Tawheed Mosque and the Battle for Citizenship for Somali-Ugandans in Uganda

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Religious leaders and religious networks have played a crucial role in the efforts by the Somali-Ugandan community to resist othering in public life in Uganda. Tawheed Mosque in the Kisenyi neighbourhood of Kampala has been a particularly important centre for integration, belonging, and pan-African activities. It serves as a setting where religious figures mediate the division between Ugandans and Somali-Ugandans while strictly upholding equality and harmony as guiding principles. In 2010, after an Al-Shabaab terrorist attack provoked hostile attention towards the Somali-Ugandan community, Sheikh Abduweli of the Tawheed Mosque worked with business and religious leaders to file a lawsuit against the Ugandan government to block an effort to deny citizenship to Somalis born to Ugandan-born parents.[1] This initiative demanded the same social and political rights for Somali-Ugandans as for all other Ugandan citizens. Religious leaders spurred community members to defy discriminatory practices by the immigration office as they urged to be recognised as fully-fledged Ugandan citizens entitled to all rights outlined in the Ugandan constitution.

This essay draws on empirical data gathered in Kampala and Jinja between March and April 2023 and focuses on the myriad ways Somali-Ugandans are part and parcel of Uganda's political fabric. This focus aligns with the recently growing scholarship on Somalis on the African continent, in addition to the already established scholarship on Somalis in both Kenya and South Africa where their trajectories are well documented. An example of Somalia's impact on the African continent can be found in Sahra Koshin's work on the migration patterns, humanitarian efforts, and diasporic activities of Somali migrant entrepreneurs in Zambia.[2] This essay will also contribute to our understanding of the Somali presence in African countries traditionally not considered theirs, while delving into their engagement with politics via the instrumentalisation of religious networks.

The Trajectory of Somalis in Uganda

Since the eruption of the civil war in Somalia in 1991, people have been crossing Somalia's borders and entering neighbouring nations in East Africa, including Uganda. The resettling of Somalis in Uganda, however, predates the 1990s and can be traced to the colonial era (1894–1962). Men from northern Somalia were stationed by the Imperial British East Africa Company to serve as *askaris* in Uganda, and many of them made the decision to stay there after completing their military service by relocating their families and starting new lives in the landlocked country known as the Pearl of Africa. Concurrently, Somali pastoralists had started venturing into new territory, and in their quest to find greener pastures some ended up in Uganda, where they mostly engaged in the cattle trade. These historical trends slowly but surely led to the formation of a bona fide Somali community in Uganda, where they resided in locations like Jinja, Soroti, and Kumi.[3] The majority of families initially lived in Karamoja during the colonial period, and a large number relocated to Kampala in the post-independence period.

People of Somali origin in present-day Uganda come from different camps, which Iazzolino and Hersi demarcated as "*askaris*, pioneers, and refugees."[4] Somali-Ugandan communities who are pioneers and have lived in Uganda for three generations are the subject of this essay. More specifically, the focus is on a sliver of these communities that encompasses a group of religious leaders and businesspeople who are intertwined through kinship ties and who will be referred to as a singular Somali-Ugandan community for the purpose of this essay. The other two groups of Somalis are Somali refugees and Somalis whose

migration to Uganda in recent decades has been motivated by economic and social opportunities. In addition, the essay deliberately sidesteps the majority of scholarship on Somalis that is conducted through the prism of refugeehood and instead foregrounds the movement of Somalis that can be traced to pre-colonial times within and between African borders.

Somali communities in Uganda swiftly established a name for themselves as people with sophisticated business acumen while maintaining both their commercial and cultural ties to Somalia. As they assimilated into Ugandan society through time and with each succeeding generation, Somali migrants began to see themselves as more than just Somalis but also as Somali-Ugandans, as they were fully embedded in Ugandan society. These Somali-Ugandans immersed themselves firmly in economic life as they engaged in petty trade by setting up small shops and eventually going into the bus and trucking business as they carried goods across the Kenyan, Sudanese, and Congolese borders.[5] The socioeconomic success of Somalis in Uganda is greatly aided by their relationship with the state, as each sitting president, from Milton Obote to Idi Amin and currently Yoweri Museveni, has viewed Somalis in a favourable light and considered them an asset to the Ugandan economy.

This positive perception was shattered in July 2010, however, when twin blasts carried out by the Somali terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab hit Kampala in the wake of the World Cup final. Seventy-four Ugandans who had gathered to watch the match died, with many more left injured.[6] As a result, Somalis in Uganda, who had previously experienced a degree of anonymity, suddenly received considerable negative media attention. Kisenyi, dubbed Little Mogadishu due to its large Somali business enclave, received the attention of national and international media outlets alike as its residents articulated fears of reprisal attacks.[7] President Museveni reiterated his commitment to continuing an open-door policy for Somali refugees while also contributing to the fight against Al-Shabaab in Somalia itself. Public discourse, however, diverged from the government's stance (albeit moderately), and the Somali community was seen as detached from Ugandan culture. In addition, tainted imagery proliferated through Ugandan media outlets that reproduced ethnic stereotypes and falsehoods, which were harmful to Somalis living across Uganda.[8]

In response, Somali-Ugandan community leaders deliberated how to counter negative perceptions of Somali people. In fact, the community's religious leaders played an authoritative role in mediating the peripheral standing of Somalis in Ugandan society. After the Al-Shabaab attack, Somali-Ugandans had faced retaliatory xenophobia through the exclusion of citizenship status as migration officials dismissed pre-existing policies that were in place to grant these groups citizenship. Somalis who were born in Uganda to Ugandan-born parents were denied citizenship as immigration officials grouped them together with recently arrived Somali refugees. In response, third-generation Somali-Ugandan religious leader Sheikh Muhammad Abduweli suggested petitioning the Civil Division of the High Court based in Kampala to grant Ugandans of Somali descent citizenship, with the goal of inserting them further in state structures to both increase political leverage and alter public perceptions of Somalis. Sheikh Abduweli, along with six other members of the community, namely Hirsi Mohamed, Yahaya Yusuf, Ahmed Noor Osman, Abdullah Ahmed Sheikh, Abdu Abucar Hussein, and Abdinasir Hussein Shire, sued the government in 2019 to reverse the discriminatory migration decree.[9] As the Sheikh aptly stated, "Our rights should not be infringed upon by outside parties who are unwilling to recognise our rights. It is important that we are recognised as Ugandans first. I was born here, as were my father and his father before him. So, we decided to fight for our rights to be recognised as one of Uganda's tribes. This will greatly help the community's standing and influence."[10] The lawsuit yielded positive results for the plaintiffs as the court ruled that the Ugandan Constitution's Article 10 and Section 12 of the Citizenship and Immigration Control Act's qualifications were met by them, making them citizens by birth.[11] Moreover, the lawsuit whipped up considerable public controversy as it raised questions of who and what constitutes a Ugandan, and it simultaneously opened the possibility

for other minority communities to pursue Ugandanness through the legal route.

Tawheed Mosque—A Pan-African Site of Possibilities, Integration, and Togetherness

In Uganda, relations between Muslim and Christian communities have historically been characterised more by mistrust than by cooperation, but this phenomenon has slightly improved in recent decades. Initiatives aimed at fostering solidarity and collaborative gestures have worked to alleviate tensions in Uganda's multireligious society. Religious actors from wide-ranging backgrounds have played an indispensable role in these efforts.[12] Islam is a major world religion, yet it is a numerically marginal religion in Uganda, which has caused Muslim communities, such as the Nubians as well as Somali-Ugandans, to face exclusion in socio-political realms. Somali-Ugandan imams have sought recourse against ostracising elements, and in particular, Tawheed Mosque has proven itself a central site for resolving barriers.

The mosque was founded in the 1980s, when Somali-Ugandan elders pooled resources to build a communal mosque and was expanded in 1994 when a *madrassa* was added.[13] Tawheed Mosque is thus a Somali-Ugandan-run mosque based in the heart of Somali life in Kisenyi, with its minaret functioning as a compass for Somali(-Ugandan) groups who frequent the mosque. It is a space of religious and political significance, and it is the site where Sheikh Abduweli disseminates his pan-African notions in his preaching and teaching. Though most worshippers are of Somali descent, fellow Africans are welcomed by the Sheikh as he forges deep religious connections that translate into cultural and political understandings.[14] Tawheed is a transnational space that has provided social services and cultural exchanges alongside educational activities since its inception, though the offering of social services to Ugandans of all walks of life has increased since the 2010 twin bombings in Kampala.

Overall, Tawheed Mosque was strategically positioned as a site for intercultural convergence that yielded the potential to move beyond binary imaginaries that include or exclude Uganda's Somalis. For example, religious leaders established programmes that facilitated relations between the Somali community and other communities. In one such instance, community members were encouraged to attend a yearly Blood Donor Day initiative aimed at meeting the needs of various people while positioning Somali citizens as integrated people who actively contribute to Ugandan society.[15] In addition, while in the past *Jummah* prayers would routinely be held in the Somali language, Luganda and Swahili were increasingly used to draw other Muslims, with English becoming the official lingua franca. In addition, during the holy month of Ramadan, Ugandans from different religions were welcomed to join for a meal and a prayer, further reframing Somali-Ugandans as neighbours not to be feared but with whom to feel solidarity.

Familiarity and reciprocity were centred on erasing the negative tinge ingrained in the community's societal standing by terrorist activities that had nothing to do with Somali-Ugandans. The initiatives therefore fostered social cohesiveness as they made Somali-Ugandans visible as an integrated collective that was fully a part of Ugandan life. Moreover, Sheikh Abduweli, a staunch pan-Africanist, espoused unified visions of Islam and pan-Africanism as belief systems that not only existed in harmony on paper but also in practice. Proposals intended to foster togetherness were, unsurprisingly, arranged around a unified *ummah* woven together through the principles of equality, brotherhood, and sisterhood. This meant foregoing social practices that were exclusionary to non-Somalis and instead embracing a reinterpretation of communal standards that had long been in place to avoid the intermingling of Ugandans and Somali-Ugandans. Abduweli fervently preached a critical Islamic tenet, namely that Islamic thought is driven by the significance of social inclusivity—piety and prophecy cannot exist alongside marginalising exchanges. Consequently, the issues faced by Somali-Ugandans were not only their burden to carry, but it was also the *ummah*'s task to ensure the fair and just treatment of shunned groups of fellow Muslims, despite socio-political differences.

Religious spaces in Uganda also function as political sites, especially as members of the clergy are more revered than politicians.[16] When prominent community members, businesspeople as well as religious leaders, deemed it necessary to sue the government for not protecting ethnically Somali Ugandans from xenophobic treatment by immigration officials in their denial of the Ugandan passport, Sheikh Abduweli opened the mosque to representatives of the community as a base for their political lobbying. Petitioners congregated in the offices of Tawheed's densely visited confines to debate matters of national belonging and its associated rights, all the while coming to the mutual stance that the proposed naturalisation process by immigration was wholly unmerited as Somali-Ugandans were legally citizens by birth. In the words of Abduweli, ''when you have been living in Uganda for several generations, you have the right to citizenship, and we should not be treated as if all Somalis are refugees. We took this complaint to the government because that is our right as Ugandans. We are an indigenous community, and the businessmen know this, which is why they were supportive of turning this into a legal issue."[17] Thus, in response to looming restrictive conditions imposed upon the community's rights, Somali-Ugandans' foremost religious leader advanced the claim by exerting the Ugandanness of his community. By defying the delineation of the community and exercising agency in pursuing a right available to all citizens, Somali-Ugandans surpassed subjugation and instead embraced empowering communal practices that serve as learning tools for other post-migrant communities in Uganda.

Jummah prayer at Tawheed Mosque, Kampala, April 2023. Photo taken by Yusra Abdullahi.

The Somali-Ugandan Community versus the Republic of Uganda

In the 2019 lawsuit against the Ugandan government, the Somali-Ugandan plaintiffs had numerous demands that they wished the court to uphold. These demands included a declaration that eligible members from the Somali-Ugandan communities are automatically citizens by birth entitled to both the issuance and renewal of all available Ugandan citizenship documents and that the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control issue these identity-related documents to those eligible without creating more discriminatory hurdles.[18] This was in direct response to Immigration's requirement that, in order to be granted a Ugandan passport or identity card, all Somalis must either first be naturalised or provide evidence that marriage to a "true" indigenous Ugandan is in their lineage. The petitioners, however, provided evidence of the illegal nature of these requirements and employed Articles 9 and 10(b) of the Constitution of Uganda to demonstrate how one is by default eligible for citizenship by birth.[19] The attorney general countered by claiming that the plaintiffs were not entitled to automatic citizenship simply for being born in Uganda and that, in fact, they could not even provide evidence of being denied certain rights and services for being of Somali origin. While this further attested to the intensification of the marginalisation of Somali-Ugandans post-2010, Sheikh Abduweli's reconstruction of a collective identity rooted in a firm belief in Ugandanness in conjunction with the Islamic practice of justice allowed for the continuance of court proceedings in an agreeable manner.

Sheikh Abduweli and the Tawheed Mosque play a critical role within the influential business community. Some businessmen provided legal fees and assisted behind the scenes during the lawsuit, while others were at the forefront in their dealings with the state and acted as intermediaries between the Somali-Ugandan populace and political circles.[20] Somali-Ugandans are the second largest group of taxpayers in Uganda due to their many successful businesses in various domains, including the fuel sector, foreign exchange and money transfer services, and the hospitality industry.[21]

The Somali-Ugandan businesspeople are closely tethered to Somali communities across the country, and they play a crucial role in creating job and schooling opportunities for Somali youth. These entrepreneurs also frequent Tawheed Mosque, where they call upon the Sheikh for spiritual counsel, engage in almsgiving, conceive of ways to improve the overall wellbeing of the communities, and discuss political matters.

In these ways, Tawheed connects community members who consider the mosque a critical information hub where political, economic, social, and judicial matters intersect and where important community issues are discussed and resolved. The Somali-Ugandan community's modus operandi is to exert influence without making their way onto news headlines since, as one businesswoman put it, '"politics is a dangerous game for Somalis."[22] Businesspeople often prefer not to have their dealings with political figures publicised. To illustrate, the Mandela family—famed for their Café Javas franchise as well as their City Oil fuel company branches—represented the wider community in political fora, and they also facilitated relations between the state and their own Somali-Ugandan community. However, the Mandelas are careful not to be seen as crafty negotiators. Mosque-led initiatives thus allowed businessmen to navigate the precarious nature of the state in which they conduct business and live their everyday lives. Nevertheless, political clout was openly sought after through the matter of citizenship. In 2020, Justice Ssekaana ruled in the case filed in 2019 and declared that the Somali-Ugandan plaintiffs were, indeed, entitled to Ugandan citizenship. According to the judge, Somali-Ugandans born in Uganda and whose parents or grandparents were also born within Ugandan borders from February 1, 1926, onwards should automatically be granted citizenship.[23] In addition, Justice Ssekaana determined that the plaintiffs must be provided with the documentation they require and stated that the continued exclusion of Somali-Ugandans by skin colour (in their case used to determine indigeneity) is "extremely dangerous, derogatory, and discriminatory."[24] Lastly, he determined that petitioners who were eligible for citizenship renewal had to be given the appropriate documents.

Conclusion

The example of Tawheed Mosque and Sheikh Muhammad Abduweli demonstrates the unique role of religious institutions in the interactions between Somali-Ugandans, the Ugandan state, and the broader Ugandan public. Their response to the move to deny citizenship to long-time resident Somali-Ugandans became part of a larger campaign to resist othering and officially demand to be recognised as Ugandan. The mosque served as a site of community building, integrational activities, and a forum for deliberating socio-political strategies aimed at improving the standing of Somali-Ugandan communities, in the process displaying Tawheed's potential for accommodating these convergences. Despite the complex and varying relationships between the mosque and political integration, Muslim leaders in this Somali-Ugandan community worked to produce collective identity practices that were aligned with the goal of wider cohesive integration in the Ugandan context.

Further, prominent Somali-Ugandan businesspeople assumed a critical role in linking the community to broader political institutions that were uniquely placed to advance their rights claims. Here, the Sheikh was influential in developing congregational dynamics that encouraged Somali-Ugandans with relevant networks to advocate for fellow congregants and sponsor integrational endeavours. Before politicising the contours of the Somali-Ugandan community, however, the Sheikh had to first engage with the civic lives of his congregants to maximise his impact on political matters. This exercise led to the lawsuit against the Ugandan government, which yielded a win against the discriminatory practices of the immigration office and set the precedent for other Ugandan communities of non-Ugandan origin to pursue similar pathways to achieve citizenship. Ultimately, the civic and political engagement of the Somali-Ugandan community was informed by proceedings at Tawheed Mosque, where religious leadership concurrently became a mechanism to mobilise Somali-Ugandans who wished to exercise agency over their own affairs. ■

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