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A Cosmic Connection: For anthropologist Catherine Besteman, reunion with Somali Bantu in Maine was life changing.

Gerry Boyle

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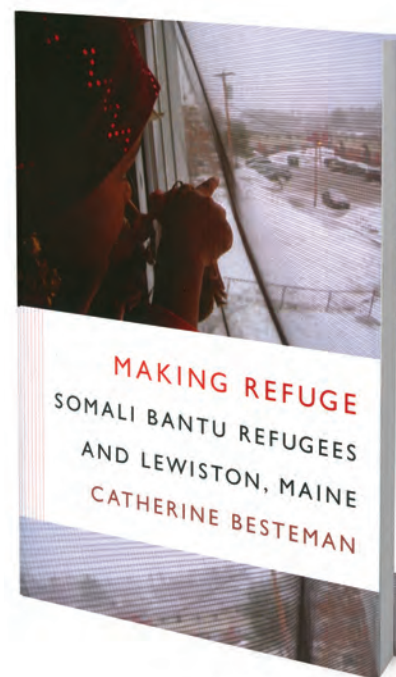
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IN LEWISTON, A COSMIC EVENT

Reunited with Somali Bantu families after decades, anthropologist Catherine Besteman chronicles their lives

By Gerry Boyle '78
Photography by Heather Perry '93

The invitation was from Bates College for Colby anthropologist Catherine Besteman to participate in a panel with Somali Bantu refugees who, in 2006, had started arriving in droves in the down-at-the-heels mill city of Lewiston, Maine.

Besteman and her husband, Jorge Acero, had lived in a remote Somali village, Banta, in 1987 and 1988, and Besteman's role in Lewiston was to give some background on the civil war that broke out shortly afterward. But when Besteman, the Francis F. Bartlett and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology, introduced herself to the men on the panel and asked where they were from, the faces suddenly became familiar.

"Catherine stood up and said, 'Hey, what's going on here? Are all you guys from Banta?' The whole thing kind of erupted," said Muhidin Libah, who had lived in Banta as a child.

The children who had tagged along after Besteman and Acero in rural southwest Somalia were now adults. Their parents were aging versions of the villagers Besteman

remembered. And, as one said to her, "Catherine! You got old!" By chance, the Americans and the community that had bonded in remote easternmost Africa two decades earlier were reunited in the most unlikely of places.

The reunion followed years of civil war, destruction of the village and region by marauding militias, displacement of the residents to other parts of Somalia and refugee camps in Kenya, and resettlement of some Somali Bantu to other parts of the world. "I had found it impossible to keep track of anybody," Besteman said. "That's what made it so cosmic, that we would all end up in Maine."

That cosmic event rekindled a remarkable relationship, one that had begun in a world of farming and villages of thatch-roofed homes. "I wanted to know what happened in Banta, not to write about it necessarily, but because this was a place I cared about," Besteman said.

Having once chronicled a Somali Bantu life that revolved around families and crops, she found herself advocating for the same families in the schools and social service agencies of Lewiston. She reconnected with former

*Left: Rilwan Osman and his children look at photos taken in Rilwan's village in Somalia in 1987.
Top: Catherine Besteman and a child in the village of Banta, October 1987.*



“

They did not invite refugees to come, and yet thousands and thousands came. That they became twenty percent of the population—that’s pretty extraordinary.”

—Professor of Anthropology
Catherine Besteman

STUDENTS AND SOMALI BANTU COLLABORATE ON DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS

The course is called Global Maine, and Colby students are learning the state is just that.

Four teams of students were working in the immigrant community in Lewiston this spring, collaborating with Somali Bantu residents on documentary projects. The Integrated Studies course, taught by Francis F. Bartlett and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology Catherine Besteman and Associate Professor of Global Studies Maple Rasza, introduced students to the immigrant community and trained them in the techniques of visual anthropology.

A full story is at [Colby Magazine](#) .

Children of Somali immigrants play in the playground of a preschool in downtown Lewiston. They are part of a growing immigrant population from Somalia and other parts of the world that is changing the face of the small Maine city.



She is keeping our history alive.”

—Rilwan Osman, executive director of
Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services

village residents, not only in Maine but in Syracuse and Hartford. The former farmers were learning English and how to drive. They worked in Walmarts and escorted their children to school, and found ways to help themselves and each other in this new and strange world.

And Besteman became a lynchpin in the transition to their new lives. “We always call her when we need anything, we always ask her for ideas,” said Libah, director of the Somali Bantu Community Association of Maine. “If someone doesn’t know us, she’s the one who will testify who we are.”

Eventually the Somali Bantu experience in Lewiston would become Besteman’s second Somali project: her latest book is titled *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine*. In it she explores the experience of the new immigrants and the reaction to their unexpected arrival—from hostile editorials to bolstering of English-language instruction—in the predominantly Franco-American city.

Besteman says her book has two purposes: one, to show how people become refugees and what happens to them after they are displaced; and two, to tell the story of Lewiston, using it as a lens to examine how people react to and deal with change. “How does a poor city struggling with an influx of very poor people figure that out?” she asked. “How do you pull together as a community rather than rip each other apart?”

Viewing the immigrants through an anthropologist’s lens, Besteman tells the story from the perspective of the various players: the Somali Bantu themselves, the local residents and officials who opposed the refugees’ settlement in their city, and those who have worked to help the Somali Bantu succeed in the community.

Members of the immigrant community who were reading the book (published in February), welcomed it as a way to document the culture of a community that had, until recently, no written literary tradition. “She is keeping our history alive,” said Rilwan Osman, executive director of Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services, who lived in Banta as a child.

In fact, Besteman wrote the book only after urging by Osman and others. “There was this very clear message,” she said. “You write stories. This is clearly what you have to do now.”

For three years after their reunion, Besteman worked with the Somali Bantu community in Lewiston, not as an anthropologist, but as a friend helping them adjust to American life and assisting as they worked to explain their history and culture to their new American neighbors. A key distinction was the term Somali Bantu, a recently coined term used to describe an ethnic group descended in part from slaves brought to Somalia from other parts of Africa. In Somalia, Somali Bantu were discriminated against by ethnic Somalis, even as most Mainers see them as broadly Somali, or even just as refugees.

“These are people who come with a whole history,” Besteman said, “a whole past and a whole life.”

Most of that recent history is in the Middle Juba region of Somalia, a heritage visible on and around Lisbon Street in the signs for Somali markets and businesses and in the Somali Bantu nonprofits that have flourished and grown in the city center. Besteman may be one of the few non-Somali Bantu who fully understands the culture as it has become established in Maine as well as its roots in Somalia. She moved to the Juba Valley, close to the border with Kenya, in 1987 to do doctoral research in Banta. For a year Besteman and Acero lived in the community of subsistence farmers organized around elder-led extended family groups. “Catherine came and she settled,” said Libah. “She was different [from other Westerners] because she was in the community.”

That life was shattered in 1991 when the formerly U.S.-supported government of Siad Barre collapsed and heavily armed militiamen took to the countryside, raiding and pillaging villages. Residents of Banta, including many now living in Lewiston, fled into the bush, trying to stay ahead of the marauders. “We divided into two groups,” he said. “One group headed for Mogadishu on foot. That means if you are ten, only six of you will die on the way.”

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She's a senior at USM, planning to work at the UN when she leaves college. She barely spoke English when she came. I almost cried.”

—Caroline Sample, former English Language Learner teacher at Lewiston High School, on meeting with a Somali Bantu graduate



It was a harrowing time, but Libah's family escaped, spending more than a decade in a refugee camp in Kenya, a period chronicled in Besteman's book in the words of the refugees themselves. Their memories, she writes, include sexual abuse of women, arbitrary decision making by camp administrators, a lack of protection from theft and other crimes, and being confined to the worst menial jobs. "It was so horrible that it is undiscussable," Besteman was told by one Somali Bantu. "No one should have to live in such a place."

The 12,000 Somali Bantu were categorized as a "persecuted minority" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the book notes, and attempts were made to repatriate them to their ancestral lands in Tanzania and Mozambique. Those efforts sputtered because of budget problems, and the United States finally announced that it would accept some of the refugees. But tightened security after 9/11, verification of Somali Bantu status (a sometimes confused and haphazard process that included no appeal provision)



After school, children flock to computers at Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services in Lewiston.

required clearance by multiple agencies, and medical checks caused the resettlement process to take five years, Besteman writes, concluding that the Somali Bantu were “the most heavily screened immigrants in American history.”

Thorough screening didn’t prepare the Somali Bantu for life in the United States, whether it be in Houston, Atlanta, Syracuse, or any of the other American cities where they were delivered. Besteman chronicles the experience of several refugees who grappled with their new country—and the lack of preparation offered by the U.S. State

Department. Refugees were expected to be self-sufficient in 90 days, she writes, an astonishingly short time for illiterate, non-English speaking refugees who also were expected to promptly repay the cost of their flights to America. One Congressional report concluded that the refugee resettlement program in the United States should be called “Abandoned upon Arrival.”

The Somali Bantu who settled in Lewiston handpicked the city after struggling in larger, less hospitable places where they found locals unfriendly, transportation difficult, and



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People are learning that this is home for us. We don't have any [other] home to go to. We are part of the community.”

—Rilwan Osman, executive director of Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services

Rilwan Osman in his office in Lewiston. Osman, 32, an immigrant from Somalia, cofounded the nonprofit in the back of a van. It now serves the refugee communities in both Lewiston and Portland.

street criminals quick to prey on them. Because Lewiston was a secondary settlement site, immigration agencies had little involvement in their transition to Maine life, leaving the initial heavy lifting to city and social service administrators. “They did not invite refugees to come,” Besteman said. “And yet thousands and thousands came. That they became twenty percent of the school population—that’s pretty extraordinary.”

The public schools saw an unprecedented influx of Somali Bantu, with at least one new family arriving every week for most of 2006, most placing several children in the high school alone. “I started with twelve to fourteen students,” said Caroline Sample, then an English Language Learner

teacher at Lewiston High School. “By January, one of my classes had thirty-five, many of whom had never set foot in a school before.”

But the students adapted, and older Somali Bantu saw a power shift that left them reliant on their children. Teachers like Sample were often asked to explain letters from state agencies, utilities, and landlords. “What is this thing?” Sample was asked as she was handed yet another document.

And all along she was advocating for her students, mediating misunderstandings, explaining expectations and viewpoints on both sides, “because who had heard of a Somali Bantu?” Sample said.

Besteman had, of course, and was one of the nation's experts in Somali Bantu culture. Among the first things she emphasized was that the Somali Bantu community could and should direct its own transition and that the learning process is not one-way. "Catherine helped show us that," said Kim Wettlaufer, former director of the refugee integration program at Trinity Jubilee Center, housed in the basement of a Lewiston church. "When we first met her she was so adamant ... that they need to be led by themselves. It can't be a bunch of white people. That's what she taught us. It's about people doing it themselves, and they *can* do it themselves."

Wettlaufer praised Besteman for advocating for the Somali Bantu but also keeping a low profile and stepping back as the immigrant community developed its own organizations and agencies and services. "My respect for her," he said, "is endless."

The community has forged its own way in the decade since the first arrivals. Around the block from the Trinity Jubilee Center are the Lewiston offices of Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services, where Acero's photos of village life in Banta line the walls. The agency, which offers services ranging from childcare to mental health counseling, started in the back of a van, said Osman, the cofounder. Now it has two offices (one in Portland) and more than 40 employees.

"We have made huge progress," he said, and he credited Besteman for helping to legitimize the community, portraying their culture through meetings and exhibits, even persuading local hospitals to add interpreters who speak Maay Maay, the Somali Bantu language. "She is the one professional who came in and explained us," Osman said. "I think that's bridging some gaps and making us more visible."

Still, in *Making Refuge* Besteman explores the hostile reaction to the Somali presence, attempting to deconstruct the conflicting stereotypes of welfare leeches and job stealers. Now, even in a political climate that shows increasing resentment towards immigrants nationwide, antipathy toward the Somali and Somali Bantu communities in Maine is diminishing.

"People are learning that this is home for us," Osman said. "We don't have any [other] home to go to. We are part of the community."

Indeed, conversations in Lewiston are studded with success stories. Sample, the retired ELL teacher, has seen many of her students go on to get college degrees.

Recently she met a former student out shopping. "She's a senior at USM, planning to work at the UN when she leaves college," Sample said. "She barely spoke any English when she came. I almost cried."

Libah, at his Lisbon Street office, keeps a list of names on the bulletin board behind his desk: 16 students who came through one of the nonprofit's education programs and graduated from Lewiston High School in 2013. "2014 was even more," he said, tapping the paper proudly. That week his own daughter had been admitted to colleges and was trying to make her choice.

Wettlaufer, at Trinity Jubilee Center, points to the inspiring Lewiston High boys soccer team, which won the state championship last fall with skilled players who had come up through the Somali Bantu soccer programs in Maine. A track All-American while at Bates, he coaches youth track in Lewiston, where some 80 children came out for the program and a relay team of 10-year-old Somali Bantu girls recently broke a 36-year-old state record. "It's been a huge success," he said.

Challenges remain, including finding ways to keep Somali youth connected to their heritage while they embrace the American culture all around them. A decade



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—Kim Wettlaufer, former director of refugee integration program, Trinity Jubilee Center, Lewiston

after her joyful reunion with the former residents of Banta, Besteman continues to be a sounding board for the Somali Bantu community organizations and to simply enjoy the friendships that have been extended across decades and continents.

In the end, she said, writing the book was a humbling experience. "It's a book that I think contains a great deal of admiration for both the immigrants and the Lewiston residents who oriented their lives toward making Lewiston a place where immigrants could be safe and thrive," she said. "These are not easy things to do. I feel theirs is an extraordinary story." ©