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Book Review: *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine* by Catherine Besteman

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BOOK REVIEW

MAKING REFUGE: SOMALI BANTU REFUGEES AND LEWISTON, MAINE

BY CATHERINE BESTEMAN

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. XVI + 352 PAGES

\$28.95 (PAPER)

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Practitioners in the field of education in emergencies often focus on the present moment, the immediate need, and durable solutions for the future. Rarely in this field do we find ourselves looking backward to inform the way forward (Monaghan 2019). Catherine Besteman's book, *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine*, is an excellent example of how the past educational experiences of marginalized refugee groups can shape both individual and cultural identity, and have an impact on their present and future educational opportunities and experiences.

Through a decade of work and an expansive seven-year ethnographic study, Besteman weaves an intricate story of colonial devastation, historical discrimination, and contemporary violence. In the foreground of this severe backdrop, she showcases the hope, resiliency, and resolve of the Somali Bantu refugee community in Lewiston, Maine, as they seek not merely to integrate, but to achieve equality. Her book is first and foremost an ethnographic account of the Somali Bantus' journey, from conflict in Somalia through a decade in Kenyan refugee camps and eventual resettlement in the United States. Besteman creatively uses the recurring theme of education throughout the three main sections to exemplify points related to the discrimination, identity development, integration, and cultural change experienced by this Somali Bantu community.

In the first section, Besteman presents a narrative of the structural violence that led to the evolution of the *jareer* (marginalized Bantu) and *jileec* (dominant) ethnic groups in Somalia. She recounts how the historical enslavement and subsequent minority status of the *jareer* led to their poverty, physical assault, and humiliation (78). Besteman describes the centuries of extreme marginalization that specifically included a lack of access to education, which resulted in illiteracy, limited opportunities for social mobility, and lingering negative relations between the *jareer* and *jileec*. Indeed, this educational discrimination followed the Somali Bantus to refugee camps in Kenya in the early 1990s, where *jareer* Somali Bantus who are now resettled elsewhere remember being taunted by their fellow *jileec* students: "Even monkeys can pass the exam and go to high school!" (88).

Besteman describes how education functioned as a vehicle for past and present discrimination, noting specifically that education was instrumental in the identity development of Somali Bantu youth. She explains that jareer teenagers learned the term “Bantu” from their Kenyan teachers in the refugee camps, which offered them “a connection to Bantus elsewhere in Africa and to their teachers that made the label appealing” (87). This contrasted sharply with the racism they experienced there. Besteman explains how educational success in the refugee camps “emboldened young Somali Bantus, for whom the Bantu label offered a positive self-identity” (88). Despite the racism and discrimination the Bantu label inflicted, education provided an opportunity for positive self-identity development for jareer teenagers who proudly took up the term.

In the following section, Besteman uses education as a backdrop for showcasing the challenges of resettlement, integration, and assimilation the Somali Bantus faced in Lewiston, Maine. She begins by noting that the promise of education motivated individuals to sign up for resettlement in the first place; however, the reality upon arrival was a disappointment. Almost all of the Somali Bantu refugees who arrived in the United States as teenagers failed to graduate high school, due to the poor quality of their previous education, language issues, and cultural differences. Most Somali Bantu adults were forced to choose between earning an income or pursuing an education. Besteman explains that schools became battlegrounds for intercultural conflicts (e.g., Somali Bantu parents’ requests for prayer rooms in schools, for their daughters to be allowed to wear headscarves, and for the cafeteria not to serve pork), and that Somali Bantu parents felt their concerns were often disregarded or deflected by school officials. This section also includes examples of how the unwarranted overuse of suspensions, teachers’ racist remarks and behavior, and the denial of specialized services for struggling Somali students created an accumulation of obstacles within the education system that made achieving assimilation, let alone equality, nearly impossible for these Somali Bantu students.

In the final section of the book, Besteman underscores the integral role education played in the development and reshaping of these Somali Bantus’ cultural identities and practices. One example is how advocacy groups used the schools as a means to increase protective factors for Somali Bantu girls, preventing early marriage in particular. As a result, parents were forced to shift their traditional ways of thinking about their daughters’ safety and future wellbeing; instead of marriage being a factor that would provide future security, their school now functioned in this capacity, and marriage was seen to be more harmful than helpful at such a young age. Besteman also describes how the school was a catalyst for parent-child

interactions (e.g., parents asking children how their school day went, discussions about report cards, pushing back on school discipline and suspension, etc.), and how these interactions slowly changed how the Somali Bantu parents and children regarded, respected, and communicated with one another—changes that will shape the cultural identities and educational experiences of future generations of resettled Somali Bantus.

Besteman's work is an impressive in-depth look into the past and present lives of a displaced people and their experience "making refuge." For those in the field of anthropology, this book is an outstanding example of ethnographic work and an important reality check for those working in the field of refugee resettlement. This book also demonstrates the crucial role education can play in a refugee group's past, present, and future discrimination, identity development, integration, and cultural change. Like *Making Refuge*, future historically rooted works about the refugee experience will help to inform and improve the design and delivery of education services for displaced communities in both emergency and resettlement contexts.

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