PROJECT MUSE®

Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity by Cawo M. Abdi (review)

Neil Carrier

Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies, Volume 3, Number 2, 2016, (Review)

Published by Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies



For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/778429/summary

[3.238.57.9] Project MUSE (2024-03-28 12:02 GMT)

Mashriq & Mahjar 3, no. 2 (2016), 174–177
ISSN 2169-4435

CAWO M. ABDI, *Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Pp. 296. $94.50 cloth, $27.00 paper. ISBN 9780816697380.

REVIEWED BY NEIL CARRIER, African Studies Centre, University of Oxford; email: neil.carrier@africa.ox.ac.uk



Since the collapse of the Somali state over two decades ago, Somalis have spread in significant numbers across the world, settling in places near to and far from their homeland—from Kenya and Ethiopia to Australia and Alaska—and forming a global diaspora of great contemporary importance. However, some places are more central to this diaspora than others, and Cawo Abdi's crucial book takes the reader on a tour of Somali lives in three of their most important locales: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), South Africa, and the United States. In so doing it offers great insight into how the desire to carve out some certainty and security—religious, cultural, and economic—motivates many to make often dangerous journeys in search of, as Abdi poetically terms it, an earthly "Jannah" (paradise). Based on ethnographic research in the three locations, Abdi analyzes what attracts Somalis to them, as well as the challenges they encounter there, challenges that often create the impetus to move on once more. Much of this impetus derives from issues of citizenship and the knowledge that sadly the citizenship of some countries is worth more on our unequal planet than others.

The theme of citizenship is woven throughout the book's case studies, including that of the UAE. This is a country to where Somalis have long had links, the Gulf region in general being a place to which many Somalis moved in the 1970s as its economy grew through petrodollars. It remains a key hub for Somalis, in many ways a displaced port of Somalia through which much cargo is routed by its resident Somalis. The UAE offers Somalis many employment opportunities and there are those who live very comfortable lives, so attracting further settlement. Abdi relates how

[3.238.57.9] Project MUSE (2024-03-28 12:02 GMT)

the shared religion of Islam allows Somalis there to navigate its society, forming a bridge between themselves and Emiratis in particular. Not all are so comfortable or integrated, however: their legal status is often precarious, as are some of the livelihoods that many rely on, and so the UAE for many fails to fulfill hopes of a physically and economically secure life.

The case study of South Africa presents us with a newer migration destination for Somalis, and one whose opportunities come with great potential dangers in a climate where xenophobic attacks against the likes of Somalis are all too common. Abdi provides useful context on the migration patterns of Somalis to South Africa in the post-Apartheid era, and on the relatively generous immigration and refugee policies that allow them freedom of movement and the right to start businesses. Somalis often come to the country after long treks down from East Africa, and her chapter on South Africa reads well alongside Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* (2014) that tells of one Somali's journey across Africa to reach South Africa. Importantly, Abdi also offers great insight into the local *spaza* shop economy in which Somalis now operate. These are small convenience stores in townships, sometimes made out of shipping containers and all heavily secured with steel bars and grills such is the fear of crime. Abdi recounts how Islamic connections with local Indians enabled Somalis to integrate into this economy by helping to supply goods on credit, again the mosque and shared religion being crucial to the story of Somali settlement as it was in the UAE. But Somali success in this *spaza* economy has bred resentment from locals, and Abdi deftly contextualizes this resentment within the racialized politics of contemporary South Africa. Once more despite the opportunities the country offers, the pull of somewhere with greater security is still felt keenly, which brings us to Abdi's third case study of the US.

This is perceived by many Somalis in the UAE and South Africa and elsewhere as the ultimate earthly Jannah, yet for most it is a very ambiguous one, as Abdi's chapter on life for Somalis in Minnesota reveals. Minnesota—and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis–Saint Paul in particular—has one of the largest concentrations of Somalis outside of Africa, drawn through resettlement programs and the work of voluntary groups who attract Somalis there from all over the US. There are some Somalis who thrive in Minnesota becoming successful professionals, business people, students, and so forth. For others, however, life in

the US can mean a life navigating the bureaucracies of the welfare state, and navigating very challenging social realities. Gender is a key focus of the chapter as Abdi explores how men and women negotiate job markets in the US and adapt to a country where women often find themselves as the official heads of households. Abdi sensitively describes the ambivalence with which both men and women greet these perceived challenges to the "traditional" Somali family structure.

The "slippery" Jannah of the US raises other issues for Somalis, mostly related to their marginalized status in a place where being black and Muslim often means facing much structural violence. While in the UAE and South Africa, Islam can provide openings into wider society and economy, in the US it can close them off. Given all this, having gained the secure citizenship of the US that provides global mobility, it is not uncommon for Somalis to consider a return to lands closer to home—including Kenya and UAE, as well as Somalia itself. Abdi offers case studies of those disillusioned with life in the US and keen to be where they have greater social mobility, a social mobility hard to find in the US itself.

Of course, whole books could be written about each of the case studies, and Abdi has to sacrifice some depth for the sake of breadth. However, it remains deeply impressive how much Abdi conveys about each of the places she analyses, and for anyone interested in Somali lives in these places, this book is essential reading. But the real strength of this book is its multi-sitedness. Weaving questions of identity, citizenship and belonging throughout the three case studies, Abdi shows how similar themes run through the Somali migrant experience in all these locations, although each location also offers its particular challenges and opportunities. This book is a model of how a study of a transnational society can be kept grounded and sensitive to specific places. There are some gaps, as with any book with such an ambitious scope.

Some might argue that Abdi skirts over particular issues of Somali identity, especially the role that clan might play in the social and economic processes she describes. Clan and its politicization are, of course, highly sensitive topics, and Abdi is open and eloquent in describing her misgivings about the concept. Her book is itself testimony to how Somali society can be studied without clan being fetishized, yet one still wonders if its social salience among Somalis in the different locations might have been explored further.

More could also be said about some of the other key Somali locations mentioned in passing (Kenya and Nairobi in particular—although I am biased in this regard, most of my own work being conducted there).

Nonetheless I highly recommend this book to a wide range of readers. Indeed, *Elusive Jannah* should appeal not just to Somali specialists, but also to those interested in migration more broadly. Her work is a theoretically informed, yet empirically rich, evocation of contemporary mobility that deserves to become a key text within migration studies, anthropology and related disciplines. Beyond academia this book has the potential to do much good too: given the current focus on migration to Europe and the U.S.—and debates about the political use of terms such as "economic migrants" and refugees and their conflation—a book such as this that sensitively portrays the pushes and pulls felt by Somalis within a global context where some citizenships are more equal than others could bring much sanity to debates about the current "migration crisis."