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## The Long Road to Becoming American: One Kenyan's Immigration Journey Filled with Perseverance, Discrimination, and Student Visa Restrictions

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**The Long Road to  
Becoming American: One  
Kenyan's Immigration  
Journey Filled with  
Perseverance,  
Discrimination, and  
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Restrictions.**

## Introduction

This study focuses on the story of one immigrant, Mid-hat Abdulrehman, and how he came to America and the problems he encountered along the way. Mid-hat is a Kenyan immigrant from the town of Lamu on the East African coast (Figure 1). Lamu is one of the oldest Swahili settlements with Swahili culture still thriving there today. Along the coast of Kenya, Islam is the dominant religion practiced and is very Orthodox in nature. Mid-hat is very close to both his Swahili culture and to his Islamic faith. Mid-hat is the third of four children in his family, three of whom now live in America. His mother and older brother still live in Lamu. As a child growing up in Lamu, his father owned a carpentry business and at the age of seven Mid-hat started working in his father's shop. Growing up, he learned the knowledge and skills required to enter his father's trade, but he desired more because he hated being stuck inside and working in the shop. He wanted to be out playing soccer, but his family encouraged him to focus on school and work in the shop. His mother taught Swahili to the Americans who visited Lamu because she could speak English and as a result,



**Figure 1:** Lamu, a town on the North coast of Africa, is located on an island which is part of the Lamu Archipelago. On this island no cars are used, only donkeys and boats called *dhow*s. Lamu is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Image from <http://www.africasky.co.uk/lamu-holidays/>)

Mid-hat's family was one of the first families to begin to intermingle with Western people and culture. It was because of this interaction that Mid-hat first began to dream of a potential life in the United States.

His brother traveled to the United States in 1996 which further encouraged Mid-hat to pursue a life and education in the US because he saw the opportunities that would become available if he received an American education. However Mid-hat relied on his father for financial support and when his father died unexpectedly in 2000, he began to doubt that he would ever be able to go to America.

Fortunately, his older brothers continued to support him which allowed him to attend one of the best schools on the Kenyan coast (Figure 2). This allowed Mid-hat to begin to actively pursue his dream of moving to the US. This essay explores Mid-hat's undying perseverance to realize his dream of immigrating to America fueled by the support from his family, in spite discrimination he

faced along the way. As well as the challenges he faced once he arrived in the United States.

### **Assumptions and Early Hypothesis**

Prior to meeting Mid-hat, I knew that he was going to have a unique story to tell. When Dr. Gearhart discussed possible participants she initially described Mid-hat's story as "incredible." During our initial exchange, Mid-hat asked me to look up the Diversity Visa Lottery and student visas to



**Figure 2:** Left to Right: His sister-in-law, his brother, his sister, and Mid-hat. Mid-hat's family members are the most important people in his life. They are the people who supported him throughout the entire process and who continue to support him today. They are the reason he is in the US today. (Image taken February, 27<sup>th</sup>, Mid-hat's home)

prepare for our first meeting. It was at this point that I knew that Dr. Gearhart was right in her statement, I knew that if he had won the Diversity Visa Lottery, it would be incredible. The only other thing I knew about Mid-hat prior to my research was that he is from Kenya and that the particular region he was from is Islamic. I knew that this meant that his story would most likely have been impacted by 9/11 and the change in the way this country treats Muslim immigrants and has tightened its immigration policies. I assumed that he had met discrimination and had a harder time entering this country just based on this fact alone. However, originating from Kenya and not a Middle-Eastern country, I also assumed that he would have had a less difficult time than someone from that region.

Before I met with Mid-hat, I read some of the current literature that has been published on immigrants from Kenya. As part of my research on the Diversity Visa Lottery, I learned that this is a random lottery in which 50,000 visa applicants from countries that have not had more than 50,000 people immigrate to the US in the last five years are selected to have the opportunity to complete the necessary paperwork to gain a Green Card. Approximately 15 million people worldwide apply

for the lottery and in 2012, 4,720 people from Kenya won the lottery (US Department of State, 2012). In the article *The U.S. Diversity Visa Programme and Transfer of Skills from Africa* (n.d.), suggests several reasons why the diversity lottery process may undermine the intent behind the program. Only the most skilled and well educated Kenyan citizens are likely able to afford a lawyer to complete the complicated paperwork. These then are also Kenya's most skilled workers who Kenya needs to retain in order to boost the economy. The lottery goes against the idea that that the diversity visa should be a random opportunity to increase immigration of non-typical immigrants to the US because only the wealthy immigrants can afford the paperwork. I began to wonder then if these skilled people leaving the country after winning the Diversity Visa Lottery were returning to Kenya after they received an American education or if they were helping their families in some other way.

This question led me to the article *Remittances and Poverty in Kenya* (Kiiru, 2010), which focuses on the question of how much remittances, money sent back to their family, effect the families in Kenya. Kiiru finds that about 70% of households received remittances in the year before

the study was conducted. It was also found that these remittances had a positive impact on consumption and on reducing poverty in the homes that were receiving them (Kiiru, 2010). This article led me to question what Mid-hat's plans were for the future and if he was planning on moving back to Kenya someday or if he plans on sending money home to his family.

A similar article, *The Meaning of Work for Black African Immigrant Adult College Students* (Stebbleton, 2012), Stebleton, describes how African immigrants have a different meaning of work. They feel that they are only in America in order to send money to their families to support them and be able to return home with a set of skills that will benefit their community. They also want to feel as though they are a member of American culture and as they assimilate to American culture, their views on work change (Stebbleton, 2012). After this article I wanted to ask Mid-hat how he views work and if his views have changed from when he first came to America.

Another assumption I had was that Mid-hat came from a different culture and that he had to learn how to balance assimilating into American culture and maintaining his Swahili culture. The

article A *Dialogical Examination of Kenyan Immigrants' Acculturation in the United States* (2010) by Wakirur Wamwara-Mbugua and Bettina Cornwell explore how Kenyan immigrants adjust to American culture by interviewing several immigrants. One of their findings was that many Kenyans felt defined by their accents and that when speaking English it made them stand out to the point that people would stop and ask them where they were from. This caused them to feel that their accent exaggerated their "otherness" and made them feel more excluded in society. The other main finding is that Kenyan immigrants feel a strong need to separate themselves from African Americans and that they struggle to find an identity in a culture where they are no longer the majority but part of a minority population (Wamwara-Mbugua & Cornwell, 2010). This article led me to question how Mid-hat feels about being a Kenyan Muslim since the majority of Muslims in America are from the Middle-East. This article led me to this question because I know that since Lamu has Arab influence that Mid-hat would look more Arab than "black." I assumed that because of his appearance he would not have to face being mistaken as an African American but he would more likely be

mistaken as a Middle-Eastern Muslim. All of the research I conducted led me to new questions and new assumptions that I had not thought about prior to reading the articles.

### **Ethnographic Methods**

The primary mode of ethnographic inquiry that I used was using images to engage Mid-hat in conversation about his immigration story and to inquire about different aspects of his life. During our first interview on February 13<sup>th</sup> we met for 2½ hours at Illinois State University's library. I asked him to bring photos with him to our first meeting and once we started the interview I asked if he preferred to start with his story, the images, or do both at the same time. He indicated that he did not have many images of the actual process of coming to America so he began by telling me his story. After he was finished, I asked him to show me the images he brought (Figure 3).

Through the images he told me stories about his family back in Kenya and his family here in Bloomington, IL. He showed me images of his "firsts" in America such as

his first trip to Chicago, his first hamburger, and his first snow. Through the images he was also able to discuss Swahili traditions with me and I was able to gain a better understanding of the culture he comes from.

We also met on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> and March 8<sup>th</sup> to work on the project and each meeting was approximately 2 hours. During these subsequent meetings, as well as throughout the entire ethnographic process, Mid-hat and I worked collaboratively to identify the main aspects of his story. I explained what visual metaphors are how we were going to create them to tell his story. We both came up with ideas that we thought were important and different ways in which we could represent those ideas. While he had the ultimate decision if he wanted a certain point highlighted in the paper, I provided suggestions that I thought

were important to mention. Most of the images we produced represent a larger, more complex issue than we could have addressed through photography alone. For this reason, I used Photoshop



**Figure 3:** Mid-hat showing me old photos that are of importance to him and his story. (Image taken on February 27<sup>th</sup>, Mid-hat's house)



CS6 to create images that Mid-hat and I envisioned to represent abstract concepts. Mid-hat also reviewed all drafts and the final version of the essay for factual accuracy and that he was appropriately represented.

I also had the opportunity on February 27<sup>th</sup> to go to Mid-hat's home to prepare a meal and eat with his family. During the meal preparation, I was in charge of rolling the chapati, a type of flat bread. Throughout my time with Mid-hat and his family, I learned more about his culture and his family dynamics. It was a great learning experience for me and an opportunity to build rapport.

### **Presentation of Data**

Mid-hat's immigration story is comprised of poignant moments or events that clearly demonstrate the incredible perseverance he had with the help of his family, the discrimination he faced and the challenges he encountered once in the US. Mid-hat's journey began when his sister was adopted by their sister-in-law. He was supposed to be adopted as well but unfortunately he was already 18 and thus that was unable to be adopted. This meant he needed to find another way to enter the US. Once he finished high school, he applied for a

visa in 2005. In 2005, 2,206 Kenyan's were granted F1 student visas. In 2012, 1,018 Kenyans were granted student visas (US Department of State, 2012). As part of the visa process, an applicant must travel to the US Embassy, located in Nairobi which is a very long journey from Lamu. Mid-hat tells about this day and said, "It was a horrible day. It was raining and we (Mid-hat, his brother, and sister-in-law) had to wait in a long line outside the embassy (Interview of February 13<sup>th</sup>)."



**Figure 4:** Depiction of the line in front of the US Embassy in Nairobi. However, this is also a representation of the waiting as a whole Mid-hat had to endure during the immigration process. (Image taken by [illegible] 2012)

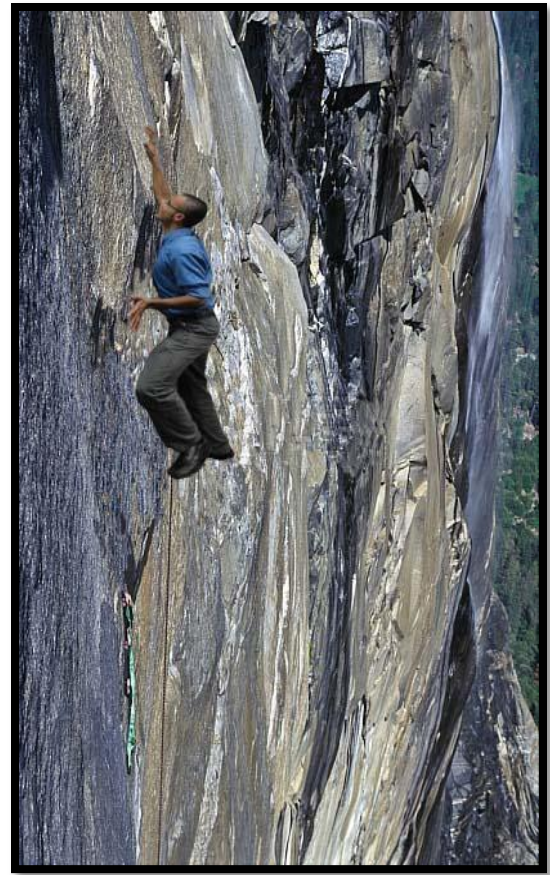
During this visit, the embassy (Figure 4), denied Mid-hat's Visa Application because the embassy worker claimed that his brother did not have enough money to support him. While he felt dejected, Mid-hat made another appointment for the following week to try again. His brother and sister-



in-law stayed with him to help him through the process again.

During his second interview, the embassy worker this time told him that the other worker was wrong in saying that his brother could not support Mid-hat, because his financial paperwork proves otherwise. Despite this information, he was still denied a visa because the embassy worker said that he did not think that he would not return to Kenya if he went to the US since his family was there. After this, Mid-hat began to lose hope but his mom's dream (Figure 5) was a driving force that inspired Mid-hat to continue to pursue his dream of going to America.

He decided to apply for a Malaysian visa, which he acquired easily, and attended the HELP University in Malaysia which has American Degree Transfer programs. After a year and a half, he decided to try again to get an American visa. He had to interview again and this time everything went smoothly. After two weeks of anxiety-filled waiting, he finally received the call informing him that his application for a Visa was accepted (Figure 6).



**Figure 5:** Mid-hat retelling his mom's dream. "I dreamt of you climbing this huge wall and you didn't know what was on the other side but you knew it was good, so you kept climbing and when you reached the top there were people to help you take the last step and it was full of light."- Mid-hat says that this dream helped him to not give up because he knew the end would be a good result. (Image taken February 20<sup>th</sup>, ISU, Photoshop CS6)



**Figure 6:** A representation of Mid-hat waiting for the call for the US visa, a defining moment in his life. He said that it rang during class and he was so excited to get the call.(Image taken February 20<sup>th</sup>, ISU)



**Figure 7:** A juxtaposition of Mid-hat's work before and after he became a Legal Permanent Residence. Before (left), he was limited in the hours and could only work on campus, where he worked as a teaching assistant. After (right) he is able to work wherever and can work full-time without the limitations of the F1 visa. He now works at the bakery at Jewel Osco. He also can now get tax returns, which he is very excited about. (Images taken February 20<sup>th</sup>)

Mid-hat arrived in America with his F1 student visa in July of 2009 filled with excitement and moved in with this brother, sister-in-law, and sister in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. He went to school at Illinois State University and studied physics. Mid-hat remembers, "I thought that once you came to America, it would be easier. I could just work, but it is not that easy. There are so many legal restrictions (Interview of February 13<sup>th</sup>).” He quickly learned that he had to be a full time student and could only work at an on campus job for a maximum of 20 hours per week. He worked as a physics TA but longed to work outside the University (Figure 7).

He faced difficulties when applying for internships, which is important so that he can gain relevant work experience outside of the

university. Mid-hat wanted to apply for an internship at Argonne Laboratory (Figure 8) but was disappointed when he found out it was restricted to US citizens only. These examples are some of the major challenges he faced while in America as he learned that pursuing his dreams were not going to be as easy as he imagined.



**Figure 8:** A representation of when Mid-hat looked up internships at Argonne. Since he was not A US Legal Resident he was ineligible for the internship. This was one of many issues Mid-hat faced and he knew he needed to pursue a Legal Permanent Residence in order to be able to achieve his dreams in America. (Image taken February 20<sup>th</sup>, ISU, Photoshop CS6)

As graduation approached, Mid-hat knew that he was only allowed to stay in the US for 3 months after graduation on the F1 visa. In order to stay longer he needed to obtain his Legal Permanent Residence, or “Green Card.” On a whim in 2011, he decided to apply for the Diversity Visa Lottery but did not tell his family because he did not think he would win. Not many people win the lottery but Mid-hat won it on his first try. In 2012, 4,720 people from Kenya won the lottery (US Department of State, 2012). He said that “when I received the first call saying I won, I thought it was a joke and hung up. When they called again two weeks later I realized I won and I finally told my family (Interview February 13<sup>th</sup>).” He hired a lawyer to help him complete the paperwork.

Not long after, he and his family were going back to Kenya and had to stop in Amsterdam along

the way. His US citizen family members, his sister and sister-in-law, walked through security with no problems. However, Mid-hat and his brother spent 4-5 hours at security while they checked through a long list of names to ensure that they were not on the terrorist list. On the way home from Kenya, he was again pulled out of the security line for questioning and was asked why he was leaving the country when no other people were pulled aside (Figure 9).

Once he was back in the US, he went with his brother and sister-in-law for his interview in Chicago for what he thought was a typical interview for his Legal Permanent Residence. However, the interview became very strange when the interviewer started asking him questions like “do you know why you are here?” The interviewer then told him that he did not need to come and that most applicants do



**Figure 9:** The image on the left is Mid-hat with his name tag saying “Gary Smith” where people are not paying attention to him. The image on the right has a name tag with “Mid-hat Abdulrehman” and everyone staring at him. This juxtaposition is a representation of the discrimination Mid-hat endured simply because he has a Muslim name. (Image taken February 27<sup>th</sup>, Mid-hat’s home, Photoshop CS6)



not have interviews. Then the interviewer started speaking Swahili which shocked Mid. The interviewer explained that all of his paperwork was fine but that there was something suspicious about his last name so the US government wanted to have him interviewed to make sure he was who he claimed to be. While for all of these examples, Mid-hat cannot definitively state what the reasons behind these events were, he speculates that they all occurred because he is a Muslim trying to enter the US in a post 9/11 America and feels that just because he has a Muslim last name people make automatic negative assumptions about him. These examples of discrimination illuminate the ubiquitous discrimination that Mid-hat had to face.

Two weeks after the interview, Mid-hat received his Legal Permanent Residence card. Now Mid-hat works at the Jewel bake shop (Figure 7) but he does not need to worry about work hour limitations or school requirements. He does plan to attend graduate school in the near future.

It is evident that Mid-hat's journey to becoming a legal resident was not an easy one. It was a journey filled with many bumps in the road but he always had his brother and sister-in-law there to support him throughout every step of the process.

-hat and they conversed in Swahili. His mom in Kenya continually supports and encourages his dreams. He faced a large amount of discrimination during this process which is evident from his experiences in the airports and during his green card interview. Finally, Mid-hat thought that getting to America would be the hard part but never imagined the difficulties he would face in regards to work and school. Through all of this he did, and is still achieving his dream.

### **Data Analysis**

After interviewing Mid-hat and hearing his story, I realized how incredible it truly was. He could have given up so many times but his persistence was undying. In regards to my original assumptions, I would argue that they were not far off. Mid-hat did have an amazing story to tell and he did face discrimination along the way.

In regards to the research articles, there were many aspects that held true for Mid-hat. Mid-hat does plan to return to Kenya in the future and he does plan to send money home to his family just as both Stebleton (2012) and Kiiru (2010) suggest. Also as Stebleton (2012) suggests, Mid-hat wants to be a force of change in Kenya by introducing renewable energy and the skills that go along with

that, which he gained in America. Finally, as Wamwara-Mbugua and Cornwell (2010) suggest, Mid-hat has indicated that he feels like he is living in two worlds. He talks to his mom everyday and he feels he must balance his Swahili life and his American life.

During my discussions with Mid-hat I learned that he is not a typical Kenyan immigrant. He is a Muslim Kenyan, which is generally restricted to the coastal areas of Kenya and so they have a much harder time getting US visas. Also, not many people win the Diversity Visa Lottery. This one aspect of Mid-hat's story that makes him a very unique immigrant compared to others from both Kenya and other regions of the world.

In relation to the larger immigration view, the issues that surfaced during Mid-hat's interview are generally true of many immigrants to America. Many immigrants rely on family to help them through the immigration process which is often a lengthy one with many bumps in the road, just as Mid-hat's. There are also many immigrants who face discrimination as they move to and live in America. These are generally people from places where "white" is not the dominant ethnicity and

speak a different language. Finally, many immigrants face problems when they arrive here. The F1 visa is the same for all students and thus when they graduate they either need to be ready to return to their home country or they need to find a way to become Legal Permanent Residents. While these issues are not unique to Mid-hat's story, his story is one that is particularly poignant

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to delve into one immigrant's story of how he came to the US. This paper focused on Mid-hat Said Abdulrehman, a Kenyan immigrant from Lamu. My initial assumption was that his story would be very interesting and one in which he faced discrimination, which turned out to be a fairly accurate assumption. During the research, the biggest problem my consultant and I faced was the time restriction. This limited our conversations and the amount of time we had to take pictures. For this reason, some questions were not able to be answered and would be important to look at during future research. For instance, this paper mainly covered his journey but did not include what he does to incorporate into American culture and how he maintains his own culture. It would also be

interesting to compare his story to other Kenyan immigrants. Overall, this research was successful in what it aimed to accomplish.



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