somalis also formed a tight-knit community between the 1900s and 1960s. In these years, as James Baldwin put it, Harlem was drowning in poverty. "Harlem, physically at least," Baldwin wrote in the 1950s, "has changed very little in my parents' lifetime or mine. Now as then the buildings are old and in desperate need of repair, the streets are

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[450] Ansley T. Erickson and Ernest Morrell, "Introduction" in *Educating Harlem : A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community*, ed. by Ansley T. Erickson and Ernest Morrell (Columbia University Press, 2019), 11-12; Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 3-4; Awatkins-Owens, *Blood Relations*, 2.

[451] Some of these works include: Lean'tin L. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith, eds. *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014; Stefan M. Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009; Robert Philipson, "The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon" African American Review 40, no. 1 (2006): 145–60.*

crowded and dirty, there are too many human beings per square block."[452] In this same Harlem, Somalis worked as elevator operators, security guards, peddlers, and small-business owners.[453] Among these was Hajji Siteen, who peddled cloth, dry goods, and homemade resins and incense in the Black and Muslim communities. Then, sometime in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he took on a boiler operator job after another Somali, Arte Ghalib, left for Somalia.[454]

By then, the U.S. was in the grip of the Great Depression, leaving millions of Americans unemployed and underemployed. At its peak in 1933, unemployment exceeded 30 percent. The conditions were so bad that, as one historian noted, "half the population was ... unable to pay for food and rent."[455] The depression years hit Black migrants, including Somalis, the hardest. In the northern states, the unemployment rates for African Americans reached 80 percent higher than those of their white counterparts.[456] The steel and auto manufacturing factories, where most Somalis labored, shed the most jobs. In the years between 1929 and 1933 alone, "U.S. Steel went from 250,000 full-time workers to no full-time workers." Because the initial years of the Depression coincided with Herbert Hoover's presidency (1929-1933), Somalis called these trying years "The Hoover Time."[457] Many of them, like Ghalib, escaped the biting hunger and retired to their homeland. Those who stayed behind, hoping the Depression would pass soon,

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[452] James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 59.

[453] Interview with Hashi, Fateh, and Suleiman.

[454] Interview with Hashi, Fateh, and Suleiman.

[455] Frank Stricker, *American Unemployment: Past, Present, and Future* (University of Illinois Press, 2020), 49.

[456] William A. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2 (1992): 417.

[457] Interview with Fateh.

became destitute and often found themselves cramped into Hajji Siteen's basement room, where they shared tea, bread, and watery soup. Others depended on New York's charitable organizations, making them eligible for deportation under the "public charge" rule.[458]

The Great Depression certainly disrupted the steady stream that had brought earlier Somali migrant laborers to the U.S. in ways that even anti-immigration policies could not. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Somalis managed to maneuver through the restrictive immigration policies by deserting their ships and surviving in the difficult circumstances of being undocumented. However, in a world where unemployment rates among Black people surged 50 percent, they could not escape the searing poverty that defined American life. They lost their factory jobs and could not keep up with the high food and rental prices, forcing some to retreat to their old pastoral lifestyle. Among these men was Ghalib, who established a family after his return to British Somaliland.[459] One of his children, Omar Arteh Ghalib, would grow up to become one of Somalia's post-colonial political figures, serving as a foreign minister from 1969 to 1976 and prime minister in the early 1990s.[460] But if some Somali laborers returned to their country, many would persist in America through the depression years.

By the 1940s, the country's economic situation improved with the outbreak of the Second World War. American workers returned to the assembly lines to produce military equipment for the Allied powers. Soon, the number of unemployed Americans dropped from 8,120,000 in 1941 to 2,600,000 in 1942.[461] Some Somali migrants rejoined the production industry; others enlisted

[458] Interview with Fateh and Suleiman.

[459] Interview with Suleiman.

[460] Cabdishakuur Casoowe, "Kumuu ahaa Cumar Arte Qaalib," *BBC News - Somali*, November 18, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/somali/war-54988909.

[461] Andrew E. Kersten, "African Americans and World War II," *Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002): 13–17.

in the U.S. armed forces. As experienced former seafarers, they secured positions on U.S. Navy ships at home and abroad.[462] Saleh Shire, for instance, served on a Florida-based ship that transported war supplies. Because the U.S. Army was racially segregated,[463] Black servicemen like Shire were often relegated to inferior roles. On Navy vessels, for instance, many Somalis labored as porters, cooks, and cleaners.

In the years during and after the war, more Somali migrant laborers arrived for job opportunities.[464] By then, some of those who had entered the country in the 1910s and 1920s and had lived through the Depression years had become proud small-business owners. Hajji Siteen, for instance, opened a restaurant in Harlem, which became popular among Somali migrant laborers in the U.S. and beyond. Those interested in trying their luck in the U.S. were familiar with him, his restaurant, and the diaspora community in Harlem. These migrants knew Hajji Siteen not just for his business but also for his leadership and generosity: he often organized initiatives to raise funds—*qaaraan*—for newly arrived migrants still trying to gain their footing in the U.S.[465] This phenomenon was not unique to the Somali diaspora. Black migrants, whether from the southern United States or the Cape Verdean islands, leaned on one another for financial assistance and emotional support. In both cases, networks of kin and community provided

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[462] Interview with Fateh, Suleiman, and Hashi.

[463] Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021);Daniel Kryder, "Race Policy, Race Violence, and Race Reform in the U.S. Army During World War II," *Studies in American Political Development* 10, no. 1 (1996): 130–67; Ulysses Lee, "United States Army in World War II: Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops" in *Superintendent of Documents,* (Government Printing Office, Washington,1966).

[464] Interview with Fateh, Suleiman, and Hashi.

[465] Interview with Fateh.

information on suitable cities, pooled funds to bring in the next migrant, and helped alleviate the psychological burden of newcomers. As historian Ira Berlin wrote of African Americans during the Great Migration, "every would-be migrant seemed to have relatives or friends who would welcome them at the end of their journey."[466] The same was true for New Bedford Cape Verdeans. Quoting a 1911 report, Halter wrote that "practically all who come have relatives or friends or persons they know about. There appears, therefore, to be no need for protection or direction at the docks. This is done by kinsmen or friends."[467] In Harlem, Hajji Siteen and other leaders provided support and directions to new Somalis. Hajji Siteen often offered them a one-time gift of $60 to help cover basic expenses as they adjusted to life in America. For this, he earned the second part of his nickname, *Siteen*, which means *sixty* in Arabic.[468]

In addition to Hajji Siteen, there were other prominent leaders and entrepreneurs among the Somali Harlemites. Jama abu Ras operated a grocery store, Ahmed Anjeer owned a candy shop, and Ahmed Qurabe ran a restaurant. Abdirizak Haji Hussein, a future Somali prime minister who met some of these men in Harlem in the 1950s, recalled them in his memoir. Hussein described Qurabi as a "voracious reader" and "self-taught intellectual" who was "critical of everything" and "loved to argue." Qurabi, in Hussein's observation, was influenced by pro-Muslim intellectuals in Egypt.[469] Omar Fateh, the student from Montana State University, also remembered Qurabi, whom he met in the early 1960s. Before settling in Harlem, Qurabi had

[466] Berlin, *The Making of African America*, 169-74.

[467] Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity*, 71.

[468] Interview with Suleiman.

[469] Hussein, *My Role in the Foundation of the Somali Nation-State*, 103-104.

lived in Britain and worked as a steamship laborer.[470] The transition from the sea to small business was apparently a common occurrence among seafarers. Many Somalis, who had settled in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, also became owners of lodging houses, cafes, and restaurants after retiring from the sea.[471] These businesses offered the diaspora not only the needed services but also a familiar taste and a sense of community and cultural revival.

Some of the Somali migrants in Harlem married or cohabited with local women. Qurabi, for instance, married an African American woman.[472] The two may have met at one of the Harlem street corners where Black radical soapbox orators—Hubert Harrison, Marcus Garvey, Grace Campbell, Richard B. Moore, W.A. Domingo, Arthur Reid—drew thousands to discussions that offered searing critiques of racism, capitalism, and colonialism. Or perhaps they encountered each other at the same restaurant where Qurabi served Somali, Arab, and Black customers soup, rice, spaghetti, and spicy Somali tea. Or maybe he first rented a room in her apartment before they tied the knot. However they met, it was common for single migrant men of color to develop relationships with Black women. In a racialized world, these men and women almost always lived in proximity in segregated neighborhoods. For instance, Alfred Xuma, a Black South African who later worked at a pipe shop in Birmingham, Alabama, married an African American woman named Madie Hall, and James Kwegyir Aggyre, a Ghanaian, married

[470] Interview with Fateh.

[471] As I explained in previous chapters, Somali migrant laborers were among colonial laborers from Africa, Arabia, and the Caribbean who established businesses in dockside neighborhoods in British port cities. See more Hakim Adi, *African and Caribbean People in Britain: A History*. London: Penguin Books, 2022; Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Laura Tabili, *We Ask British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994; Neil Sinclear, *The Tiger Bay Story*, Cardiff: The Butetown History and Arts Centre, 1994.

[472] Interview with Fateh.

a Black Virginian named Rosebud Rudolf Douglass, who graduated from Shaw University, the first HBCU in North Carolina.[473] Qurabi and other Somalis were, thus, part of a long tradition in which migrants of color forged bonds of love, family, and friendship with Black women. To the migrants and their new American families, the differences that set them apart—language, nationality, religion—mattered less than the shared experiences that brought them together: a history of racial violence and exploitation rooted in slavery and colonialism.

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In the late 1940s and 1950s, as the wind of liberation swept through Africa, Somali migrants in Harlem joined the anti-colonial struggle to liberate their homeland. The country had been divided into separate colonies under the rule of the British, Italian, and French Empires since the late nineteenth century. At the onset of the Second World War, Benito Mussolini's fascist regime captured British Somaliland, extending its already-conquered Italian Somaliland, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. By then, Italy had occupied Ethiopia since 1935, when it fell after a war that sent Emperor Haile Selassie I into exile in Britain.[474] The conquest of British Somaliland and Ethiopia fulfilled Italy's long-held dream of forming the Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*) colony, which would consolidate control over nearly the entire Horn of Africa. Indeed, after formally annexing Ethiopia in 1936, Italy merged its new and old colonies into Italian East Africa, making Addis Ababa its capital.[475]

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[473] Nemata Amelia Ibitayo Blyden, *African Americans and Africa : A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 135-6.

[474] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Italy and Its Colonies: Introduction," in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures–Continental Europe and Its Empires*, 263–68, 2023.

[475] Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland*, 30; Kent B. Stiles, "Return of the Negus; Expulsion of the Italians Expected to Restore a Familiar Figure," *New York Times*, April 13, 1941, https://www.nytimes.com/1941/04/13/archives/return-of-the-negus-expulsion-of-the-italians-expected-to-restore-a.ht ml.

That ambitious Italian East Africa project soon crumpled, however. By the early 1940s, British troops had retaken the lost northwestern territory (British Somaliland) and captured Italian Somaliland. Additionally, British and Ethiopian military forces joined to liberate Ethiopia from Italian control and to restore Haile Selassie to the throne.[476] After Italy surrendered in September 1943, the Allied powers assumed control of the remaining Italian colonies, including Eritrea, Libya, and the Dodecanese Islands. In colonies such as Somalia and Eritrea, the Allies—particularly Britain—moved quickly to replace Italian with English as the official language in an attempt to "wipe clear" traces of Italian colonialism.[477] However, according to one historian, the Italians were reluctant to abandon their colonial ambitions, holding out hope for two more years after the war as they awaited formal confirmation of their loss in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. During this period, Italian politicians, intellectuals, and activists mounted an intense campaign to reclaim former colonies. For them, as was the case for other European powers, colonized countries of color held symbolic significance: they represented a means to assert national pride on the world stage.[478]

As world powers pondered the fate of Somalia, often without Somali input, anti-colonial activists and intellectuals in urban areas like Mogadishu and Hargeisa were orchestrating their own plans for the country. The replacement of fascist Italian control with a seemingly more liberal British colonial administration presented an opportunity for young Somalis to establish

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[476] Stiles, "Return of the Negus," *New York Times*, April 13, 1941; Abby Holekamp, "Italian-Occupied East Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia)" in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, ed. A. Lohse and O. Parken (Washington, DC: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025), 502-4.

[477] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Italy and Its Colonies: Introduction" in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 263; 265.
[478] Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Italy and Its Colonies: Introduction," 265.

political and social clubs, where they exchanged ideas and devised plans to lead their country to independence. From these gatherings emerged prominent national organizations in both the southern and northern regions of the country. They included the Somali Youth League (SYL), the Hamar Youth Club, and the Somali National League (SNL). Some of these groups shared similar principles and political ambitions for decolonizing Somalia. Others—including the Patriotic Benefit Union and the Hizbia Digil and Mirifle—emerged to counter the nationalist ideas and advocated for the return to Italy.[479] In the end, the SYL project resonated with the majority of the Somali people, garnering the support of large numbers of followers both at home and abroad. Indeed, the organization had active branches throughout Somalia and neighboring Somali-populated territories in present-day Ethiopia and Kenya. Moreover, SYL had dedicated members and supporters among Somali migrants in Cardiff, London, Kingston upon Hull, Manchester, New York, and Canada.[480]

The most important task before SYL was to secure Somalia's liberation and unify the fragmented colonial territories under a single flag. Yet the fate of their country rested in the hands of the post-war powers, who were already deliberating the future of all the former Italian colonies at the newly established United Nations.[481] The Four Power Commission—Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union—recommended placing Italian Somaliland

[479] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 43-45; Annalisa Urbano, '"That Is Why We Have Troubles': The Pro-Italia Movement's Challenge to Nationalism in British-Occupied Somalia (1946–9)," *The Journal of African History* 58, no. 1 (2017): 115–34; Safia Aidid, "Haweenku Wa Garab (Women Are a Force): Women and the Somali Nationalist Movement, 1943–1960," Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies 10 (2010): 25–49.

[480] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 43-54. United Nations, *Petition from the Somali Youth League, Branch of Gardo concerning Somaliland under Italian Administration* (New York: United Nations, 1951), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3829077.

[481] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 41.

under a UN trusteeship. However, they were divided over the exact form that trusteeship should take. The Soviet Union proposed placing former Italian Somaliland—along with the colonies of Libya and Eritrea—under an Italian trusteeship for a defined period, after which Somalia would become independent. By contrast, Britain, France, and the U.S. recommended that Somalia be placed under the United Nations trusteeship system, with Italy overseeing the country.[482] As these debates unfolded, the Somali people had no say in their future, just as no African leader was invited to the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which formalized the Scramble for Africa.

Still reeling from the trauma of decades-long racist and humiliating colonial policies and practices, Somalis fought hard against the formation of an Italian trusteeship, with or without the involvement of the United Nations. The Italian colonizers, after all, were well-known to the SYL leadership for enforcing race-based policies and practices that weaponized citizenship as a tool to create a system of racial hierarchy. "Italian citizenship was an honor restricted to Italians and could be earned only through special merits and acknowledgments," noted historian Nicola Camilleri. "The inhabitants of the colony, who did not belong to the group of Italian colonizers, were not *citizens* but *subjects*. This division of colonial society entailed a strict separation between the colonizers—who by and large kept their metropolitan legal status as citizens—and the colonized, who were segregated as noncitizens."[483] This legal differentiation was not merely symbolic; it had real implications for the everyday life of the subjects. It relegated them to a

[482] "Recommendations by the Deputies of the Foreign Ministers for the Former Italian Colonies of the Council of Foreign Ministers," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Western Europe, Volume III*, ed. United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d594

[483] Nicola Camilleri, "Colonial Subjects and Others: Racism and Inequality during Italian Rule in the Horn of Africa," *Northeast African Studies* 20, no. 1–2 (2020), 28.

humiliating second-class status, one that prevented them from accessing public education, entering certain neighborhoods, or sharing roads with white pedestrians.[484]

In an attempt to prevent Italy's return, Somali anti-colonial activists launched an international campaign that sent SLY representatives to various metropolises, including New York, London, and Paris. On several occasions in the late 1940s, these representatives reiterated, in writing and in speeches, the reasons they opposed the return of Italian rule.[485] By rejecting Italy, these leaders also rejected colonialism, the exploitation of their land, and the racial subjugation of their people. In a 1949 letter to UN member states, senior SYL leaders outlined several key reasons they opposed the proposed Italian-led trusteeship. "The record of Italian misdeeds, crimes, tortures, massacres, racial discrimination and economic subjugation are only too vivid as we still suffer from the deep wounds occasioned by the 50 years of 'civilization' undertaken in Somalia by the Italian Government and its great people," the letter stated in part. "We beg you, therefore, to decide the future status of our country, not in the light of sordid bargaining, bickering and bartering but in the light of Justice to our wishes and desires."[486] To dispute or influence the decision-making process of world superpowers was no easy task, but SYL understood well the politics of the era and invoked the language these powers employed in their ideological war against Nazi Germany just a few years earlier: justice, liberty, and disdain for fascism.

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[484] Aidid, "Haweenku Wa Garab (Women Are a Force)," 107.

[485] "Somali Leader Thanks NAACP For Aid at UN," *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 4, 1949; Benjamin Rivlin, "The Italian Colonies and the General Assembly," *International Organization* 3, no. 3 (1949), 496.

[486] Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 49-50.

SYL leaders also understood that, in this struggle for justice, they needed the support of an international coalition that would put more pressure on world powers and spread their political agenda, hoping to reach the sympathetic ears of anti-colonial groups and individuals in liberal cities like New York and London. Somali migrants in New York City stepped in to support Abdullahi Issa, the first SYL representative to arrive in the United States, by offering much-needed financial assistance. For instance, the migrants helped cover Issa's hotel and other living expenses and provided clerical services to prepare official documents and talking points for UN meetings and media interviews. Their support was particularly crucial as the British Military Administration in Mogadishu often denied authorization to remit funding to Issa and his delegation, a tactic both American and British governments employed to undermine SYL leaders, whom they considered agitators, and force them out of New York.[487]

[487] Letter to Foreign Office, June 30, 1949, FO 371/73802, The National Archives, Kew, London, UK.



Somali UN Delegate Firm On "No Italians"

Declaring "we are determined our country; what we want is independence," Abdullahi Issa, Somali delegate to the United Nations appealed last Sunday to the American people to give every possible support to the Somali cause." Mr. Issa was one of the principal speakers at a rally for Somaliland at Abbysinian Baptist Church.

Congressman Adam Powell, Jr., told of his fight on the floor of Congress against the return of the African colonies to Italy on Wednesday April 13. He urged the people to support the Somalis to achieve independence and pledged his determination to work on behalf of Negroes everywhere. Rep. Powell said he would reaffirm the statement he made when first elected to Congress that he would go to Washington to repesent not only Negroes in the United States, but colored peoples in the Caribbean, Africa and elsewhere.

Other speaker were: George A. Weston, Colonel Adrian Johnson, John Andu, Indonesia; Abdelkader M. L. Kebire, delegate from Eritrea to the UN, the Rev. D. N. Licorish, Attorney Harison S. Jackson, Ali Noor, Ibahim Guled,

Figure 11: SYL representatives met with supporters at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem in May 1949. The people supporting the Somali independence agenda was U.S. Rep. Adam Powell, Jr. *New York Amsterdam News*, May 14, 1949.

This was part of a broader agenda of American and British intelligence agencies, which scrutinized anti-colonial activists and their organizations. Since the inception of SYL, the CIA constantly surveilled the organization and its leadership. On January 5, 1949, a CIA agent wrote a report about SYL officers and their encounters with others:

> Hasan Elmi, alias Beli, of the Shaikal Tribe, acts as an unofficial inspector of the Somali Youth League. In June 1948 he went to Ethiopia and was in touch with one Pitov, a member of the Soviet Mission in Addis Ababa. Ali Behi, of the Omar Muhammud Tribe, was in touch with Pitov at about the same time. ...This is the first indication that locally the Russians may be active in the Somali Youth League.

The report concluded with a note about a senior SYL official. "Abdullahi Issa Muhammud, Secretary General of the Somali Youth League, left Mogadishu by air on 28 October for London. It is not known which route he used."[488] From this, we can gather that the U.S. was concerned about two things. First, they wanted to keep track of the organization's activities and the extent of its influence. This mattered because a strong and effective SYL could disrupt, as they saw it, the post-war plan the U.S. and its allies had for Somalia. Second, the United States was uneasy about potential political alliances forming between Somalis and the Soviets—a new reality that would come to shape the remaining decades of the century. Facing pressure from multiple fronts, SYL leaders needed to lean on their Somali brothers abroad for support.

In addition to offering financial assistance, Somali New Yorkers provided the technical know-how Issa needed to navigate the American immigration legal system. For instance, Issa's visa expired in 1949, forcing him to leave the country. This came after months of sustained pressure from officials in London, who ordered him to return to Mogadishu when UN sessions were in recess. But Issa and his colleagues did not want to do this for two reasons. First, they did not have enough money to send their representatives back and forth. Second, Issa wanted to utilize the recess period to connect with advocates and other members of the international community to sell the SYL agenda. Once again, the first Somali diaspora rose to the occasion: they devised a plan to send Issa to Canada as he waited for the fall session at the UN. In Canada,

[488] This is just one of many reports the CIA wrote about SYL and its leadership. See Central Intelligence Agency, *Somali Youth League*, CIA-RDP82-00457R005200110008-8, July 11, 1950, CIA FOIA Reading Room https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp82-00457r005200110008-8?utm_source=chatgpt.com. In another report from July 1950, the CIA also wrote about SYL and its influence—of lack thereof—in French Somaliland as well as its connections with the governments of Ethiopia, Britain, and France. The report also comments on the relationship between the organization and the Soviet Union. See Central Intelligence Agency, *Somali Youth League*, July 11, 1950, CIA-RDP82-00457R005200110008-8, CIA FOIA Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R005200110008-8.pdf

he would then apply for a new visa to stay in the U.S for a few more months. Issa agreed. New York Somalis who financed this plan and the trip to Canada included Ahmed Anjeer and his African American wife, Kathy.[489]

The Somali diaspora in New York also facilitated connections between SYL activists and anti-colonial Black American leaders and intellectuals in Harlem.[490] By this time, Black American leaders had been engaged not only in domestic anti-racism projects but also in anti-colonialism efforts in Africa. As the African American civil rights advocate Walter White put it, the Second World War had "given the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored—and also oppressed peoples of the world." For him and other civil rights activists—including W.E.B. Du Bois, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Paul Robeson—the struggle against Jim Crow was tied to that of the colonized peoples around the world.[491] It was for this reason that, in 1948, the renowned anthropologist and activist St. Clair Drake wrote to Du Bois about the plight of the Somali people. Drake had been in Cardiff conducting field research for his doctoral dissertation, "Values, Social Structure and Race Relations in the British Isles," about communities of color and race relations in Britain.[492] Through his investigations, he met many Somalis and studied their social and political organizations. Drake was disappointed that, to many African American

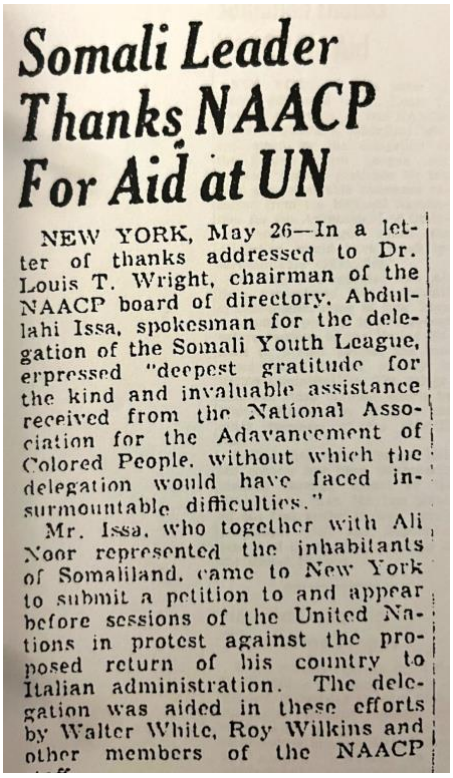
[489] Ismail "Kongo" Mahmoud (ex-seaman who settled in New York in 1972) in discussion with the author, November 2021; Interviews with Fateh and Suleiman; Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats,* 48.

[490] Hussein, *My Role in the Foundation of the Somali Nation-State*, 103; Samatar, *Africa's First Democrats*, 47.

[491] Judith A. Bennett, "Black White Men: African American Encounters with the Wartime Pacific," in *Hollywood's South Seas and the Pacific War*, ed. Tony Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 125; Penny von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1-2; James L. Roark, "American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943-1953" *African Historical Studies* 4, no. 2 (1971), 253.

[492] Kieran Connell,"An African American Anthropologist in Wales: St. Clair Drake and the Transatlantic Ecologies of Race Relations," *Journal of British Studies* 63, no. 1 (2024): 167.

anti-colonial leaders and Black newspapers, "Somaliland means nothing." To reverse this attitude, Drake pleaded with Du Bois to "assist in getting out the Somali point of view to the American public."[493]



Somali Leader Thanks NAACP For Aid at UN

NEW YORK, May 26—In a letter of thanks addressed to Dr. Louis T. Wright, chairman of the NAACP board of directory, Abdullahi Issa, spokesman for the delegation of the Somali Youth League, erpressed "deepest gratitude for the kind and invaluable assistance received from the National Association for the Adavancement of Colored People, without which the delegation would have faced insurmountable difficulties."

Mr. Issa, who together with Ali Noor represented the inhabitants of Somaliland, came to New York to submit a petition to and appear before sessions of the United Nations in protest against the proposed return of his country to Italian administration. The delegation was aided in these efforts by Walter White, Roy Wilkins and other members of the NAACP

Figure 12: SYL leader Abdullahi Issa thanks the NAACP for standing with Somalis in their anti-colonial struggle. The Cleveland Call and Post, June 4, 1949.

In the months and years that followed, Du Bois and Drake continued their exchange about the anti-colonial Somali struggle. In 1949, Du Bois penned a letter to the Haitian delegation at the UN, encouraging them to use their vote and "influence to freeing the Somali people from European control and establishing them in a free land." Du Bois also noted that he had spoken with Issa and was in agreement with SYL in its opposition to Italian colonialism:

[493] Letter from St. Clair Drake to W.E.B. Du Bois, April 28, 1948, Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

> I believe that it is of great and pressing importance that Italy should be totally eliminated from rule in Africa. The history of her attempts to reduce Ethiopia to an African colony are disrespectful and the cruel aggression of Mussolini were one of the main causes of the last World War. The Somalis hate and fear Italians and for this they have ample reason.[494]

In that same year, Black American activists and elected officials gathered at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem in solidarity with Somali anti-colonial leaders. Among those who spoke at the event was Congressman Powell, who, in the words of one reporter, "urged the people to support Somalis to achieve independence and pledged his determination to work on behalf of Negroes everywhere."[495]

In the end, the years-long anti-colonial efforts to save the country from return to Italy bore no fruit. The UN trusteeship system took effect in southern Somalia in 1950, with Italy at the helm. In the northern region, the British Empire maintained its colonial rule, as it did in most of its colonies throughout the continent. Italy and Britain would run the country for another 10 years, after which both territories gained their independence and united to form the Somali Republic.[496] In 1960, Somalia became one of seventeen African countries—including Nigeria, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast—that gained independence.[497] For Somali migrant laborers in New York City and around the world, 1960 represented a significant milestone: they were no longer colonial subjects but citizens of Somalia, with access to official government representatives

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[494] Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Haitian United Nations Delegation, October 17, 1949. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

[495] "Somali UN Delegate Firm on 'No Italians,' *New York Amsterdam News*, May 14, 1949; "Somali Leader Thanks NAACP For Aid at UN," *Cleveland Call and Post*, June 4, 1949.

[496] Mohamud A. Jama, "Somalia and Somaliland: Ruminations on an Interim Settlement Process," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 17 no. 10 (2017), 75.

[497] "1960: A Wave of Independence Sweeps across Africa," *France 24*, July 9, 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/20200709-1960-a-wave-of-independence-sweeps-across-africa

through Somalia's embassy in Washington, D.C. Some returned to their newly independent country. Others continued to live in the U.S. as even larger waves of Somali migrants and refugees began to arrive and settle in the decades that followed.

EPILOGUE

In late October 2025, a friend who has been following my research journey sent me a sixteen-minute YouTube video. In it, Abdisalan Hereri, a prominent Somali journalist, interviewed Sabrina Martinez—her husband, Mike, sitting beside her—about her family history. Her grandfather, Mussa Jama, arrived in the United States in the 1920s. Jama, according to Sabrina, left Somalia at age seventeen and had lived in London as a seaman before settling in New York City. Later, he opened a restaurant and a gambling business on 116th Street in Harlem and married an African American woman, Lillian, who managed a music studio for over sixty years. Together, the couple had two children: Mohamed and Asha (Sabrina's mother), both of whom worked as nurses and played the piano. Today, Asha is eighty-nine and lives in New York; Mohamed died at forty-one. In the video, Sabrina recalled her uncle and the Somali migrants—whom she described as "countrymen"—and his encounters with them. "He was an amazing uncle," she said of Mohamed. "The countrymen loved him, and he knew, and he kept everyone together because he was very, very loving and kind. Whenever they came, they wanted Mohamed. They would stay with us—they would stay in the house with my grandmother. They would stay with us, my family. So, they were here; they came a lot."[498]

Two days before Sabrina's interview, Hereri posted another interview with Raquel Ali Abdi Jama, the granddaughter of a Somali seaman, Abdi, who arrived in New York in the 1920s or early 1930s. In New York, he married an African American woman, and the couple had four children, including Raquel's father, Ali. However, Abdi did not get the chance to raise his

[498] Since the interviewer didn't ask the spelling of the names mentioned, I guessed them based on the speakers' pronunciations. Abdisalan Hareri, interview with Sabrina Martinez, "Sabriina awoowgeed waxuu New York yimid 1920-meeyadii," Hareri Media, YouTube video, posted October 28, 2025, accessed, November 20,2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hV0wk7QiZ2E&t=7s

children: he was deported when Ali was only two or three years old. Despite his father's absence, Raquel explained, Ali grew up to be "a very important person in Yonkers, New York, which is where I live. He was a police officer for thirty years, and when he passed away, the mayor held a big parade and named a street after him. So, if you go to Yonkers, there's a street called 'Abdi Ali Way,' in recognition of my father."[499]

In those closing days of October, as the videos circulated on social media, I was in Cardiff wrapping up my dissertation research, which first brought me to Wales in the summer of 2022. On this visit, I managed to squeeze in some last-minute archival work and reconnected with several descendants of early migrant laborers I had interviewed during my first trip to fill in gaps in their oral histories. I also attended two community events—thanks to Dr. Ahmed Ali, Zainab Mahdi Gass, and Steve Khaireh for the invite—and spent some time exploring the Grangetown and Butetown neighborhoods. Wherever I went, I met friendly Somalis curious about my visit. Once I explained my research project, most responded with the same phrase: "My father was a seaman." I heard this from at least three people I met at Haraf restaurant on separate occasions, from two others with whom I shared a table at the Riyo Creative Conference, and from two leaders I spoke with at the Butetown Community Centre.

Indeed, whether in Harlem or Cardiff, I have come across new sources—people with blood ties to Somali migrant laborers who lived and worked in the United Kingdom and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century—even in this phase of the dissertation. More than once, I have been tempted to delve further into the fascinating stories of Sabrina's and Raquel's families to rewrite and enrich the chapters about early Somali in the United States—

[499] Abdisalan Hareri, interview with Raquel Ali, "Raquel Ali awoowgeed waxuu New York yimid 1930-meeyadii," Hereri Media, YouTube video, posted October 25, 2025, accessed, November 20, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lPyDmVf9vwk&t=1110s

even if this would require visiting New York again and tracing their stories through state and local agencies, historical newspapers, and court records. There must be some official records about Lillian, who was involved in the Harlem music scene for six decades; about Ali, who patrolled the Yonkers streets for years; and about Sabrina and Raquel themselves, who continue to search for their roots. But I have resisted the urge, knowing that research and writing are, by nature, endless processes and that new information always emerges. Still, emerging information about Mussa Jama, Abdi Jama, their African American wives, and their children and grandchildren underscores the importance of the history of early Somali migrants, whose stories are chronicled in this dissertation.

I have traced the movements of these people from pastoral communities in British Somaliland to cities and towns in Arabia, to the engine rooms of European steamships, to dockside settlements in Britain, and to industrial cities in the northeastern and midwestern United States. I have undertaken this ambitious, transnational project to revive the history of early Somali migrants—a history that has been largely overlooked in migration scholarship. Yet their imposing presence in international metropolises has not been entirely absent from other studies. Instead, it has surfaced only in scant fragments or in passing as if their existence in these spaces held little significance. Scholars have generally given only a subtle nod to Somalis' historical presence in places such as the United States and Britain before quickly shifting their focus to other areas—investigations centered on pastoral societies and their political and socio-economic structures, the supposed connections between harsh environments and prolonged conflicts, and issues of terrorism and piracy.

Take, for instance, Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa*, which offers glimpses into the experiences of Somali crew members, Mohammed Mahmud and Guled, who

accompanied him on an expedition to the Horn of Africa in the 1850s. Burton noted that the men had spent years at sea before he met them in Aden. Yet he quickly moved on to the more exoticized story of the "savages" who inhabited present-day northern Somalia.[500] Likewise, in the 1920s, British colonial officer Henry Rayne wrote in passing about well-traveled Somalis in his *Sun, Sand and Somals*. "The Somali wanders afar," he remarked. "You will find him working as a deckhand, fireman, or steward on all the great liners trading to the East. I know of a Somali tobacconist in Cardiff, a Somali mechanic in New York, and a Somali trader in Bombay, the latter of whom speaks French, English, and Italian fluently."[501] In the memoir *Warriors*, Gerald Hanley, like Burton and Rayne, gave only a few lines to the spirit of Somali adventures, describing them as "great travellers." Among them, Hanley recounts, was "a tall lean Somali who spoke to me in American. He had lived in America, after sailing the world as a stoker, and had been a cocktail barman in Baltimore for some years."[502] Similarly, in *A Modern History of the Somali*, anthropologist I. M. Lewis dedicated a single sentence to the establishment of "small and fluctuating immigrant Somali communities" in Europe before shifting his focus to Somali "pastoral nomads" and "their dry savanna homeland."[503]

In the dissertation, I have attempted to give this early history of Somali migration its proper place in academic discourse. One of the central arguments I have put forth is that Somalis—contrary to the dominant narrative that often ties them to the dry land of their country—have maintained deep connections to the sea. They turned to the international sea lines

[500] Richard Francis Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, An Exploration of Harar* (New York: Dover, 1987).

[501] Henry A. Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somals: Leaves from the Note-Book of a District Commissioner in British Somaliland* (England: Witherby, 1921, 1921), 1.

[502] Gerald Hanley, *Warriors: Life and Death among the Somalis* (London: Eland, 1971, 1993, 2004.), 155-6.

[503] I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali* (Ohio University Press, 1965, 1980, 1988, 2002), 1-2.

surrounding their country, a peninsula with the longest coastline on mainland Africa, to trade their livestock in global markets, travel to Arabia as pilgrims and students of Islam, and migrate for colonial labor onshore and at sea. The migrants who eventually became colonial workers largely came from pastoral families in British Somaliland and were active participants in the colonial labor force from at least the early nineteenth century. Most of them settled in Aden, working as domestic servants, interpreters, porters, members of the steamship crew, and security officers for the colonial administration. Throughout much of the century, these laborers were largely confined to the regions along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, Somali migrants—especially young men who had left behind the pastoral life—increasingly entered the global maritime economy as firemen and trimmers in the engine rooms of European steamships. Their labor became particularly crucial during the Great War, when the British Empire was in desperate need of working hands. As colonial laborers of color, they were racialized and exploited and assigned to the most difficult and lowest-paying jobs in the industry. They participated in global maritime networks that included colonial workers from Africa, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean. Their employment aboard European steamships eventually brought them to Britain and the United States, where they established the First Somali Diaspora in the Western world. I have argued throughout this dissertation that colonialism facilitated their migrations to these spaces. Indeed, prior to the Scramble for Africa, Somalis rarely ventured beyond the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Even the most experienced travelers among them never reached farther than Egypt and the Indian subcontinent.

As colonialism took root in Somalia, however, many Somalis followed transatlantic maritime routes to segregated neighborhoods in Britain and the United States. In Britain, most

continued working at sea, establishing dockside settlements in Cardiff and Liverpool and South Shields as their bases. Others secured employment in the steel and manufacturing industries, filling the labor gap left by millions of Britons enlisting in the war. In the United States, Somali migrants took employment in cities such as Buffalo, New York; Detroit, Michigan; and Youngstown, Ohio. By the 1920s, most of these migrants had established a community in Harlem, which was emerging as an important social and political center for Black people. The Somali migration coincided with other Black migrations from the Caribbean islands and the southern states, both of which contributed to the making of this Black mecca. Here, Somalis became elevator operators, peddlers, and small-business owners—mainly running restaurants, grocery stores, and candy shops.

I have argued that these migrants came face-to-face with anti-Black racism and anti-immigration policies on both sides of the Atlantic. In Britain, for instance, they were confined to dockside settlements—places like Tiger Bay—that were under constant state surveillance. Indeed, local authorities regularly patrolled the streets of these neighborhoods and paid unannounced visits to the boarding houses they owned and operated. Such surveillance apparatuses served the government as a mechanism of control, monitoring the movements and activities of colonial migrants. And in the aftermath of the Great War, these spaces became targets of violent mob attacks that erupted in the summer of 1919. Blaming colonial migrants of color for the maritime labor crisis, white Britons attacked dockside settlements, burning buildings, looting businesses, and ransacking homes. In the years following these "race riots," the British central government created immigration policies that restricted the entry of new migrants and rendered those already in the country *aliens*, subjecting them to unemployment, repatriation, and deportation.

In the United States, Somali migrants endured a similar fate. As colonial subjects and longtime seafarers, most carried only discharge books, which were deemed insufficient for entry into the country. Their plight became even more difficult under the 1924 Immigration Act, which explicitly barred migrants of color. Because of this, Somalis found abandoning their vessels to be the only viable option for entering the United States. However, this left them in a precarious legal predicament. As undocumented migrants, they were susceptible to deportation, exploitation, and abuse. There were even cases of blackmail and extortion in the 1920s, when extortionists posed as federal immigration agents to exploit undocumented Somalis in Buffalo, Detroit, and Youngstown. In addition to these barriers and problems, most Somali migrants were relegated to low-paying jobs in the service industry.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Somali migrants played a crucial role in the anti-colonial movement in Somalia. They collaborated with representatives from the Somali Youth League, the most influential liberation movement in the country, during their visits to the United Kingdom and the United States. They provided financial support to these representatives by paying for their expenses during their stay in New York City for the United Nations Assembly meetings. Moreover, these migrants introduced anti-colonial Somali activists to prominent African American leaders and intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, St. Clair Drake, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. For prominent Black Americans, who were sympathetic to the Somali plight, the reason for forging such connections was to put pressure on the United Nations through correspondence, critical media coverage, and public meetings. Building transnational solidarities with colonized people of color was important for Black American pan-Africanists, who tied their struggle against racism in the United States to the fight against colonialism in Africa.

In short, several aspects make the revival of this early Somali migration so important. First, the movements of Somali migrants were facilitated by European colonial powers, who racialized and exploited them as cheap laborers—crucial for the survival of the colonial and capitalist systems, which have historically depended on Black bodies. Second, these Somalis were part of a broader network of a global colonial migrant labor force, both at sea and onshore. They often worked alongside their counterparts from West Africa, Arabia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Caribbean. As colonial subjects, they often lived together in segregated neighborhoods, subjected to racist immigration policies and state surveillance. Third, Somali migrants in both the United Kingdom and the United States played an important role in the anti-colonial movement to oust European powers from their homeland in the aftermath of the Second World War. They provided financial support to anti-colonial activists in Mogadishu, who came to New York for UN Assembly meetings and connected them with African American leaders. Together, they forged transnational solidarity that continued until Somalia gained independence in the summer of 1960.

* * *

I chose to end the dissertation in 1960—the year Somalia gained independence—for three reasons. First, migrants who voyaged in post-colonial Somalia were no longer subjects of colonial powers; they were now legally considered citizens of the Somali Republic, even if they still jumped ship and did not necessarily hold Somali passports. This shifted the decades-old colonizer-colonized relationship, which legally affected every aspect of migrant lives, especially their migrations to industrialized countries. As colonial subjects, migrant laborers were often at the whim of the British Empire's decisions. For instance, the Empire decided when and how subjects received legal documents, who paid their deportation expenses, and the types of jobs

available to them, among other things. However, by summer 1960, their newly independent country had technically assumed responsibility for its citizens, both at home and abroad. Thus, by this period, the dynamics of migrants were much different from those of the colonial era.

Second, the faces of Somali migrants coming to the U.S. and Europe began to change. If those who migrated during colonialism were primarily wage laborers, students and government personnel now arrived to pursue education and professional training in European and American universities. They were part of a wave of young people from Africa and other formerly colonized countries who sought to acquire the necessary skills to build their newly independent nations and meet the demand for qualified teachers, managers, engineers, and doctors. Although Somali students attended universities across the world, the United States and the Soviet Union offered formal scholarships and educational programs that attracted international students from these countries. As with many things during the Cold War, the two world superpowers competed to cement their influence and win the ideological battle in Africa.

Third, by the 1960s, the widespread use of steamships had been in decline for several decades, with more advanced technologies such as diesel-powered vessels and airplanes increasingly replacing steamers as the preferred mode of transportation.[504] As a result, positions such as those of firemen and trimmers in the engine rooms gradually disappeared, forcing Somalis and other colonial laborers out of the maritime economy. Some of the laborers in the U.K. and the U.S. returned to their homeland; others found employment in the steel and manufacturing sectors on both sides of the Atlantic. The older generation of ex-seafarers and the

[504] Greg Clydesdale, "Systemic Decline in British Shipping 1870-1960," Department of Management and International Business, Massey University – Albany, https://www.hetecon.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CLYDESDALE_G._-_Systemic_Decline_in_British_Shipping_1870-19.pdf; Stig Tenold, "The Declining Role of Western Europe in Shipping and Shipbuilding, 1900–2000," in *Shipping and Globalization in the Post-War Era*, edited by Niels P Petersson, Stig Tenold, and Nicholas J White, 9–36 (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019).

new generation of college students encountered one another—in places like London, Liverpool, and New York City—though age and class often drove them apart. Just as the early migrants had accommodated the anti-colonial activists a decade or two earlier, in some instances, they welcomed the students and even shared apartments with them.

By the mid-1970s and the 1980s, the Somali post-independence honeymoon period ended. Mohamed Siad Barre's military regime grew increasingly authoritarian, cracking down on dissent and silencing critics. Those with the means and connections to leave the country fled to start anew in North America and Europe, joining the college students and personnel already there as asylees. Others emigrated to oil-rich Arabian countries and neighboring African countries. In Britain and the United States, these migrants arrived on the heels of the seafaring generation. If these early migrants were the first Somali diaspora, those who came as students and government personnel between the 1960s and the 1980s represent the second Somali diaspora. Like their predecessors, the second diaspora remains largely unexplored in academia.

By 1991, the Barre regime collapsed. Soon, the third and largest Somali diaspora became established in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of the world. The United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom house some of the largest Somali populations outside of the Global South. In Cardiff, the ex-seamen who settled there a century earlier sponsored their loved ones, who settled in Tiger Bay. Today, one can find in Cardiff the fourth generation of Somalis, tracing their roots to Cardiff in the 1900s. In the United States, Minnesota has the largest Somali population, followed by Columbus, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington. These newcomers arrived primarily as refugees, immigrants, and asylees. Numerous contemporary

scholars have written about their experiences in their adopted countries, including the challenges they face and the contributions they make.[505]

Taken together, I have sought in this dissertation to bring the history of early Somali migrants out of obscurity. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to various academic fields, including U.S. immigration, maritime history, the Black diaspora, and ethnic and racial studies. This history also provides contemporary scholars with the historical grounding necessary for their own inquiries. Although the circumstances that brought early Somalis to the United States and Britain and the challenges they faced differ significantly from those of more recent arrivals, examining their history enriches our understanding of contemporary Somali migration. It shows that Somali migration is not a recent development but one that began in the late nineteenth century and continues into the twenty-first century.

[505] Some of these studies include: Nahid Afrose Kabir, "Young Somalis in Australia, the UK and the USA: An Understanding of Their Identity and Their Sense of Belonging," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34, no. 3 (2014): 259–81. doi:10.1080/13602004.2014.939556; Ilse van Liempt, "From Dutch Dispersal to Ethnic Enclaves in the UK: The Relationship between Segregation and Integration Examined through the shows that migration is not a recent development but a continuum that began in the late nineteenth century and continues shows that migration is not a recent development but a continuum that began in the late nineteenth century and continues into the twenty-first century into the twenty-first centuryEyes of Somalis." *Urban Studies (Edinburgh, Scotland)* 48, no. 16 (2011): 3385–98. doi:10.1177/0042098010397401; Charmarkeh Houssein, "Diaspora, Memory, and Ethnic Media: Media Use by Somalis Living in Canada," Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies 12 (2012): 87-105; Cawo Abdi, "Threatened Identities and Gendered Opportunities: Somali Migration to America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 2 (2014): 459–83. doi:10.1086/673380.

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