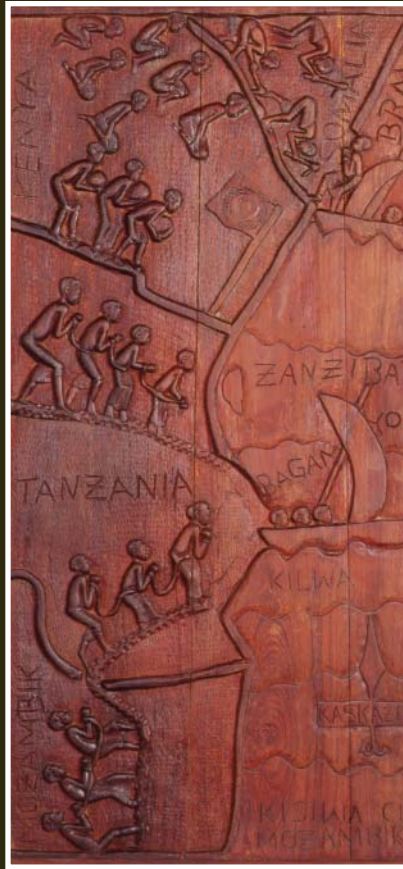


# When Worlds Collide: A Report from the Cultural Divide

*A caseworker on the frustrations of clashing values  
between a refugee community and us*

by Meryl Lipman

Photographs by Ron Johnson



A 200-year history of the Somali Bantu is depicted on this trunk lid, designed by Dan Van Lehman and carved in northern Mozambique. Courtesy of PSU



**F**atima huddles in the back room of a local warehouse, her head shrouded by a beaded yellow shawl. Onyx eyes peer from her thin dark features, framed by the sea of shimmering fabric. Her body smell engulfs the makeshift office, where I've brought her for a job interview.

The company's personnel director offers her the assembly position and hands her a work schedule—weekdays, nine to four. Fatima's interpreter Hamsa relays the information in Somali. Fatima answers, face pinched and Hamsa turns to me. "She goes to the mosque on Fridays at noon."

The H.R. director clears her throat pointedly.

I blink at Fatima, trying to see her as more than a difficult welfare case. In the American workplace, it's considered reasonable to take Muslim high holidays off, but not to leave early on Fridays, I explain. Hamsa translates into Somali, a series of clicks and rolling sounds. Fatima stands, suddenly assertive, shaking out her floor-length robes. She refuses the job, understanding her cash assistance may be cut. The H.R. lady glares at me; I've wasted her time. The job was a good one, I mumble as we leave.

Hamsa and I work for an organization contracted by Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide employment services for non-native TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) recipients, a fancy way of saying we find jobs for immigrants and refugees on welfare. *[Editor's note: Clients' names have been changed, and the author's organization obscured, for confidentiality. Photos are for illustrative purposes only and do not depict persons mentioned in this story.]*

Back at our office, we find Khadra, a Somali Bantu client pacing outside Hamsa's cubicle. As she tells it, she arrived at her retail job wearing a long sheer shift and was sent home for indecent exposure. "American women wear skirts up to here," she spits, draw-

ing a line at her crotch, “and tops down to here,” indicating her bust line.”

Leaning against the cubicle frame, hiding a smile, I insist that, while many of my countrywomen lack taste and style, she still needs to layer her clothing in public.

After Khadra leaves Hamsa and I sit back and process our morning, discussing the limits placed on our clients’ self-determination by poverty and cultural pressure.

Such mornings—and conversations—are typical for us.

Every day my colleagues and I teach program participants to modify national dress for safety in production and kitchen jobs. We suggest they adjust religious rituals to fit work schedules and, despite political rhetoric on family values, we recognize that the choice to raise one’s children is discouraged by the welfare system.

Much of our clientele hails from Somalia, a dramatic shift from the waves of Southeast Asians who flooded the Northwest in the 1970s and ‘80s and the Russians/Ukrainians, who arrived in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Since 1996 an estimated 150,000 Somali refugees have streamed into the United States, 6,000 of them to Oregon, fleeing state-engineered famine, organized rapes, executions and other

horrors of tribal warfare. (Currently 5,000 Somalis and 1,000 Somali Bantu are estimated to live in the Portland Metro area, over 1/3 of the 15,000 Africans living in the region.)

Beyond the freedom not to be starved, sexually assaulted or murdered, however, independence remains elusive for them. UN refugees do not choose

their destination, though they often join family members in various nations. Portland arrivals are served by secular or faith-based organizations who administer federal refugee grants—IRCO (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization), Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Lutheran Community Services and Catholic Charities.

Newcomers are expected to learn English and acculturate within eight months, at which time their dedicated resettlement dollars run out. They then apply for TANF and are absorbed by the welfare system. DHS self-sufficiency programs require a full time commitment consisting of 40 hours weekly job search and unpaid internship, a stretch for most emigrants.

Policymakers regulating TANF seem unaware of (or unmoved by) refugees’ confusion and trauma. Aside from health problems caused by brutality, malnutrition and stress, these rural dwellers may not have cooked, washed or eliminated indoors and, given a hygiene kit, they may not know where on their bodies to roll the Deoderant.

Additionally, DHS and its contractors have not tackled the greater infrastructure issues of absorbing agrarian laborers into an urban work environment.

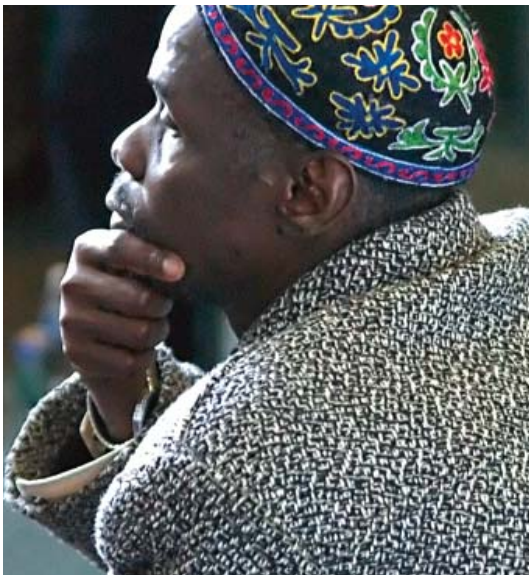
### Infrastructure and Economic Development

Though Russians, Latinos and Africans often have agricultural backgrounds, they reside in Vancouver, Gresham, southeast Portland (Rockwood, Mt. Scott), Oregon City, Tigard and Beaverton, where they can access cultural heterogeneity, public transportation and other amenities.

While the Metro area shines as a purveyor of social services to foreigners, DHS and community-based organizations depend on existing employers to incorporate outlanders into the job market.

Victoria Libov, IRCO’s Employment and Training Manager, notes that IRCO offers vocational training in housekeeping, food processing, child-care, eldercare and welding. Were time and money no object, Libov says, she would start a construction pre-apprenticeship program, “tomorrow.” (The construction industry grew by 10% in Oregon from August 2004 to August 2005.) Lutheran Community Services runs an African Women’s Sewing Circle, and Steps to Success Non-Native Employment/Training refers its low functioning clients to sheltered workshops and its high functioning participants to college level internships.

While praiseworthy, these endeavors are not coordinated at the regional level and fail to incorporate the farms, wineries and nurseries of Clackamas, Washington and Yamhill Counties, where foreigners, though unlikely to settle, could find natural job matches. Inaccessible by public buses, rural employers are often ignored by urban workforce programs, which see the demand as too seasonal and procuring transportation as too great a liability.



- **Oregon, and the Portland Metro Area in particular, has a long tradition of aiding international refugees, starting with displaced refugees from Europe and Asia after World War II, continuing with the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 and Indonesian refugees in 1959. Cuban refugees, served mostly by Catholic Charities, began arriving in Portland in 1961.**
  
- **Between 1975 and 2000, over 1.5 million Southeast Asian refugees came to The United States. Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were heavily represented, as were indigenous Hmong and Mien cultures. In 2006, the United Nations began resettling persecuted indigenous Karen tribal groups living between Burma and Thailand.**
  
- **The Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon estimates that, since the mid-1980s, over 100,000 Russian-speaking (Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, Belarussian) refugees have settled in the Portland Metro Area (mostly in Vancouver, WA, Southeast Portland and North Clackamas County).**

Several refugee host countries have designed successful citywide or regional programs that use settlers' skills, the goals being self-reliance and economic contribution. In Norway, for example, a \$125,000 grant helped the pastoral town of Loeten import 25 camels, to be herded by the region's Somali refugees. In January 2006, Wenche Stenseth, Head of Refugee Resettlement for Loeten, reported to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Many of our refugees from Somalia have extensive experience in camel husbandry and why shouldn't we, an agricultural community, use this resource to our benefit?"

A rephrasing of this question should be on the lips of all county, Metro, and state policymakers: how can we coordinate our efforts to invest the resources and skills, brought by these immigrants, for mutual economic and community advancement?

#### **Ideal Assimilation Times**

**A**s the Bush administration enters its seventh year, America seems bent on proving it is not a welfare state, a stand many Americans embrace. The Scandinavian countries, in comparison, extend refugees life-long assistance—free medical care, education and time to adapt. Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Canada grant long assimilation periods with stress on language acquisition and cultural competency. According to UNHCR, Denmark offers a three-year curriculum. Norway gives two years.

In 1980 the U.S. Government gave each refugee a 36-month resettlement grant. In 1982 the grant's duration fell to 18 months and Oregon planned a pilot project tying refugee grants to early employment. In 1989 the federal government whittled the grant down to one year and, in 1990, to its current length of eight months.

Portland jobs workers contend that, given a three-year integration period, newcomers languished. But veteran refugee workers agree that eight months is too short, raising the question of what time frame would be fair.

Ann Schneider, a 26-year job developer and ESL instructor at Mt. Hood Community College and the African Women's Sewing Circle, notes, "The first six months, you're barely here. There are intensity factors that affect people's ability to adapt." Those factors include language, loss of status and past traumas. Says Schneider, "You need a year."

While most program managers pinpoint 12 months as ideal, Libov, a Soviet Jewish refugee, is



more optimistic. “Between eight and 12 months, depending on the barriers,” she says, though she cautions against ignoring obstacles to meet arbitrary deadlines. “You can have a productive employee if everything in his life is taken care of, if there is stability.”

Schneider laments another frustrating factor. “In the early days (before refugees received aid from the same pot of money as U.S. born welfare clients),” recalls Schneider, “the system wasn’t so punitive.”

Indeed, DHS, propelled by ever-changing federal guidelines and threats to its funding, has become increasingly numbers-driven, less personal and more punitive over the years. “Where is the research that says these methods will work for non-natives?” asks Schneider. “They make these changes based on—what?”

### A History of Welfare

**F**rustrated by this very question, I once complained to my mother, the daughter of Russian Jewish refugees who escaped the last pogrom. She gave a terse reply: her parents arrived in 1906, on a boat to New York, speaking no English, illiterate. My grandmother worked 14 hours a day, six days a week in a sweatshop and never learned to write her name. My grandfather,

a machinist, taught himself English by reading the paper. My mom faked her birth certificate at age 11 to work in a bottling plant. She finished high school, married well and sent me to college. I, in turn, traveled abroad, learned foreign languages and went to graduate school; each generation gained more education and freedom than the last. “Entire villages were wiped out in the pogroms,” my mother scolded. “Our people were also shell-shocked. But they didn’t want a handout, they wanted to work.”

The truth is, early American immigrants had no alternative. TANF and its predecessors did not exist until 1935, when public assistance swept into law as part of FDR’s 1935 Social Security Act. During the 1960s and 70s, the program expanded. As a function of President Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” food stamps became available for all low-income households in 1964 and, 10 years later, Congress enacted Supplemental Security Income for senior and disabled citizens. The 1980s saw social programs shrink, and when Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, he promised to “end welfare as we know it,” hence the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” of 1996, more commonly known as “welfare reform.” The act placed a vigorous emphasis on job search, gave states more control over eligibility (but also left states with the risk of penalty,



should poverty increase), and restricted a family's TANF eligibility to five years. (Oregon originally obtained waivers to that limit but, as of October 1, 2006, the "clock" began ticking, retroactive to July 1, 2003).

Clinton's supporters maintain that his plan has been wildly successful. In the past decade, the number of families on welfare has dropped by 57%, with more people going to work. However, they often end up in low wage jobs, with few benefits or advancement opportunities and little support for continuing education.

Additionally, such terms as outsourcing and globalization mean that the unskilled assembly jobs of the 20th century have largely shipped out. Though Oregon has tried to save or add manufacturing jobs, the state still stands 23,000 positions below its 1998 peak. Top Oregon employment sectors include professional/business services and healthcare; more Oregonians are employed in office and administrative support positions than any other profession. Obviously, these occupations require written and spoken English, computer knowledge and culturally appropriate demeanor. Into this milieu we invite our immigrants and refugees.

### Reaching for Self-Sufficiency

I do not mean to be a curmudgeon. Academic institutions and non-profits tied to DHS have had great victories helping newcomers find employment, one reason Oregon ranks #11 in America as a destination state for refugees.

In 2004, Marsee Foods Inc., an industrial bakery in northeast Portland, began hiring a cadre of Russian and Spanish speaking refugees through Jobs+, a state-subsidized half-year training pro-

gram. Four of Marsee's Jobs+ participants still work there. Daniel Bes, Marsee's Vice President of Marketing, who doubles as H.R. director, estimates that half his 80-person staff is foreign-born. He himself is French. He says his non-native employees show up on time, work hard and plan to move up. Despite the challenge of supervising a multi-cultural staff, he believes Marsee is making "an investment in our company's future. We work with emigrants on accuracy, speed, acquisition of skills. As long as they are receptive and trying, there's no reason to give up," says Bes.

Upon moving to the United States, Bes found work in a French bakery. "I always felt I was bringing a trade from my country," he says, again raising the question of what more we can do to use newcomers' knowledge and experience to diversify our own economy. "There is nothing worse than coming from a foreign country and ending up on the welfare system," concludes Bes, his accent lush and melodic.

The strongest, proudest immigrants echo his sentiments. They either refuse public assistance or use it as a temporary measure while learning English and seeking other resources. And, while I agree with my mother and Daniel Bes, I can't seem to reconcile that with women like Fatima and Khadra, who are too rooted in their culture to reach out for American-style independence so tightly linked to financial prosperity.

Watching my clients, I contemplate my grandmother, Malke ("queen" in Yiddish) Smolenskaya, shortened at Ellis Island to Molly Smoller, sailing past the Statue of Liberty to a life of servitude. I look ahead, to the 35,000 refugees scheduled to arrive in The U.S. over the next few years, from places like Burma, Burundi and Krasnodar-Krai (Russia).

And I keep working. **M**

*Since 2003 Meryl Lipman has worked developing job training opportunities for Portland immigrants and refugees. Previously, she studied social systems in Denmark and taught life skills to U.S.-bound refugees in Belarus. She holds a BA in International Studies from The American University and is currently pursuing a master's in writing at PSU.*

*All photographs, with the exception of that of the Somali woodcarving, are courtesy of Ron Johnson, a Brigham City, Utah, photographer.*