

## IEA/COLUMBUS, OH / 02/28/06 SOMALI VIDEO CONFERENCE

**Woman's Voice:** The African Diaspora, she has her M.A. in Political Science and African Studies from Boston University and also an M.A. in African and American Studies from the University at Berkeley. She has lived in West Africa for a year and has traveled in forty-two countries and has a lot of information for us on Somali refugees here in the United States. So if we could switch to Natoschia Scruggs.

**NS:** Okay, so let me just say before I begin that this is just a very brief history and a little bit on Somali culture. It's a very old culture so I can't do it justice in twenty minutes, but I'll try to give a quick summary. So as I said Somali history and Somali culture are unique and old, and I'll give you several reasons why Somali culture is unique.

The first thing is that Somali people speak one language, which is pretty uncommon in most African countries. It's one language with many different dialects or several dialects, but it is still ( break in tape).

All Somalis are Muslims; with the vast majority of Somalis are Muslims. They're some of the oldest Muslims in the world and are believed to be the first people on the continent of Africa to convert when the prophet, Mohammed and his followers left Saudi Arabia and went into Africa. So you have to understand, and I think a lot of people don't understand, how much

influence Islam and Arab culture have had on Somali culture and Somali people, since the sixth century, so it's very old.

The third point I wanted to make about Somali culture is that unlike most African countries, Somalia does not have a long history of colonization by European nations. Now at one point the country was divided three ways between England, France, and Italy. However, there was never a very large European community that was settled in Somalia that ran Somalia the way we see in South Africa or what we saw in Kenya or other countries in Africa. That's a very big difference between Somalia and other African countries.

The fourth point I wanted to make is that Somali culture again is very old. The ancient Egyptians whose own civilization is 5,000 years old, over 5,000 years old, held Somalia in very high regard. Somalia at that time was called Punt, and it was believed to be the birthplace of the gods of the ancient Egyptians, so Somalia was known throughout the ancient world. If you go to Egypt today you can see notes that were written in hieroglyphics about Somalia on walls of temples throughout Egypt. They kept notes on how they traded with ancient Somalis. Also the Chinese kept records of their trading expeditions to present day Somalia. Herodotus, one of the most famous ancient Greek historians, also knew who the Somalis were; he called them the most beautiful people in the world, actually. So I just wanted to say that to point out the fact that Somalis have always been known for trading and traveling, and were known throughout the ancient world.

My next point I want to talk about is Somalis in the United States. A lot of people don't realize this but the first Somalis came to the United States as sailors in the 1920s. They settled in Harlem, which we know is a famous neighborhood in New York City, and they blended into local Black communities that existed at that time. Black Americans populated those communities. (I'm not going to say African American, that's too confusing.) But when I say Black Americans, I'm referring to people like myself who descend from Africans who were brought here between the 1600s and the mid 1800s and enslaved in this country. So Somalis joined communities, or joined Harlem specifically, and communities that were already populated by Black Americans and by Black immigrants from the Caribbean, and places like Jamaica, Trinidad, and Haiti.

Although Somalis first came, or the first recorded Somalis came, in the nineteen twenties as sailors, most Somalis arrived in the U.S. between 1965 and the year 2000. Some came as college students and professionals, so we have to realize that not all Somalis came here as refugees. There were people who came here to do their PhDs, to get other forms of education, and who wound up staying after the war started. My point is that everybody did not come here as refugees.

The vast majority arrived as refugees fleeing the civil war that broke out in their country in 1991. This war caused Somalis to flee to countries around the world so today you have huge Somali communities in places like India, Finland, Australia, but also in many Middle Eastern countries, because of the proximity to Somalia. They're very close to Somalia, but also because

Somali culture and religion are Arab influenced. When I say Arab influence, I don't want you to think that Somalis simply mimic Arab culture. They have their own culture, but the proximity, if you look at a map, is very close, so there's a lot of interchange that's gone on over the years.

The reception that Somalis received in the United States depended on where they went. For example, Somalis who went to Minnesota were welcome because of the large ethnic communities that were already there. It's much easier to go to a place where you already have large immigrant communities or refugee communities, even if you are not from the same race. People in those communities tend to be more used to dealing with foreigners, dealing with immigrants, dealing with people who have language issues.

This was not the case for Somalis who went to places like Lewistown, Maine which is a city that's about, I want to say about two hours outside of Boston, maybe a little further. But Lewistown, Maine never had a large Black community so they don't have a history of dealing with many people of color, but especially with Black people. Somalis who went there were met with a lot of resistance and, in fact, there was a rally held by White supremacists and it really got ugly. Most people in the community turned out to support Somalis in the end, but I say that to say that when we talk about Somalis in the United States, we have to make some distinctions, and we have to realize it depends on where they go as to what their experiences are.

There are four big problems that Somalis face in the United States.. The first is that they arrive as poor refugees who had to leave everything that they owned and loved, behind in a country that is still pretty much war-torn, ten years later. Now there are pockets of Somalia that

are fine where people have returned and they live, but for the most part, especially the southern part of the country where the capitol is, Mogadishu, people still can't return. I think that's something that we have to remember when we deal with Somali students and Somali people in general. It's one thing when you have to leave your country, but it's another thing when you still can't return. You feel like a perpetual outsider or perpetual foreigner, and in many people this leads to depression. So I think we have to be aware of that when we deal with Somali people.

The second point is that Somalis are Muslim in a mostly Christian country and this has become more difficult in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America. I know I don't have to give examples of that. People have just become more explicit with feeling anti-Muslim after the attacks on the World Trade Centers, and because Somalis are Muslim and because Somali women tend to wear hijabs, and they stand out, they became targets in many ways.

The third point I want to make about problems that Somalis face in the United States is that they're Black in a country with a long history of racial discrimination against Blacks. Although they had nothing to do with this history at all, Somalis are negatively stigmatized when they reach America simple because they have Black skin. From the outside point of view, they're Black and Black means all these different things in American culture, but Somalis come into this culture without any knowledge of what that means, and yet they have to deal with the repercussions of that history.

The fourth point is that Somalis mostly live in neighborhoods populated by other poor Americans, especially Black and Latinos. We call them Latinos in New York, but I think most

people still call them Hispanics, so I'll say Hispanics. Somalis live in neighborhoods where they're with other poor people and that causes problems that I'll go into a little bit later.

I want to focus on the relationship between Somalis and Black Americans, some of the tensions between Somalis and Black Americans. As I stated Somalis and Black Americans often live in the same poor neighborhoods under the same oppressive conditions. This means that they compete with each other for the same limited resources. The combination of the competition for these resources or these meager resources and the lack of mutual cultural understanding has led to violence in the past. So you have these two groups who "look alike", but who are culturally very different, with very different histories, who are in the same neighborhoods, competing for the same resources. You have Black Americans who think that Somalis are getting extra benefits because the government is giving them housing vouchers or discounts, like food vouchers and things like. So on the Black American side you have Black Americans feeling, well they're coming into this country and they're getting things and they don't deserve them, they're not even from here, they're outsiders. You also have Black Americans who feel that Somalis feel that they are better than Black Americans, that they look down on them. This is a problem that Black Americans have with many other groups, again going back to the history that we have had in this country. There is often a feeling that people come in and they don't understand Black history, and they look down on Blacks and they think if they watch a music video on Black entertainment television, or they see one news story about a Black man who robs someone, that all Black Americans are bad, and that we (Blacks) have no culture. The list goes on and on of negative

stereotypes. On the other side of that, you have Somalis who feel that Black Americans understand things that they don't and I'll talk about that a little bit more. So you have misunderstandings on both sides, and these misunderstandings have led to violence.

The second point is that both groups have to deal with racism, but Somalis come from a country where they do not have an understanding of skin color as having social meaning. In other words, in Somalia people identify by their clan affiliation or they identify by what families they come from and what regions they're from in the country, and not in any way by the color of their skin. So this is very new for Somalis. They don't have a concept of this understanding of what it means when you see another Black person. All the nuances that Black Americans tend to have, this understanding that we're (Blacks) one, we should do things a particular way. Now this makes sense for Black Americans because historically, the situation we've been in politically and socially, you had to do this because you had to do it for safety and to survive. But this is not the case for Somalis, so they don't understand this system. And again I want to point out that in America, Black Americans were forced to identify by skin color for hundreds of years and have now formed many social understandings of what it means to have Black skin.

The third point is in the Twin Cities, in Minnesota, in Fall 2001, a Somali senior citizen was beaten to death at a bus stop and there was a huge outcry about that. The story is still not very clear, but there was a confrontation with police and the community believes that the police manhandled the senior citizen and he died. In March 2002, police shot and killed a mentally ill Somali man. Again Somalis believe that this happened because police were racist, because they

have certain negative feelings about Black people, and because Somalis have Black skin. They come to this country and they fall into that. So this is something that Black Americans and Somalis have to deal with, this issue of racism.

In this country we tend to make everything racial, but if you go beneath these issues it's also poor issues. There are issues within the Hmong community that I've heard of from the Midwest and dealing with the police and dealing with other minorities. Some of these problems stem from the fact that we're talking about poor people. The fourth point is September 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center, at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, Black American and Somali students clashed and these fights caught the attention of local media. So Somalis said that some Black Americans were angry with them and called them names because of the attacks on the World Trade Center. Then they started to fight over this. Here we have this issue that's layered; you have Black Americans and Somalis with black skin. These Black American students were reacting in a nationalistic manner because even though they're Black, they're still American, and the attacks on the World Trade Center evoked certain feelings from them, that had to do with them being from this country, and seeing one of their monuments destroyed by Muslims.

From the outside it looks like these Black people are fighting each other, but these issues are much more layered. Somalis, being Muslims, took offense to Black Americans thinking that all Muslims are bad. So really they were not fighting over racial issues, they were fighting because one side was upset over national issues and another side was upset because they felt that

part of their identity, their Islamic identity, identity as Muslims, was being attacked. That's not racial, that's a cultural issue.

Now I want to focus on some efforts that have been made to ease tensions between Somalis and Black Americans. As I told you in September 2001 there were clashes at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis. Rather than let the fighting at Roosevelt High School continue, African Americans at a local non-profit educational organization called *We Win Institute*, and Somalis at the Confederation of the Somali Communities of Minnesota, held a series of public forums. You had young Somalis and young Black Americans fighting against each other with adult Black Americans and adult Somalis sitting behind saying, okay, what are we going to do about this. Rather than divide themselves, they decided to come together through local non-profit groups. They held a series of forums and through the forums people from both communities realized that they held cultural misconceptions about each other. The Black Americans realized they didn't know anything about Somalis at all. They just thought, oh, they're African. And Somalis realized that they really didn't know much about Black Americans either. So they found out that they had more in common than they originally believed. The direct result of these forums and this intervention was the end of the fighting. The fighting stopped, and a group called, The Brothers of Ankh, (Ankh is the name of the ancient Egyptian symbol that we all have seen but probably don't know what it's called) was formed to draw Black American and Somali youth together and assist them in understanding each other's social and political positions within the United States, as well as within the world. So these young

Black Americans, for the first time really, were taught why Somalis came here in the beginning. They didn't even really know much about the civil war.

March to April 2004, the Children's Theatre Company in the Whittier neighborhood of Minneapolis created and ran a play which was called, "Snapshot Silhouette," and this basically was a portrait of a community that underwent an ethnic and racial transformation. It focused on the relationship between two twelve-year-old girls. One was Somali and one was Black American. Through this play, the directors and the children's theatre wanted to address these issues of racial identity, of misconceptions about Muslims, about the way people dress, about the food they eat, and language issues. All of this was addressed in this play, and actually it got a lot of press. It was a huge success and they were interviewed on National Public Radio and helped to ease tensions. It was credited for easing tensions in Minneapolis between the two groups.

And then there are some other efforts that have been taking place that I found out about that I wanted to share with you. In Pittsburg, for example, local Black American families volunteered to help Somali and other African refugee families settle in their local communities by taking them shopping, helping with their English, and helping them get use of public transportation. In New York City and Boston, both places where I've lived, I know for a fact that Black organizations, Black American organizations like the Urban League, sponsor block parties and cultural festivals so that different groups, not just Somalis and Black Americans, but different immigrant groups from around the world, can come together and learn about each other's cultures. The idea is that it's only ignorance that keep people fighting with one another.

So I want to make five conclusions. *First*, I want to say the misunderstandings that occur between Somalis and Black Americans are due to a lack of understanding of each other's cultures and histories.

*Second*, these tensions are also due to the fact that the larger American population views all Blacks as the same in some respects. This is changing. I don't want to make it sound like American society is stuck in 1850, that's not true. But we all know that there are many perceptions that exist in our society. And so there is this idea, this assumption, that all Black people are going to get along and automatically stand as one in these communities. And that's simply not true. All Blacks have to deal with racism when they do not understand it in the same ways. This adds a burden to the relationship between Black Americans and Somalis. So besides the cultural differences that all groups experience, there's this added weight of the history of what Blackness means in this country that we all grapple with.

The *third* point is that the tensions between Somalis and Black Americans are not unique. Many immigrant groups have problems when they migrate to new countries and often have problems from people in the same race. For example, in the late 1880s, Italian and Irish immigrants routinely clashed in places like New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The clashes were many times very violent, bloody, and resulted in deaths. So when we think about these issues, sometimes I think we focus too much on, "oh, look at these in-groups fighting each other". We have to remember that this is not new. This happens whenever you put poor people together, especially people who don't feel secure in their own identity within the country that

they're living in. You have these clashes. The fact is, however, that most immigrant groups and local Americans across races do get along. We only hear about the bad stories, though, because those are the ones that make the news.

*Fourth*, over time people will get to know each other and know each other's ways and habits and histories, and likes and dislikes . These misunderstandings will melt away. Somalis will become part of the larger American population, just like the Somali sailors who came to New York in the 1920s. So all these differences that you notice initially stand out because they're still fresh. As I said, most Somalis only arrived here between 1965 and 2000, with the vast majority came in the 1990s. These are still very new issues so this is why we hear about these clashes. Over time I think they will diminish.

The last point I wanted to make is that all Americans were immigrants and had accents at some point. All of us were awkward at some point. When I say all of us, I mean our ancestors came here at some point and grappled with the same issues. I think only time will tell and time will melt away these misconceptions. For now I think we all have to work hard at trying to understand each other, and try to come to terms with our past. I think that we are doing a good job in this country, despite the problems that we still have.