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A Wider Perspective

Three lives – Eritrean, Bhutanese, and Afghan – help Boise see itself.

By Aileen Hale with Kathleen Rubinow Hodges

Fear of others, psychologists say, can be realistic or symbolic: viscerally real when rivals battle for scarce resources or culturally symbolic when rooted in stereotypes. Symbolic prejudice is more benign say researchers. An Idaho public opinion survey, recently published, suggests that prejudice can quickly dissolve when strangers become neighbors. “Those who live around and come into contact with refugees tend to hold more tolerant views,” writes Jeffrey Lyons of Boise State University, a researcher who co-authored the study. In the southwestern part of the state where most refugees have resettled, poll respondents were the most likely to report positive feelings toward refugees.

The stories of Awot Haile of Eritrea, Ratna Subba of Bhutan, and Yasmin Aguilar of Afghanistan illustrate the process through which outsiders become insiders, breaking Idaho stereotypes. All crossed continents and cultures to start over in Boise. All give the city a more global perspective, revealing what Boiseans take for granted, helping us see ourselves. Their stories – traumatic, resilient, courageous – remind us that prejudice is hard to sustain when stereotyping gives way to compassion and doors open from within.

Awot Haile, Entrepreneur

Born in 1980 in a small town in Eritrea, Awot Haile can remember the devastation of war, the struggle to survive on the streets of Asmara, and life in a mud brick hut in a crowded refugee camp. Today, married and the father of three children, he owns a taxi business in the city of Boise and looks forward to a stable future. In January of this year, he related his story to Aileen Hale.

Many in his family fought Ethiopian troops for Eritrea’s independence. The fighting was mostly in the countryside, but sometimes it came to the city. In 1990 when he was just 10 years old, a bomb killed Haile’s mother, and the family broke apart. His father fled with one of his sisters; another sister joined the army; and his youngest brother



DARIN OSWALD/IDHO STATESMAN



Olive leaves encircle a camel in the emblem of Eritrea.

Previous page: Awot Haile prepares lunch in a restaurant kitchen, Boise, 2013.

went to live with their grandmother. Only one sister stayed with Haile. Together, the two children went to Asmara, the capital city, to find work. Haile found a job lifting heavy containers of feed for animals until a falling container crushed his leg. Badly injured, he could not afford to see a doctor, so he used traditional medicine for a month. When he was finally able to go back to work, he realized that he would never play soccer again – a sport he had loved playing with his friends. To this day, he still uses a brace on his leg, although he is so agile you would never know, and he never complains.

In 1991 when Haile was 11 years old, his country won its independence from Ethiopia following a United Nations-sponsored referendum. “For many years there was peace, and there were no more bombs!” Haile exclaimed. People rebuilt their country and lived simply and happily. Everyone wanted a good future. Young people were finally able to return to school. Haile loved school. He said, “Going to school was one of the most wonderful times for me.”

However in 1998 fighting began again along the Ethiopian border. Because Ethiopia had approximately 83 million people while Eritrea had only 4.5 million, many Eritrean citizens had to fight to build up their army. The government started to draft students. Anyone who was 17 years old was obligated to join the army.

Around the same time Haile’s dad passed away from a disease. Haile remembers his father as a wonderful man with a big, kind smile – a friend to all who knew him. Everyone said Haile’s smile was like his father’s. When his father died, Haile’s stepmother was pregnant. Six months after giving birth, she also died.

Now Haile was faced with the additional challenge of taking care of his new baby half-sister, as well as his other sister. There were no good jobs even though he took any work he could get to make money for his family. His baby sister was always ill because she had no baby formula or mother’s milk. She would never recover. At the age of 10, she had the mind of a 2-year-old.

Haile continued working and taking care of his two little sisters alone for four years. Then the government told him that

he must join the army. He went to them and showed them his still-painful injured leg, explaining that he needed a brace to walk. The government didn't care as they desperately needed men to fight, so they still made him serve.

Knowing he couldn't survive military life, he left everyone and everything without telling anyone, not even his sisters. He fled his city and took a bus to the border. He walked for hours, with his painful injured leg, to reach Ethiopia. Here he became a refugee, living with 10,000 others in a refugee camp. The people built their own houses with bricks from the soil and roofs made from grass. He survived in that camp for six years by making and selling his own bread.



ETHOS/FLICR

Finally he got the opportunity to legally resettle in America, and his friends held a big party to say goodbye. He flew from the capital of Ethiopia to Frankfurt, Germany, and then to Boise, Idaho. Like most refugees, Haile could not choose where he would be resettled. He was asked during his interview if he wanted to join relatives anywhere in the U.S., but he had none here. He arrived in Boise on June 30, 2010.

Haile likes Boise because it is a small city with very thoughtful people. Even so, the first eight months were scary

Eritreans find shelter and relative safety across the Eithopian border in a UN refugee camp, 2012.

for him. He had to quickly adjust to the language, culture, food, people and weather. He missed his family and had no one here to share his experiences or life with. He spoke no English. Yet he felt very supported by Boiseans, especially one man, Mike, who was his tutor. Mike helped him drive around town to get to know Boise; he taught Haile how to shop and how to prepare and eat American food.



CREATE COMMON GOOD

Create Common Good, a Boise nonprofit, provides food service training for refugees and the underprivileged.

Haile started to learn English through classes at the College of Western Idaho. The International Rescue Committee assigned a specialist to help him find his first job. He entered an English and work skills training program run by Create Common Good (CCG), a nonprofit. He participated in English classes for one month at the downtown YMCA where he made friends with teachers (including this author, Aileen Hale) and tutors. As he quickly acquired a solid foundation in English, he moved on to practical work skills training where he studied industrial cleaning and customer service. He practiced English by talking with YMCA clients.

In collaboration with CCG, the Idaho Department of Labor provided paid opportunities for refugees to get hands-

on job training experience for 90 days. Haile received culinary training under an internationally renowned chef, Brent Southcombe. Afterward CCG hired Haile at \$7.50/hour. He started with CCG in 2011 and worked with them for three years as an assistant to the chef.

In addition to his work with CCG, he was also working three other jobs – at the Boise Fry Company, Joe’s Crab Shack, and Cafe Rio – and so was able to acquire a lot of kitchen experience. In December 2013 Haile quit CCG. The organization had started as a nonprofit but shifted to becoming a for-profit production company. This organizational shift was difficult for him as rules and structures changed. He decided to start his own business as a taxi driver.

It was a good move. He is now the independent owner of Premium Cab Company and says he is very happy working with the people of Boise. He has felt a lot of support as he improved his English language skills and moved from one step to another in his jobs. He hopes to open his own store or maybe a gas station. He says: “God knows what I will open, but I have dreams to open my own business in Boise. I’ve been here six years, and within that time I’ve been very blessed by God. God has blessed me with a wonderful wife, Selamawit, in May 2011 and now with three beautiful children.”

Haile arrived in Boise six months before his wife. They had been in a refugee camp together in Ethiopia for six years. When she first came to the U.S., she arrived in Columbus, Ohio. They arranged for her to move to Boise, where they got married in the courthouse. In June 2013 with help from Habitat for Humanity, they were able to buy a home. Haile is thankful that he and his family are living comfortable and stable lives.

Aside from the challenge of getting used to the cold weather, Haile and his family are happy in Boise. He feels the people are friendly, and the city is safe without much crime. He finds it a good place to raise his kids. His son has started in a Head Start preschool and is learning how to be hard-working and respectful. As he has never been to any other states, he can’t compare what life would be like elsewhere. He came



A. HAILE

Haile’s taxi service,
2017.

directly from Africa to Boise and has not left! He survived initial culture shock. Haile successfully passed the American citizenship exam in English and became an American citizen on December 17, 2015.

As a taxi driver, Haile meets a lot of people daily and finds the majority to be very nice. He says: “What helped me to love Boise was my work with Create Common Good. It showed me how the community helps each other. I’ve seen how CCG trained refugees and how people from the community volunteered to help with language and transportation until refugees were able to get their own means of transportation and work. I remember one American lady who helped an Ethiopian woman, giving her rides and tutoring her. I haven’t felt much discrimination. I have seen refugees open stores in the International Market, and when it burned down, many people from the community donated money to help rebuild. For example, a friend of mine got help with re-opening his restaurant within three months. So I can say Boiseans really help refugees.”

Haile has been in Boise for six years and says he hopes to live here a long time. He has aspirations to get his GED and then go to college. He has been able to accomplish more than many native-born Americans. Beginning with next to nothing, he has always been rich in spirit, tenacity, and compassion for others. To this day, with the salary of a taxi driver, he helps sustain the livelihood of numerous family members who remain in Eritrea and Sudan.

Ratna Hang Subba, Chef

Ratna Hang Subba, owner of the food truck Darjeeling Momo, is a stocky, outgoing, smiling man. It might seem on the surface that he doesn’t have much to smile about. He was born in 1985 in Bhutan but fled from that country with his mother and sisters in 1992 when he was just 7 years old. Like many other Bhutanese, he lived for almost 20 years in refugee camps in Nepal. In February 2017 he invited author Kathleen Rubinow Hodges to his house for a conversation.

Subba’s group, ethnic Nepalis (or Lhotshampa), had lived in Bhutan since the early 1900s when the British encouraged



STAMP OUTPOST

A snow leopard fronts the Himalayas in this postage stamp from Bhutan, 1966.

their Hindu ancestors to settle uncultivated lands. In the 1980s the Bhutanese government changed its definition of citizenship to exclude many Lhotshampas and began requiring national adoption of the Buddhist majority's language and dress. Lhotshampas campaigned for increased political and cultural rights. When the Bhutanese government took harsh measures in reprisal, over 80,000 fled, ending up in United Nations-supervised camps in Nepal. For the next 20 years, the Bhutanese government adamantly refused to allow their return, and they were not allowed to settle in Nepal.



LEFT: DARJEELING MOMO, RIGHT: RITESH MAN TAMRAKAR/WIKIPEDIA

This is Ratna Subba's story. He was born in Patalay village, Tsirang province, Bhutan. His father, a leader in the district, was threatened with arrest by the government and had already escaped to Nepal when Subba left with his mother and two younger sisters. He said: "We lost everything: land, home, society. It was a very sad moment." The mother and children ran out into the night and lived in the forest for two days without eating or drinking. Then, "somebody gave us a little food, and some other very good people showed us the way to India." They stayed in a shelter in Assam state for 15 days as a guest in someone's tent. He remembers his mother crying. They continued west into eastern Nepal. They had to beg for food. Others on the same journey died or became sick.

Left: Ratna Hang Subba sells momo from his food truck.

Right: Momo are Tibetan-style dumplings filled with meat or vegetables and Nepalese spices.



Plastic tarps and bamboo shelter
Bhutanese at Beldangi
Camp in Nepal, 2014.

The family stayed first at a camp called Midar Surunga in the sand on the windy, dusty banks of the Mai Khola River. After six months, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) visited and brought tents, food (rice and oil), and even provided some school. A year later they moved a bit further west to another UNHCR camp called Beldangi, near the town of Damak, where they stayed for 19 years until 2012. At Beldangi there were 33,000 refugees living in rows of huts made of bamboo covered by plastic tarps. The huts were grouped into sectors, the sectors grouped into units, and the units had leaders. Despite the organization, Subba described the place as “lack of good food, lack of everything.” They were not supposed to leave the camp. The Nepalese didn’t like the refugees. Subba explained, “They hate us, they harassed us, they disrespect us.”

Finally in 2006 an international agreement was brokered, and as Subba put it, “The government of America opened the

door.” The agreement paved the way for resettlement of the Lhotshampa in third countries with the U.S. agreeing to accept the largest number of people. Subba explained that United States officials came to visit the camp and “found we are the good person and qualify to come [to America].” His parents came to Boise first; then on November 8, 2012, Subba and his wife arrived in the city. As of early 2017 over 108,000 Nepali Bhutanese had emigrated, most to the United States. Only about 10,000 remained in the camps.

Within three months of his arrival in Boise, Subba had found a job as a chef because he already had seven years work experience as a cook in Nepal. Even though it had been illegal to leave Beldangi camp to work, he did. He explained “Refugee life is a hopeless life. I accepted Jesus, got hope, and decided to work as a cook.” In Idaho he began cooking for Momo Dumplings restaurant in Meridian. However, the owners of that restaurant went back to Nepal to assist family after the earthquake of 2015. With help from other family members, Subba bought a food truck. He parks it at events in the spring, summer, and fall, and posts the locations on his Facebook page. He also works at a care center at nights. “I like helping people,” he says.

He and his wife, Martha Rai, have three children. Three-year-old Josh, their youngest son, was born in Boise. Both his parents and hers share their home. The family wants to buy a house for themselves, and they are on the list for help from Habitat for Humanity. In the meantime, they live in a tidy rental in a west Boise neighborhood. Subba, his wife, his parents, and several other relatives all belong to a small Bhutanese Christian church and meet regularly for prayer. His goals in life are helping people, sharing God, being happy, and working with his food truck. His life, as he described it, has been an immense struggle. Statistics show a higher than average prevalence of anxiety and suicide for Bhutanese in the United States. However, at least on the surface, Subba is resolutely cheerful and forward-looking. And as this author can testify, he makes great dumplings!



Boise-born Josh Subba, age 3, beams for the camera, 2017.



Yasmin Aguilar at the Agency for New Americans, 2015.

Yasmin Aguilar, Outreach Coordinator

In 2000 Yasmin Aguilar traveled alone to Boise, arriving as a refugee through the Agency for New Americans (ANA). She had been a doctor in her native Afghanistan, where she grew up in a well-educated family. She learned English when she was in high school, studied medicine in the Czech Republic, and completed a medical residency in gynecology and orthopedics. Though she was comfortable with English when she arrived here, adjusting to Boise was still a shock. She is now a community outreach coordinator at the Agency for New Americans. In 2016 she recounted her journey to author Aileen Hale.

In 1992 the Northern Alliance, an extremist Muslim faction, gained the upper hand in Afghanistan's ongoing civil war. They attacked her family's house because her father had been in the air force. At the same time the atmosphere had become unsafe for women. The family fled to Pakistan. There, Aguilar completed her medical studies.

In 1996 she got a job with an American-based organization, Mercy Corps. She worked in refugee camps addressing the topic of women's health, which was sensitive



SSGT CECILIO RICARDO, USAF/WIKIPEDIA

and difficult for most people to talk about. Her biggest accomplishment was to set up health committees in order to give classes. She taught people the basics about their bodies, the prevention of disease, and birth control. She taught women about safe childbirth, immunizations for children, and basic sanitation. In the camps there was often no water or electricity, so she had to be resourceful.

During this time she and her family were forced to move back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as neither country was safe. Aguilar's public health work put her life at risk. "There were people not happy with a woman in power in the community, so I was attacked and kidnapped a few times."

Aguilar finally decided that to save her life, she had to leave. She was the only one in her family who was offered refugee status. Her office told her she could do whatever she wanted later, but in that moment it was her choice to save her life. It was extremely hard, but she knew it was the only way she could survive. When she heard she was going to Boise, Idaho, neither she nor any of her friends had the vaguest idea where it was!

Northern Alliance troops in Mazar-e Sharif, 2001.



An Afghan woman defies the Taliban in the 2014 documentary *Playing With Fire*.

Interviewed by the *Boise Weekly* in October 2009, Aguilar explained that in the U.S. she could not practice medicine without going back to school and getting recertified, but she had to support her family back in Pakistan financially. She thought, “OK, there are already many hospitals with intelligent doctors, but as a social worker in this field, I could help many refugees.” She still misses medicine, but supporting refugee resettlement in Boise has been a fulfilling second career.

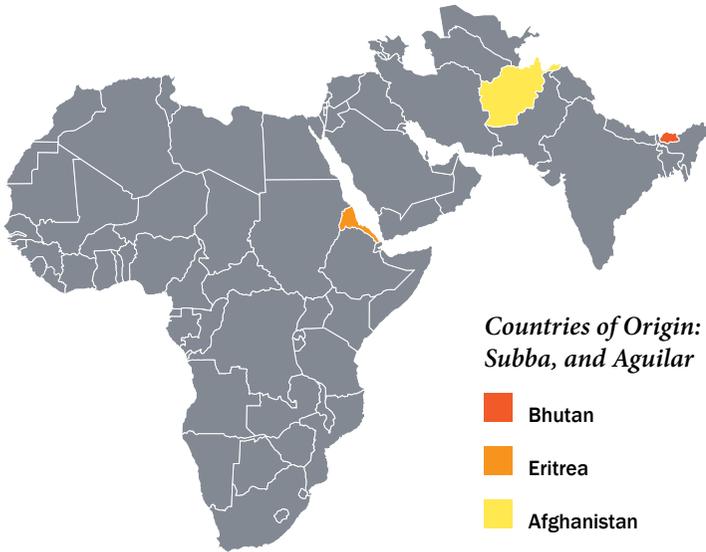
The transition was difficult. She explained that “one of the hardest parts of being a refugee is losing your identity, people not knowing who you are: your background, your education, or anything.” When she would explain where she was from, people would say, “Poor you!” They reacted to her with sympathy but very little understanding and with a lot of stereotyping. She thought to herself, “People just see what the media says and have very little information about the true situation of the people of Afghanistan.” Because she knew English, people assumed she understood everything; yet she still had to learn basics like where the bus stop was, how to get around town, and where to shop. Because of her black hair, many spoke Spanish to her.

“People were not educated enough, asking me weird questions,” she said. For example, she was asked many times if she had been raped. She responded by asking how they would feel if they were asked the same question. However, she is hopeful that Americans will become more educated about the cultures that are integrating into their communities. Boise in particular is much safer than many other U.S. cities – very welcoming and friendly.

Aguilar is Muslim, although she does not cover her head or go to the mosque unless there is a funeral or some celebration. In Afghanistan, women never go to the mosque but instead practice their faith at home. Misperceptions about Muslims can be daunting. She has had people say to her face: “You don’t belong here. You are a Muslim. Go back to your country.” In spite of those negative experiences, she says, “The principle of America is to allow people to come and be free.”

She has been living in Boise since 2000. Although she didn't choose her destination, at least it is safe. She joked, "So I came to a place like Boise. I think I'm happy. I'm still here for 16 years!" Her education allowed her to get a job two months after her arrival, and she has worked for the same agency ever since. She was able to buy a home soon after she arrived; this was a huge achievement for her, because in Afghanistan homes are usually in the names of men only. Aguilar met her husband, an electrical engineer from Mexico, when he started volunteering at ANA. She is now happily married and has learned to speak Spanish in addition to her other languages.

When people ask her where she's from, she says, "I'm from Idaho."



AILEEN HALE, ED.D., holds a doctorate in international education from the University of San Francisco. A professor of education, she has taught at Boise State, Northwest Nazarene, and universities in Belize, Ecuador, and Indonesia.