



Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity

By Cawo M. Abdi

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As a Somali working since high school in the United Arab Emirates, Osman considers himself “blessed” to be in a Muslim country, though citizenship, with the security it offers, remains elusive. For Ardo, smuggled out of Somalia to join her husband in South Africa, insecurities are of a more immediate, physical kind, and her economic prospects and legal status are more uncertain. Adam, in the United States—a destination often imagined as an earthly Eden, or *jannah*, by so many of his compatriots—now sees heaven in a return to Somalia.

The stories of these three people are among the many that emerge from mass migration triggered by the political turmoil and civil war plaguing Somalia since 1988. And they are among the diverse collection presented in eloquent detail in *Elusive Jannah*, a remarkable portrait of the very different experiences of Somali migrants in the UAE, South Africa, and the United States. Somalis in the UAE, a relatively closed Muslim nation, are a minority within a large South Asian population of labor migrants. In South Africa, they are part of a highly racialized and segregated postapartheid society. In the United States they find themselves in a welfare state with its own racial, socioeconomic, and political tensions. A comparison of Somali settlements in these three locations clearly reveals the importance of immigration policies in the migrant experience.

Cawo M. Abdi’s nuanced analysis demonstrates that a full understanding of successful migration and integration must go beyond legal, economic, and physical security to encompass a sense of religious, cultural, and social belonging. Her timely book underscores the sociopolitical forces shaping the Somali diaspora, as well as the roles of the nation-state, the war on terror, and globalization in both constraining and enabling their search for citizenship and security.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a powerful and beautiful ethnography of members of the Somali Diaspora dealing with the opportunities and disadvantages of life in three points of settlement. Cawo M. Abdi gets very close to the subjects and depicts their outlooks, strategies, and trials in a convincing and rich manner."—Steven J. Gold, Michigan State University

"Elusive Jannah provides a fascinating window into the identities, strategies, and struggles of Somalis in three very different national contexts. Based on ethnographic research in the United States, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, this is an engaging, well-written, and welcome addition to the comparative study of international migration."—Nancy Foner, coauthor of *Strangers No More: Immigration and the Challenges of Integration in North America and Western Europe*

"The book remains a valuable contribution to studies of international migration and it is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in Somalia and its diaspora."—*African Affairs*

"The multiplicity of experiences and diverse contexts highlighted by Cawo drive home the complexities of diasporic lives, making this book an important resource for both area and diaspora studies."—*International Migration Review*

"Elusive Jannah offers depth and breadth to the literature on Somali diaspora groups and more generally to studies of international migration and migrant incorporation and belonging. It deserves to be widely read for its beautiful ethnography and insightful analysis of belonging and mobility in an age of stratified globalization and migration."—*American Journal of Sociology*

About the Author

Cawo M. Abdi is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota and a research associate in sociology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

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