

## Making Refuge

We expected more democracy in America.

—Refugee immigrant in Lewiston

After arriving in Lewiston, Somali Bantu community elders faced the immediate task of figuring out how to insert their perspectives and viewpoints into local political and civic arenas, which initially only enabled their participation in highly orchestrated and contained ways such as through focus groups and meetings called by authorities with agendas defined by them. In addition to claiming the right to speak out about issues of concern to their community, Somali Bantu leaders also wished to distinguish themselves from the Somali community that had preceded them to Lewiston by, in particular, denouncing the racism they experienced from Somalis in Somalia and the Kenyan refugee camps. They faced barriers in both arenas because local bureaucratic authorities did not always view them as competent decision makers, and fellow Somalis resisted their allegations of historic discrimination. Many of their early initiatives pushed back against their bureaucratic containment and silencing.

Somali Bantu political culture is profoundly democratic, which was formerly possible in small villages where everyone worked on the same time schedule. Villagers discussed matters of mutual concern in large meetings in open outdoor gathering spots where everyone had the right to speak and share their

views, and women, normally occupied with domestic chores and child care, were able to participate as children played together within view just beyond the meeting grounds. Inequalities existed, of course: men had more power than women, and their occasional use of violence to maintain authority was carefully policed and mediated by elders and family members; elders (men and women) had more power than youths and expected respect and compliance with their wishes. Authority was vested in certain elders, who made decisions for the community after listening to all sides, and whose decisions were (usually, in my experience) respected because of their seniority and publicly acknowledged wisdom.

In the transition to life in Lewiston, Somali Bantu expectations of democratic, transparent, and vetted decision-making processes ran aground on the reality that local institutions and authorities viewed them not as decision makers but rather as unschooled objects of policy (echoing their experience in the refugee camps). Refugee elders tried to respond appropriately in the new context, learning bureaucratic languages, attending workshops, and transforming their style of political practice and decision making to match American expectations for clear leaders who speak on behalf of a community and hierarchical organizational structures that ascribe more power and public recognition to some than to others. This proved to be a challenging adjustment, as the former practice of deliberative decision making regarding internal community issues ran up against the challenges of time constraints due to dramatically different work schedules and transportation barriers, the inability of women to participate because of their child care responsibilities in isolated apartments, the demand by outsiders for quick decisions in some contexts, the expectation by city leaders or institutions for one representative to speak on behalf of the community, and struggles over authority as the elders lost power to members of the English-speaking and literate younger generation.

Somali Bantus learned early on that democracy works differently in U.S. bureaucratic culture, where the institutions with which they engage most intensely—schools, hospitals, social services authorities—do not need to be responsive to their concerns or desires despite their expectation to be involved through translators of their choice. The ire about schools in particular ran deep, as Somali Bantu parents told me over and over how they experienced the ELL program as a paramount example of top-down administration and exclusion even though the program consisted largely of their children. The Department of Justice memorandum said nothing about mandating parental involvement in the ELL program, and school administrators were thus free to limit parental involvement to annual parent-teacher conferences while refusing teacher efforts to create parent-teacher groups or a regular ELL parent

advisory committee during the first decade (see chapter 6). In one meeting I attended about parental concerns with the ELL program, a refugee father complained to a school administrator that the school made policy and called parents to a meeting to inform them about policies affecting their children but never asked parents for their views or responses. Other parents in the conversation nodded their agreement, and one noted that the way the school system treats refugee parents is just like the way Americans intervene in African villages, such as when a humanitarian group shows up and announces, “We are bringing you a well!” when what the village really wants is a school. There is no discussion—just the Americans telling the villagers what they are doing with the expectation that the villagers should accept it and be happy about it. Pointedly, he emphasized that this does not make for a successful relationship.

That particular meeting concluded peacefully, although the parents left without having achieved any of their objectives (employment for refugee parents as groundskeepers, demarcated prayer time in school, extended-day ELL classes, and extra tutoring for ELL students to allow their children to catch up more quickly to their American peers). But the meeting demonstrated what I heard over and over from Somali Bantu parents: “We expected more democracy in America,” as one man put it, summarizing collective frustration about constantly being told what they could and could not talk about in meetings, feeling silenced about how schools handled their children, and realizing that school, city, and hospital administrators did not feel compelled to respect their priorities and objectives about education, health care, translation services, or other forms of social engagement. What Somali Bantus understood as democratic practice—namely, their right to speak out about matters that concerned them—American administrators saw as the refugees’ bureaucratic incompetence. A few more examples reveal why.

### **“We Can’t Invite People and Then Cut Them Off Before They Are Finished”**

A few organizations tried to engage with the refugee population through the use of focus groups, a popular form of contained data production for organizational use, arranged through Somali and Somali Bantu cultural brokers who are put in charge of gathering community members to talk about issues of interest to the convening agency. (One refugee caseworker joked that the experience of Somali immigrants in Lewiston is “Move to Lewiston! Join a focus group!”) A significant component of the cultural broker job is to ensure that agency goals govern focus group outreach, placing cultural brokers between the expectations of the agencies that employ them and the community members they are employed to attract to meetings. Whereas in Somali political

culture, meetings are open to anyone who wishes to attend and those who attend expect to be able to speak about any issue of concern to them and for as long as they wish, agencies conducting focus groups predetermine the specific topics to be discussed, the length of the meeting, and the participants. Time and again, agencies felt focus group discussions veered too far from the topic; focus group participants felt their concerns went unheard; and refugee cultural brokers got caught in between.<sup>1</sup> For example, the expectation by NGOs that the same participants will come to each meeting for qualitative and statistical continuity is an impossible expectation because Somali and Somali Bantu community members view participation in focus groups and other programs as something to be shared. If one group of people hoards the opportunity to participate in a focus group or program training, especially when they are compensated for attendance, or if the cultural broker bars the door to community members in the interest of consistent participation, other community members accuse them of selfishly hogging an opportunity. Exclusivity is a sure route to tension and accusations, and everyone in the refugee community understands that it is far more democratic to ensure that everyone who wishes can participate.

The theme of control permeated many meetings I attended at social services agencies that were discussing how to reach out to New Mainers, leaving cultural brokers to explain how difficult it is to invite people to a meeting and then tell them what they can and cannot talk about. “We can’t invite people and then cut them off before they are finished,” cautioned refugee cultural brokers over and over again at planning meetings. After a meeting organized by a housing authority where women began screaming at each other as the convener tried to intervene to force them to talk about the topic selected by the organizers rather than the issue about which the women were upset, a cultural broker familiar with such scenes told me, “Sometimes service providers invite parents and want them to talk about a specific thing, but the parents want to talk about something else. The service providers try to make the parents only talk about the thing they want to focus on, but the parents have to be able to address the thing they want to address too.”

The unruliness that Somali and Somali Bantu parents sometimes exhibit about obeying the rules for theme and time in focus group discussions orchestrated by service providers is easily interpreted as bureaucratic incompetence, which can be challenging for even the most well-meaning service providers. Service providers do not know what to do when immigrant participants talk for too long at meetings, talk about things unrelated to the meeting agenda, do not follow rules for participation, and then get frustrated that they are invited to participate in a meeting where their concerns are being ignored. The inability to control the conversation is precisely why schools do not want to have par-

ent committees and wish to bar teachers from meeting autonomously with parents. Focus groups constrain refugee voices and focus refugee involvement on only those topics of concern to the agencies, whether or not the refugees share those concerns. When a mental health agency calls a focus group to learn about mental health concerns from parents, and all parents want to talk about is their experience of exclusion from the local schools, or when the housing authority convenes a group to talk about creating a community self-help group and the participants want to talk about their anger at each other's misbehaving children, the convening agencies are frustrated that participants do not stay on topic, and refugees are frustrated that what they see as their premier concern—worry about their children—is unheard.

### **Adventures in Capacity Building**

One way host communities can try to avoid the intercultural challenges posed by troublesome refugees is to encourage refugee self-help organizations to take over the responsibilities of acculturation and community support. The federal refugee resettlement program promotes refugee self-sufficiency in part through the creation of ethnic-based community organizations (EBCOs) to undertake self-help projects that, in theory, will take primary responsibility for caring for refugee community members. Such associations must adhere to the bureaucratic logic of American nonprofits, obligating community members to participate in capacity-building and leadership development initiatives (often followed by grant-writing workshops) to prepare them to run their own ethnic-based nonprofits.

The Somali Bantu community was among the groups selected for training when the state of Maine received a half-million-dollar ORR grant to develop leadership and organizational capacity in its refugee communities to enable them to create EBCOs.<sup>2</sup> Several representatives from the Somali Bantu community attended the first of the four required workshops but failed to return to the second, which prompted the annoyed project administrator to phone me to complain and ask me to pressure them to attend the third meeting. After I dutifully made some phone calls, I learned that the location of the second meeting had been changed from Lewiston to Portland at the last minute, making transportation impossible for some of the participants, and that those who had provided child care for the participants in the first meeting had not received the promised compensation from the project. Even though I thought their absence justified under the circumstances, I offered to join them for the third workshop, located in Portland, partly to make sure they returned to the program to salvage their reputation with the project administrator, who held an important position in the state.

The leaders for the workshop were two well-meaning middle-aged white women with a long history of professional leadership development and capacity building but with little apparent experience with refugees or non-native English speakers. We began about an hour late, with an introduction by the lead facilitator who provided a complicated explanation about the importance of setting goals, prefacing her remarks with comments about the wonderful new diversity that the refugees had brought to Maine: “It’s wonderful,” she told them, “to see different skin colors and clothing styles in Maine!” As she talked, her associate handed out colored cards that participants could hold up when they heard an unfamiliar word. Cards immediately started going up: anthropology (in response to my introduction), solid, homogeneous. The facilitator carried on with a technical discussion of goal achievement that included so many difficult words that we could not progress through the flurry of cards. “Framework.” She drew a tree on the board and said, “This tree is like your framework, your structure.” Another card. Then she drew things hanging off the tree and said, “These are your objectives”—another card—“your goals, but that’s also part of the mission statement, so we’ll get to objectives and goals tomorrow. The tree is a metaphor,” she explained, provoking another card to go up.

By now I was pretty confused as well. Goals and objectives are different, or the same? Since the facilitators provided no examples by way of illustration and solicited no responses from the participants, it was impossible to gauge what the audience was grasping. The second facilitator took over and talked for another twenty minutes, the use of cards flagging as the lecture went on. Finally the participants reanimated as the introductory section concluded with a lengthy discussion about when to stop for the day, since there was a competing multicultural event that many of the participants planned to attend. We agreed to end at lunchtime.

After an orienting activity involving postcards of art by European masters, we were broken into small groups and sent to separate rooms to write a practice mission statement and a practice vision statement. Our group included representatives from a Somali and a Somali Bantu organization along with the project administrator for the grant. In response to directions to choose a facilitator, a scribe, and a reporter, we chose a young Somali Bantu man to facilitate, but the project administrator intervened to say that since he had not attended the last meeting he could not facilitate. The role went to a woman from the other Somali organization. The scribe was also a woman from the Somali organization, who tried valiantly to record the comments despite limited literacy skills. By the end of our session, our statement reflected the comments from the Somali group about children’s needs but somehow none of the suggestions offered by the Somali Bantu participants—housing, adult literacy,

jobs, intercommunity trust—were incorporated. I couldn't help pointing this out, so the administrator added the word "adults" to our pretend mission statement. After reconvening with the other groups to share our final statements with each other, the day concluded with an exercise called plus/minus, where participants listed positive and negative aspects of the day's experience. Positives included the flexibility to end at noon, rather than 4 PM. Negatives were more numerous: the lateness of some participants, to which one of the Somali Bantu women responded, calmly, "You don't know the situation some people faced in trying to get here. Some people came from far away and had some troubles getting here." The project administrator intervened to reprimand her, stating that no one is supposed to respond to plus/minus comments; all are just supposed to listen. Another participant offered as a minus the fact that the workshop was scheduled at the same time as another major multicultural event in the city, to which the administrator, ignoring the previous directive, responded with frustration that everyone in the room should have been aware of the competing events and thus the scheduling mishap was their fault.

I knew that the Somali Bantu man who had coordinated his community's participation had worked an eleven-hour night shift—from 4 PM until 3 AM the previous night—as a janitor in a fast-food restaurant. After three hours of sleep, he began assembling other community members to get them down to Portland for the early meeting, which required finding an available car and circling the city to pick everyone up before the hour-long drive south. The group was chastised for arriving late, told they could not take an active role because of their absence from the previous meeting, ignored when they did try to contribute, silenced when they explained the reasons for their late arrival, and told they were lucky to be allowed to participate. After their hour-long drive home, the man who organized the Somali Bantu participation returned directly to work for his next eleven-hour shift. They did not return for the next meeting, nor did I intervene again to encourage them.

But such failures by Somali Bantu participants to meet the expectations set for them by institutional administrators are damaging, as agencies attempting to make a connection become frustrated that Somali Bantus are not playing their parts correctly. Their roles are scripted as focus group participants who respond to questions but do not make demands, as new residents who should be grateful to be invited to meetings, as objects of policy who do not contribute to making policy, and as political neophytes who need to be taught about leadership, capacity building, and decision making. Talking about the frustration with Catholic Charities that many local agencies felt, a social worker told me, "We all suffer from high expectations. We want the best for the newcomers so we want the providers to do everything to the best of their ability." But

then she added, “And we expect the best behavior from our clients,” noting how hard it is when the refugees do not behave in ways desired or expected by providers. In the incidents described above, refugees were “the problem” because of their failure to follow the rules and do what they were told. For the refugees, the only solution was to take control of their public presence in formats they controlled, to learn how to make their desires clearly understood by policy makers, and to organize their own programs to meet needs they defined for themselves.

### **“Learning How Things Work Here”**

While Lewiston’s civic organizations were cautiously figuring out how to extend themselves toward the refugee community through focus group meetings and discussions in the collaborative, Somali Bantus had taken note that the EBCO model would allow them to create a public presence, manage their internal affairs, and compete for grants to offer caseworker assistance, translation, conflict mediation, and so forth. Several Somali Bantu community members worked diligently throughout 2006 to create a Somali Bantu community association EBCO (hereafter called “the association”), seeking help from service providers, anthropologist allies, lawyers, the IRS, and a professional website designer. As instructed, they held community meetings to elect a board, write a mission statement and bylaws, and begin planning the projects for which they hoped to receive grant support.

Things started well. The community identified several priorities, beginning with a soccer program for young adults and a summer program for their elementary school children in response to parental worries that their older children had no activities and their younger children were not progressing out of ELL classes fast enough. Alongside these efforts, board members also embarked on a public education campaign with schools, service providers, hospitals, and city leaders to teach their American neighbors about why they are called Somali Bantus rather than simply Somalis and to convince their audiences of the need for Somali Bantu (rather than Somali) caseworkers and translators to ensure adequate and trustworthy representation. Sadiq, the community spokesperson, accepted invitations all over southern Maine to talk about Somali Bantu identity and history, a task he undertook with remarkable commitment. On one occasion, for example, Sadiq and I were invited to give an early morning breakfast presentation to the Waterville Rotary club about the refugee community in Lewiston. Unusually, he was a bit late arriving, whispering an apology as he slipped into a seat next to me at the breakfast table, saying that he was late because he had just come from Syracuse. Isha and some other women were driving from Lewiston to Syracuse the previous

afternoon for a wedding and their van broke down on the highway in Massachusetts. They phoned him for help, so he drove to Massachusetts, picked them up, took them to Syracuse, and then immediately turned around to return to Maine so he could be in time for our presentation. In other words, he had just driven fifteen hours straight and had not slept in two days. “You should have phoned me to cancel!” I whispered, horrified. “Why would I do that?” he asked, surprised.

Sadiq proved to be a whiz at information management. As we sat together at the 2009 Lewiston High School graduation, I noticed he was filling his program with notes and asked what he was doing. “I’m gathering information!” he responded. As part of his quest for useful knowledge to pass on to community members and because, as he once explained to me, “I don’t know how things work here,” he always attended graduation ceremonies, whether or not he knew any of the graduates, to gather information about scholarship opportunities, awards, donors, and college destinations of local graduates. Gathering information also motivated him to publicize his community’s achievements by asking the local newspaper to cover things like his college graduation, when he became the first Somali Bantu to gain a college degree in Maine, the 2009 high school graduation of the first four Somali Bantus to graduate in Maine, the soccer program and summer camp, clothing distributions at the association’s office, and other community initiatives. He promoted refugee success and achievement rather than sending thank-you letters to the newspaper.

### **Demanding Self-Representation**

The point of all the public outreach and information gathering by the Somali Bantu community association leadership was to insert themselves into spaces of opportunity and to explain why their identity differed from the city’s Somali population in order to demand separate representation through Somali Bantu (rather than Somali) caseworkers and translators. When first arriving in the United States, many Somali Bantus felt uncomfortable allowing Somalis to translate for them partly because they feared mistranslation caused by differences in language and dialect, but also because many did not trust Somalis with information about their health, income, children, and other intimate details.<sup>3</sup> But retelling stories about their marginalization and discrimination in Somalia in order to make their case met animated opposition from some members of Lewiston’s Somali community, who protested that the Somali Bantu label is little more than a strategic marketing campaign based in fictional renditions of history and entrepreneurial motivations. The ensuing fights over Somali Bantu self-representation occupied many Somali Bantu community leaders during their first years in Lewiston.

Sadiq was furious that some Somalis brought their racism with them to Lewiston, wielding it against Somali Bantus by trying to deny their memories of injustice while simultaneously humiliating them with racist epithets. Somali Bantu friends recount story after story about the racist incidents they experienced in Lewiston from fellow Somalis: a Somali man at a barber shop insisting that the barber change the razor after clipping the hair of Somali Bantu customers before using it on a Somali; a Somali man urinating on a photograph in the newspaper of a Somali Bantu teenage soccer star; high school students who regularly hear the saying, “Jareer are the same whether in Chicago or Jilib” (the Somali version of “You can take them out of the bush but you can’t take the bush out of them”); local community college students whose Somali classmates tease them about their inability to function in class before noon in reference to another common saying that the brains of jareer only work in the afternoon; Somali women taunting Somali Bantu women that Somali Bantu men want to marry Somali women but no Somali men would want Somali Bantu women.

Sadiq will never forgive racism. As a young man, he watched armed Somalis invade his town to demand food, girls, and the belongings of others. He witnessed the massacred men from Duqiyow in their death embrace, roped together around the trunk of the largest mango tree in the area. He fled to Banta to escape the militias who had taken over his hometown of Bu’aale, eventually fleeing Banta for Kenya with the girl who later became his wife, leaving behind their families. In the refugee camp, he became the second Somali Bantu to graduate from high school, enduring the taunts of his Somali schoolmates who refused to sit near him or study with him. He encouraged younger Somali Bantus to stay in school, eventually becoming their teacher after the move to Kakuma. His sense of self was forged by the cruelty and racism directed against villagers by Somali pastoralists and in the camps where Somali classmates angry about his intelligence and academic success called him derogatory and mocking names. Although one normally empathetic service provider argues that in Lewiston, “Somali Bantus will simply have to get over” their memories of past discrimination, Sadiq is certain that he will never lose his rage against racism.<sup>4</sup>

After becoming the spokesperson of the Somali Bantu community association, Sadiq represented the community in a multitude of public events with a relentless message: “We will not accept discrimination. In Somalia we experienced discrimination because of our ancestry, and our communities were destroyed and families killed because of it. Here, in the U.S., we are free and we will never come under Somalis again.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas the Somali leaders who had arrived before him in Lewiston wanted to present a united community voice,

arguing that in America no one cares about internal Somali differences and that all Somalis are perceived as just black, Sadiq refused to comply with the message of unity, insisting on narrating the Somali Bantu story of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination in order to ensure that Somali Bantus could represent themselves to city officials, service providers, and funders. “Somalis were trying to colonize us and that is what I was trying to avoid,” he explained about his determined advocacy of Somali Bantu rights to self-representation and resources, including competing for translation contracts at hospitals rather than working for the already established Somali-owned agencies.

Somali Bantus’ persistence led to reprisals from some Somalis who viewed their efforts as an attempt to wield the Somali Bantu moniker solely to access resources by relentlessly promoting an old narrative no longer relevant in Lewiston’s context.<sup>6</sup> The desire to claim a united face for the entire Somali community is understandable. After all, when Somalis first started moving to Lewiston, city administrators told them that they would only listen to one leader to represent the community because it was too confusing to hear different sides from different Somali networks and factions. Somali friends laugh when they recount how several city administrators upset about the Letter told Somalis that the mayor doesn’t speak for the city, leading some to wonder why the city government can be internally divided but not Somalis.

But in addition to forging legibility through singular representation, the Somali backlash against Somali Bantu claims is, sadly, also about racism and ignorance. Somalis from northern Somalia may have never encountered jareer Somalis or heard about Somalia’s history of slavery, and some may simply have been unaware of the impact on jareer Somalis of their constant experiences of racist discrimination. One Somali man who works in the Lewiston public schools took me aside one day to tell me, privately, that he has learned so much about his country from hearing about the experiences of his Somali Bantu colleagues in the United States. He said that although he hears his Somali peers denounce the claims of Somali Bantus, he now understands that the claims of racism and discrimination are valid. Other Somalis are angry that Somali Bantu claims appear to construct a hierarchy of victimization that overvalorizes the suffering of Somali Bantus, arguing, instead, that all who came to the United States fled for their lives.

But, of course, struggles over limited resources and the perception of a zero-sum game in the world of social services play an important role in the denial of a separate Somali Bantu identity by other Somalis. When they arrived in Lewiston, many Somali Bantu adults were completely dependent on interpreters and cultural brokers for assistance with medical care, the schools, social services providers, and government offices. At that time, educated

Somalis with several years of residence in the city held all the translator and cultural broker positions. While some of these translators worked very hard on behalf of newly arrived Somali Bantu refugees, Somali Bantus were also working hard to develop skills as cultural brokers and translators in order to represent themselves. The desire by Somali Bantus to be represented by those Somali Bantus with competent English meant that Somalis would lose control over coveted cultural brokerage and translation jobs.

### **“We Paid You to Dig Our Toilets!”**

Since the entire refugee resettlement program is based on competing for scarce federal, state, and private resources in the form of grants to fund critically important social support work, the system is set up to promote competition. In Lewiston the unavoidable result was rivalry within and between EBCOs to obtain grants, in part because for many refugees they offered the best opportunities for employment. Thus the emphasis on self-help as a route to refugee self-sufficiency and integration also had the effect of promoting ethnic differences as a form of competition.<sup>7</sup>

Lewiston’s service providers struggled with a response to the demand for separate representation by the Somali Bantu leadership, which some interpreted as unappreciative whininess. One hospital administrator in charge of translation policy organized a panel presentation in 2007 for Somali Bantus to make their case about separate translation to physicians and hospital staff. At the conclusion of the presentation, a doctor in the audience stood up, bright red in the face and shaking with emotion, to shout that his parents came from Canada with nothing and no one helped them, they were poor, they suffered, they didn’t speak English, and they neither asked for nor received special assistance. Furthermore, he continued, stories of Somali history and victimization were not relevant to his work as a doctor and he objected to this use of his time. As soon as he finished speaking, Sadiq jumped to his feet applauding loudly, thanking the doctor for making such an important point. When I asked Sadiq afterward about his reaction—I had thought the doctor was chastising the group for asking for special treatment—he responded that it was obvious the doctor was extremely upset and Sadiq agreed with his argument that translation issues should not be his concern as a doctor, but rather should be effectively handled by the hospital administration.

The association leadership organized another panel for a large conference of social service providers in 2007 about cultural and linguistic competency, where they spoke to a packed auditorium about their background and need for separate translators, emphasizing their distrust of the people who discriminated against them back in Somalia. They took turns describing things

that they experienced in Somalia and in the camps to justify their claims. Sadiq mentioned that even in the refugee camps, Somali Bantus still did all the menial tasks like digging latrines. By talking in such a public place about their grievances, the Somali Bantu panel at the conference set off an explosion among translators, caseworkers, and the broader Somali and Somali Bantu communities. After the panel discussion, a Somali caseworker for one of the social services agencies accosted Sadiq, yelling: “We *paid* you to dig our toilets!” He responded, furiously, “Yes, sometimes, but why were Somali Bantus the *only* people doing those horrible jobs?” A Somali activist friend who thinks that everyone in the broader Somali community should be working toward unity and togetherness, not division and difference, identifies this panel presentation as the start of the major fights in Lewiston about Somali Bantu identity claims and self-help efforts. But then, without irony, he says that he tells the Somali children who call Somali Bantu children *ooji* (slave) on the playground that they should not do that because it is bad and hurtful. It was precisely to confront the everyday normalness of such racist acts that the association leadership chose to talk in public about their historic experiences and to make a case for independent representation.

While fighting for its community members to be hired as translators, the association began applying for grants, eventually renting an office on Lisbon Street staffed by community members to help people with everything from rides to negotiating with utility companies about service suspensions, organizing community collections for family emergencies, translating for medical appointments, and mediating marital disputes. They initially targeted small grants in the range of a few thousand dollars for short-term projects and basic office support. Some years they received no funding; in other years they were more successful, gaining \$10,000 or more. But although the launch of the association seemed like a wonderful culmination of collective hard work, community unity, and self-help, before long the competitive model for meeting community needs through grant-driven “self-empowerment” undertaken by an exclusive board of leaders challenged Somali Bantu understandings of normal political practice in ways that fractured the fragile community.

### **“In Africa We Have Time”**

Within a year of its creation, tensions emerged between board members about the allocation of the organization’s paltry funds and the structure of decision making, and community members began expressing their suspicions that board members were inaccurately representing the community to outsiders or were pocketing grants intended for the whole community. Making the rocky transition from a village context where wealth and access to resources

were publicly assessed and mediated to one where board members could deal privately in cash, checks, and bank accounts enabled accusations against community leaders of operating in the name of the community but for personal gain: making deals and getting kickbacks, engaging in secret conversations with authorities and funders and attending conferences where their actions and words were unknown to community members, or involving community members in public appearances (like panel discussions) while keeping (usually only imagined) stipends for themselves. As one angry (non-English-speaking) community member told me, “We want to go to conferences too!” By 2009, every invitation for a (normally pro bono) public presentation or dance performance caused organizers to discuss how to handle suspicions that they had been paid, while other community members gossiped that payments had been secretly negotiated and pocketed by the organizers. When we were planning the dance performance for the opening of the Museum LA exhibition, one of the women involved said, sighing, “It doesn’t matter that we don’t get paid, but everyone will believe that we did.”<sup>8</sup> The jealousies and suspicions that emerged in Lewiston reflected just how few members of the community had points of engagement with other organizations and institutions in Lewiston and how dependent community members were on the few adults who spoke English and could participate in the world of grant makers and other local authorities.

“The community is broken,” Sadiq told me in 2008, lamenting the dissolution of community bonds into accusations and allegations of corruption as different factions split and realigned over and over along lines of language, village membership back in Somalia, or even Somali clan affiliation. In Somalia, such community breakdowns would have occasioned days of lengthy discussions, an approach to problem solving impossible in the American context of unpredictable and nonaligned work schedules, poor public transportation, and so many more responsibilities that everyone has to attend to that get in the way of attending lengthy community meetings. Somali Bantus understand that the fast and simple “majority rules” solution fails as a practice of democratic decision making because the losers get nothing, which usually means ongoing dissatisfaction. “In Africa we have time,” says Congolese musician Lokua Kanza, a claim echoed by one of the Somali Bantu interpreters, who says, “In Somalia we would stay until everyone has had the chance to speak, even if it takes all night” to mend a community rift.<sup>9</sup> But in the United States, organizational bylaws give more weight to some (board members) than others (community members) and contrasting work schedules make perfect collective attendance at meetings impossible, which means people end up feeling left out. The requirement for a spokesperson or identifiable leader for grants

and for interaction with institutions is an impossible challenge in a community that expects everyone to have a say. Spokespeople and leaders, who have full-time jobs, school careers, and large families, simply cannot canvass the community each time they must make a statement or represent the community to a city official or prospective donor.

The profound restructuring of daily life in the United States has made old patterns of decision making obsolete or unworkable, and the transition to paid employment has ruptured the universal daily schedule of a community dependent on farming. “Now if you try to schedule a community meeting at 4 PM, for example, half the adults are at their jobs, the others are at appointments, at school, and in class, at interviews,” one man tells me. “No one has time to come together anymore. In the U.S. everything is about money. You need money for everything! In Africa you didn’t really need money—rent, utilities, car, car insurance. Everyone is running after money, and it goes out as soon as it comes in! Plus we have to send money home.” A system that relies on competition to access money, as the grant structure for EBCOs requires, means that the community becomes infected with an understanding of resources as things to be fought over rather than shared, resulting in jealousy and rumors.

As factions broke off and then negotiated a peaceful reunion, only to break off again a few months later, other frustrations with the services provided by the organization grew. During the days I spent in the office on Lisbon Street, I witnessed the limitless array of requests from community members for rides, help with utility bills, complaints about family disputes that needed mediation, help with translation at the hospital or the court, questions about green card or driver’s license applications, and more. The English speakers in the organization were trying to fulfill the demands placed on them by the claims of community leaders that Somali Bantus only wanted translation services and assistance from other Somali Bantus and not from Somalis. But the tiny number of English speakers, every single one of whom was also attending school, working, and parenting, could not possibly meet the vast, pressing, and constant needs of hundreds of non-English-speaking community members for translation and other services. When translators began missing appointments, double-booking translation jobs, keeping poor accounting records, or rushing through client appointments, a few Somali Bantus began using Somali translators again because of ongoing frustrations with their own community’s inability to meet everyone’s needs. As the self-help systems broke down and it became apparent that the few Somali Bantu translators could not meet the high demand for help, one of the community leaders who had forcefully advocated on behalf of community-selected translators told me about their “failure”: “I am so embarrassed. I have never been so embarrassed in my entire life.”

“Our problem is that we lack management skills,” Sadiq told me, in disappointment about the association’s inability to meet the huge demand for translation services while simultaneously operating as informal caseworkers, community volunteers, students, and parents. He may be right, but it is also true that the task they set for themselves and, indeed, the expectation of community self-sufficiency through self-help initiatives, was simply impossible to achieve. “We are tying the rope at one end, but it is unraveling from behind,” he lamented, reflecting on how the association followed all the bureaucratic steps to create their organization, gain recognition, negotiate translation contracts, and open their own office, only to have things unravel because of poor time management, overwork, and infighting. By 2009 I had become worried about the health of people like Sadiq and Idris, two of the most active translators and caseworkers, who were expected to fulfill every role imaginable by their own community members and by social services agencies who depended on them as cultural brokers, while each attended school full time, worked nearly full time, raised their families, and constantly attempted to mediate intercommunity disputes over leadership and representation.

The neoliberal model of austere support, available through competition, to refugee communities facing widespread poverty, illiteracy, racism, communication barriers, and trauma expects them to solve their problems through “self-help initiatives.” When they fail, which seems inevitable given the reality of their situation in the United States as indigent non-English-speaking illiterate newcomers, the systemic structure implies failure is their fault. It is hard to find a better example of bad faith assistance. There is also something oddly awry in a system that awards millions of dollars in ORR grants to organizations like VOLAGs that offer short-term, basic, occasional services to refugees while absorbing part of the grants as administrative overhead. For instance, in 2008, ORR provided half a million dollars in grant funding to the local VOLAG and the State of Maine Multicultural Affairs Office for refugee assistance, while Trinity’s total 2008 annual budget was about \$150,000 and the Somali Bantu association’s budget was under \$10,000.

### **“The Elders Are So Lost”**

Frustrated and upset by the constant bickering of their elders, a group of Somali Bantu young adults led by Idris decided to split from the association to create their own organization in 2008. Many Somali Bantu women expressed their disgust at the infighting as well (while also wondering aloud whether the male board members were secretly hoarding community money), in part because the fighting among the men sometimes spilled over into the domestic arena as one weapon became rumor-mongering about each other’s wives. In

2010, the board tried to strengthen its integrity by ejecting several members who were failing to fulfill their duties as defined in the bylaws (attending meetings and volunteering), prompting those dismissed to try to form another separate breakaway organization, to file a court case contesting the terms of their dismissal, and to send a letter signed by ten people to all the relevant funding agencies, including ORR, accusing the association of nepotism, corruption, and fraud. Sadiq bore the brunt of the accusations because of his role as spokesperson for the organization. Someone broke through the wall of his apartment with knives, forcing him to take out a restraining order against one of his accusers.

The accusers faced consistent setbacks because none could match Sadiq's level of organizational, cultural, and linguistic competency as well as community commitment. The court threw out the charge against Sadiq for the dismissal of board members with a reprimand about filing "frivolous charges," and the police offered protection to Sadiq's family. When the letter was investigated, it turned out that half of those who signed could not read and did not fully understand what they were signing. Accusations flew about who was to blame for the misunderstanding, as counteraccusations were made that the letter writers were colluding with Somali spoilers motivated by a desire to destroy the Somali Bantu community association, although the leaders of other Somali self-help organizations were furious at those who wrote the letter because it compromised the reputation of all Somali organizations in the city. In the fallout from the scandal, Somali Bantu community leaders from other cities, including Sheikh Axmed Nur's son from Syracuse, came to Lewiston weekend after weekend, trying to mend the breach, and even I was asked to try to act as a neutral broker for reconciliation.

The intercommunity fractures reveal all the complexity that lies behind but is elided by the neat label "Somali Bantu." In the new context of identity politics in Lewiston predicated on ethnic competition for scarce resources and centralized leadership, the salience of Somali Bantu identity comes in and out of focus depending, in part, on whether people think they will get better services and more resources from claiming that identity or from allying with Somalis. When identity negotiations intersect with the inadequate fit between, on the one hand, the hierarchical model of institutional structure and decision making in America and, on the other, long-held understandings of democratic practice from Somalia, fighting erupts.

Some of the Somali Bantu elders in the breakaway faction were clearly upset about their loss of authority and status, feeling relegated to the margins rather than occupying positions of leadership. In one of the meetings I mediated, one of the oldest men in the breakaway faction explained, "*It must be*

*the elders* who should decide things. The youth can't do it because they don't know anything. The elders will always check the chair to make sure it's not broken before sitting; youth will just sit without checking." He was frustrated that the "youth," by which he meant Sadiq and other English-speaking board members in their thirties and forties who are the backbone of the association, were failing to attend to those issues he saw as the preeminent community problems: "Our children are out of control; our wives are out of control; and we need a new leadership to deal with it." The elders are men who should be assuming the position of leadership in their communities, but their lack of English means they cannot represent themselves or the community; they have lost their land and thus their control over family resources; their wives often control more resources than they do because of TANF and women's rotating credit associations; they feel their wives and children no longer respect their authority; they are making scant progress in limited English classes; and if they have jobs at all, they are degrading, minimum wage jobs with no hope of improvement. All they have left to claim are paltry resources from modest grants and the insistence that they, not the English-speaking younger adults, should be making decisions and representing the community. Instead, they are aware that they have become the least rather than the most capable.<sup>10</sup> "The elders are so lost," a community member observed to me about the failure of the community's elders to cope with life in America. Gesturing in frustration to the young English-speaking man from his home village in Somalia who accompanies him to meetings, one of the elders involved in the internal conflicts over representation and resources grumbled, "I am an elder, but I have to take this young man with me everywhere I go. I cannot speak for myself."

### **Domestic Disharmony**

The struggles for control of the emerging hierarchical political structures of community representation and decision making recounted here occurred alongside the dissolution of hierarchies of another sort. Life in America introduced dramatic transformations to the domestic realm, laying siege to the old family order predicated on hierarchies of age and gender. Women began contesting male power; children resisted parental authority; parents felt undermined by government intervention in their lives; and the enormous challenges of poverty, language, loss, racism, and trauma burdened men and women who had been holding things together over two decades of displacement. During their first years in Maine, family dramas shook the refugee community as men and women began fighting over things like chores, affairs, divorces, domestic violence accusations, and money. The Somali Bantu association leaders tried

to offer traditional counseling to solve these new problems while also running interference with authorities like police and lawyers who operate according to a different set of rules. As women made more demands on men for help with domestic chores, and men tried to figure out how to translate their authority from former models based on the threat of violence and the practice of polygyny to the new context, marital relations shuddered and cracked.

A male friend tells me, “In Somalia, men lead the family, but here women do.” Women raise the children, run the household, and manage the money that they obtain through TANF, food stamps, and women’s rotating credit associations, all of which undermine men’s understandings of their roles as household heads.<sup>11</sup> Women in polygynous marriages register paternity with the state, ensuring that the government rather than the father determines and ensures child support payments.<sup>12</sup> One young man explains, “Women are so liberated here. They are growing so much. But for men there’s hardly anything to embrace here.” Perhaps the loss of the right to use violence, even if they only did so rarely, has been devastating to their sense of power, control, pride, responsibility, and obligations, he suggests.

During a visit with Garad and his wife Halima, the talk turned, as it often did in the early years, to their efforts to adjust to a culture where men and women are “the same.” “Sometimes we struggle with our wives because the wives here are totally different,” Garad tells me, as his wife sits next to him nodding. “The women here watch American wives. Here men serve themselves and have to cook. In Somalia men did the outside jobs, but here everyone helps each other [in the home]. Here I come home from work [as a cart pusher at Walmart] and my wife tells me to change the baby’s diaper or to make her tea. I never had to mop the floor before! We’ve lived together for fifteen years, and we’ve never had the struggles we have now about this. I want to help my wife, but I want to do the man’s jobs, not the woman’s jobs.” His wife is laughing as she listens. “But can’t you work together?” I ask. “We *do* do things together,” he responds. “If she wants me to cook tea for her, I do. If she feels sick and wants me to wash the dishes, I do it. But I’m always hearing about these struggles in the families now. Some men won’t change diapers or wash dishes.”

Our conversation made me realize how many more domestic chores there are in the United States. There never used to be diapers to change, dishes to wash, floors to mop. Couples farmed and brought home food from their fields to prepare. Women hauled water, ground corn, and cooked porridge, sharing the labor among cowives, mothers, and daughters, or with neighbors. Now, living in isolated separate apartments rather than extended family compounds, women face shopping, garbage hauling, cleaning, washing dishes, laundry,

watching children, and more in a lonely social environment. There is a vast array of things women have to do outside the home as well to take care of their large families: interacting with doctors, schools, caseworkers, social workers, landlords, and utility companies. There is a ton of paper—identity documents, bills, school forms, medical records, paychecks, car insurance, benefits forms, citizenship paperwork—to manage and save. Husbands and wives are struggling over how to divide all these new tasks, all of which come under the general category of domestic labor and thus should be considered women’s work.

Life in Lewiston can feel utterly isolating for women stuck inside small apartments with six, seven, eight kids, next to neighbors who are fighting or who have blaring TVs. Heading outside in winter is an exhausting affair, with all the layers for the kids, the long walk downstairs to the street, the lack of public transportation, the misery of the freezing air, slippery sidewalks, and long gray shadows. Some women become overwhelmed, their children lingering late after school to avoid having to go home to chores or babysitting. When some wives began making demands on their husbands for more help with child care, diaper changing, shopping, and cleaning, astonished men who had never participated in these chores before and lack the skills conferred about what to do. Some of “the helpers,” like Beth, intervened to try to convince the husbands of their clients to help out more around the house. Some husbands, like Garad, obliged. Others, aghast, refused.<sup>13</sup>

Frustrated women began circulating rumors about what men were doing all day long while women were stuck at home with the kids. Unlike Banta, where life was publicly lived, Lewiston offers plenty of opportunity for secrecy, and women became increasingly upset about how much time their husbands spent away from home, either working or mired in the community politics described above. To reinforce their demands for more of their husbands’ time, some women began trying to bar the door against their husbands’ departure, jumping on their backs to force them to stay home or throwing lamps and cooking pots to block their passage to the door. Husbands responded in fury at their wives’ efforts to control their movements. When women called 911 and husbands were arrested, wives scored points but then did not want to press charges because they had already demonstrated their power. During their first few years in Lewiston, the whole community was talking about the fighting and 911 calls. “The women are crazy!” one young unmarried male friend told me, “and the police are crazy too because they take the side of the wife.”

While many of the fights started because women felt abandoned by husbands who were gone for hours, several friends acknowledged that men were beginning to marry second wives in secret, provoking some of the first wives to act out aggressively against their husbands. In the best cases, cowives live

near each other, depend on each other for child care, cooking, shopping, and other chores, and enjoy each other's company. This is particularly the case for women who were cowives in Kenya and relocated to Lewiston to live near each other again after being separated in the resettlement process. Some wives, like Abdiya, will take on child care duties so the cowife can pursue a job, or the wives will watch each other's children while they take turns attending English classes. Many cowives spend every day together, maintaining the built-in support system that characterized many polygynous marriages in Somalia. But when a cowife joins a marriage in secret or against the first wife's will, trouble brews.

Angry wives know their husbands will not call 911 when they get violent, one man tells me, "because the husbands know their wives will be arrested and they don't want that! They don't want to be left to care for all the kids, and their wives will never trust them again and will leave them." The rumor mill augments the fighting, and the large number of single mothers makes secret marriage an easy possibility for men. One woman, a mother of six, broke her husband's car windshield, slashed his tires, and was arrested twice for trying to throw her husband out of their apartment because she suspected him of infidelity. When she got the divorce she was demanding, men lined up to offer marriage, and she chose the youngest unmarried man of the bunch, whom she does not intend to share with another wife.

Men tried to justify their reluctant use of violence against their wives as necessary to assert their right to leave the apartment or to marry a second wife. At a wedding feast, one of the younger adults broke into a conversation about changing expectations for marriage to propose his theory about polygyny. He currently had one wife but was eager to figure out a way to have another while still adhering to American law. "Here in the U.S. it's common for American men to have a wife and a girlfriend on the side," he reasoned, suggesting that since Somali Bantus are allowed to have four wives according to Islam, they should be allowed to have one wife and other girlfriends to adhere to American law while still "practicing their traditions." "Isn't this what many Americans do anyhow?" he asked. I explained that while adultery in the United States might in fact be common, it is still considered wrong and grounds for divorce. He responded that he thought it would be a workable solution for Somali Bantu men who want to marry according to U.S. law but also practice polygyny, and that women would be in agreement because such an arrangement would be in accordance with Islam and cultural tradition. Everyone wins! "I think you should ask the women in the room what they think," I suggested. When asked, all the assembled women responded, emphatically, "Absolutely not."

As fights to redefine the rules of marriage and domestic life raged within the community, I had many long conversations with friends about alternatives to violence when husbands and wives are furious with each other. Community leaders were upset that some of the helpers became involved with domestic violence incidents, bringing in lawyers and official mediators, because they felt their community elders should be the ones doing the mediating. As John Holtzman has described for Sudanese refugees, domestic violence within a Somali Bantu marriage can sometimes be a call for community involvement to mediate a resolution to maintain the marriage and not an indication that the marriage is broken, which is often the American response.<sup>14</sup> Whereas American authorities pressure accusers to pursue their claims in court or with lawyers, community mediators intervene to listen to the problems, negotiate a solution, and levy a fine on the misbehaving spouse. The Somali Bantu association mediators spent a lot of time during the early years of resettlement interceding in accusations of infidelity, abandonment, loss of trust, and lack of support while trying to explain to American lawyers and police that their traditional counseling practices of mediation and levying fines would solve domestic problems better than the court system.

It took several years for the marital fighting and secret marriages to settle down, for some men to take on new domestic chores, and for women to assume more control of their lives within and outside the home. Men recognize they will never regain the kind of automatic authority they once held, and many are fully supportive of the association's new women's empowerment programs that teach women to drive, provide assistance for job applications, support a basket-weaving cooperative, and offer women a space they control to mediate conflicts among themselves. The association recognized that women need collectively acknowledged time and space to come together to talk about their concerns, solve their problems, and share their worries. Women have kept alive the critically important rotating credit associations, through which members each receive periodic infusions of cash, the funerary association that ensures help for funeral costs, and cooperative shopping, which enables families to pool their resources to buy in bulk. These healthy structures of mutual support and solidarity counterbalance the tensions between women over men and between women and men, while also providing an alternative economic model to non-Somalis in Lewiston.

### **The Value of Wage Work**

In today's world of security concerns and the ascendance of a neoliberal definition of personhood (where one's worth is measured by one's wages), we have seen how humanitarianism and charity are subject to a moral economy that

assesses worthiness on the basis of quiescent apolitical victimhood or citizenship claims based on a history of economic productivity. In this logic, the only worthy recipients are those defined by abject innocent victimization in refugee camps or American community members defined by citizenship and economic productivity. We have seen how those in refugee camps try to conform to the former image, whereas in the ideology that informs the U.S. refugee resettlement program, new arrivals must immediately get to work to become economically self-sufficient. The implication is that community membership is gained only through economic productivity, conformity, and gratitude.

But Somali Bantus bring a different understanding to the world of paid employment, pushing back against the expectations in a neoliberal economy that one's value is determined by one's economic productivity and that paid employment takes precedence over all other aspects of life. When Sadiq's refugee resettlement assistance ended and he realized that he would have to sacrifice his dream of education for an hourly job, he quit his job to be able to pursue a college degree, and his family applied for welfare assistance instead. He could not accept the American insistence that monotonous, demeaning, dead-end wage work is more important than a college education for very poor people. He eagerly returned to a job after finishing his degree but, like many other Somali Bantu friends, struggled against a logic that placed work ahead of family. Because Somali Bantus have large families, it is not unusual for parents to have to make time to take a child to a doctor's appointment or to address a problem at school. But surprised Somali Bantu friends realized that employers may be reluctant to grant time off to attend to a sick family member, which to them seemed utterly inhumane. One friend who received a phone call at work that his child was admitted to the emergency room left his job in a rush after informing his immediate supervisor, but returned to work the next day to a reprimand from his boss for leaving work early. His boss explained that he should have waited until the end of the workday to go to the hospital. My friend was so distressed by such logic that he quit his job on the spot, incensed that an employer would put a few hours at a job ahead of a sick child. Although this particular employer is a social services agency trying to make connections with the Somali community, every single Somali hired by the agency over the past decade has quit because of such microsupervising.

In addition to family, many Somali employees refuse to relinquish faith practices to conform to work schedules. In one incident, a group of Somali employees at a local factory had negotiated with their supervisor to coordinate break times with appropriate prayer times, but when that supervisor left for a new job, his replacement refused to honor the agreement, insisting instead on a different break schedule that was not in accordance with Muslim prayer

times. Indignant, the Somali employees quit. As the story was recounted to me by an involved official, state mediators intervened to resynchronize break and prayer times because the employees had written on their job applications that they needed to be able to pray at work, which obligated an accommodation from the employer. Everyone returned to work, having demonstrated a public point about the relative importance of faith and wage work.

Other Somali values, like loyalty and dignity, sometimes clash with workplace hierarchies. When a local business fired a white supervisor whom all the Somali employees admired and trusted, they quit en masse, explaining to the local newspapers that their loyalty to her superseded their loyalty to the job. The Somalis all returned to work after the embarrassed employer rehired the supervisor, having provided a demonstration of loyalty that was approvingly covered in local newspapers. A friend quit his cashier job at a local big-box store when his supervisor assigned him the additional task of cleaning the bathrooms. Protesting that he was hired for a job that required a professional appearance (and a new wardrobe), my friend chose dignity over a minimum wage.<sup>15</sup> Somali Bantus and Somalis want jobs and explain with pride their strong work ethic and eagerness to work, but they do not subscribe to a perspective that insists that human worth is measured by income, that economic self-sufficiency is the highest value, or that minimum wage jobs trump family, loyalty, faith, and dignity. These first experiences with work in America show their resistance to an all-encompassing definition of belonging and personhood that reduces people to their earning power.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fractures of factionalization, the struggles within the association over self-representation, leadership status, and internal decision making practices are evidence, for many community members, of their success at creating a new life in America. Their identity assertions gained traction, their leaders gained recognition and invitations to conferences, and (very modest) grants flowed into the association, which became the first Somali Bantu EBCO in the country to have its own office. In this version of Lewiston's story, the refugees made claims about their rights, built a public presence, and commandeered resources for the benefit of their community, which sustained itself through self-help initiatives and a resounding spirit of volunteerism. The fighting is about how to transform internal community politics from a Somali-style model of broad, inclusive democracy to an American-style model of hierarchical democracy. The fighting is about who gets to be on top of the new hierarchy.

Through their efforts to build their own organization and maintain their own structures of support and solidarity, Somali Bantu leaders were defining self-

sufficiency and integration for themselves. To them, self-sufficiency means competing for grants to provide programs and casework for community members rather than depending on the helpers, and shielding community members from interventions of local authorities by trying to solve problems through traditional counseling rather than the courts. Self-sufficiency thus means cultural autonomy to handle matters within their own community, but not necessarily economic autonomy, which is a strange concept in a community that insists that resources are things to be shared rather than individually acquired (and where, in any event, resources are scarcely available). I was reminded of the pervasive ethic of sharing one night when I went out to dinner with Idris and Abdirisak. When I asked for the check, Abdirisak said he had already paid, and when I got out my wallet to cover my portion, they both started laughing at my breach of Somali cultural etiquette. “We don’t ever do that!” Abdirisak chided me, recounting his astonishment during his first meal at Denny’s the previous week, when he watched in amazement as the four white people at the table next to him tallied up their portions of the bill using their cell phone calculators, counting down to the penny. Shaking their heads at such bean counting, they reminded me that whoever has money pays for the whole group, which they find to be a very equitable and fair way to handle money. Like sharing cars, offering to house friends and relatives dislocated by moving or fires, contributing constantly toward each other’s wedding, funeral, and other expenses, pooling money to buy food in bulk, and knowing that one income will support entire extended families in Lewiston, Kenya, and Somalia, pooling and sharing resources remains a fundamentally important Somali Bantu cultural value and one that does not mandate constant expressions of gratitude.

Integration, to Somali Bantu refugees, means equality, not assimilation. It means the ability to speak for themselves, have their opinions heard, participate in decisions that affect them, assert their desires, and participate in public presentations as equal community members with a right to voice their views. It means participating in American political, civic, and economic arenas on their own terms, with their cultural values of family, faith, and dignity intact.

Since refugee communities like the Somali Bantus have a history of independent self-management and a strong ethic of intracommunity support, the model of competitive funding for refugee self-sufficiency seems, at first glance, like a good one, allowing refugees to manage their own lives, handle their problems and challenges, and resuture their community ties. There are many indications that this is happening—despite the persistent flare-ups, in 2014 the association office was still an important base for the community, mediating family disputes and providing caseworker support on a shoestring budget. When the



FIGURE 7.1 “Lewiston Is Better Than This,” protesters marching down Lisbon Street against Mayor Macdonald’s remarks to the BBC, 2012. Photograph by Russ Dillingham / *Sun Journal*.

pregnant wife of a man involved in challenges to the association was tragically killed in an automobile accident, the association led the fund-raising efforts to support the nine children she left behind. When the younger community members broke from the association to form their own youth-focused organization (see chapter 8), Sadiq helped them acquire nonprofit status. Some of those who signed the letter denouncing the association now volunteer in the association’s office.

And yet a reliance on EBCOs enhances community isolation and shifts the responsibility for self-sufficiency and integration onto the shoulders of refugee communities, who have the least access to resources, further burdening the structures of community support that are already groaning under the weight of adjusting to life in America. As certain people are empowered as leaders who receive training in leadership capacity and public recognition, one paradoxical result is increased insularity and isolation, as community members value intracommunity communication over intercommunity communication. Those who emerge as leaders because of their positions as cultural brokers or EBCO board members must constantly balance their positions as the public face of their community to granting agencies, local authorities, and the media against the desire by other, usually older, community members who wish to retain pre-resettlement forms of authority and decision making as time-proven structures of community solidarity and mutual support.<sup>16</sup>

Thus for many Somali Bantus, the story of their first decade of resettlement is bound up with struggles to retain some political and cultural autonomy while adjusting to structures of decision making and hierarchy in their new context. Seen from this perspective, refuge is something that Somali Bantu refugees believe they actively fought for, fought over, and forged through struggle and debate. Refuge is an ongoing process of political and cultural negotiation and not a geographical state given to refugees lacking agency.

By the end of their first decade in Lewiston, Somali Bantus had won the right to self-representation and independent translation, gained the respect and recognition of city authorities, had their first community member join the city's school board, and founded their own mosque. Their insistent refusal to tolerate Somali racism shifted intercommunity discourse in the city toward greater collaboration between equals and, currently, Somali and Somali Bantu EBCOs are working toward more collaboration on projects of mutual interest. When Mayor Macdonald condemned Somali immigrants to the BBC in racist, derogatory language, Somalis and Somali Bantus marched together down Lisbon Street to protest his remarks. Holding hand-lettered signs that read, "LEWISTON IS BETTER THAN THIS," "Carpetbaggers: That's White Supremacist-Speak! Translation: Anti-Racist," "Lewiston Welcomes Culture and Diversity," and, most significantly, "IT'S OUR CITY TOO!!! ALL-AMERICAN CITY," Somali and Somali Bantu immigrants are making claims to participatory citizenship on the basis of residence and forging a collective vision of a future city they are (re)making, through constant struggle, together.