With and Beyond Museums: Cultural Heritage Work in the Somali Diaspora

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Abstract

This article looks at how new diaspora communities are carrying out heritage work both within and outside museums. Based on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, extensive research materials and long-term collaboration with Somalis who have been involved in museum and exhibition projects in Finland, this ethnographic study illustrates how Somalis cherish and talk about their cultural heritage in diaspora. Our analysis reveals the complexity of diaspora communities' cultural heritage and how Finnish museums have – or have not –recognized the rapidly growing Somali diaspora. It also shows the extent of independent cultural heritage work that Somalis do outside of the museum. Our findings contribute to discussions on inclusive museum work.

Keywords: cultural heritage, diasporas, migrants, Somalis, collaboration

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Introduction

The increasing diversity of museum audiences, and the growing influences of social activism and the principles of decolonialization (Abungu 2019; Ariese and Wróblewska 2022; Soares and Witcomb 2022; Janes and Sandell 2019) have placed new pressures on museums to rethink their collections, audience relationships, exhibition policies, and working methods.[1] Museums have become sites of political struggle for greater recognition and inclusion for migrants, diaspora communities, and other ethnic minorities, who have started to criticize outdated and offensive representations of their cultures, exclusive ideas of nationhood, and the whiteness of European cultural spaces (Dixon 2016; Gouriévidis 2014; Rastas and Nikunen 2019: 213-4). Many museums have taken up the challenge of becoming more inclusive social spaces by launching new projects, reforming their working practices and inviting migrants and other marginalized communities to participate in the production of knowledge about their cultures (Crooke 2007; Golding and Modest 2013; Insulander 2019; Levin 2016; Whitehead et al. 2015). This also applies to countries like Finland, where diaspora communities are younger and smaller compared with many other countries (Rastas and Koivunen 2021).

In studies on migrant and minority community participation in museum practice, research is typically focused upon particular aspects of museum work, rather than the knowledge and experiences of the communities the museums have collaborated with (Crooke 2007: 87-93; Whitehead et al. 2015). Furthermore, descriptions of collaborative projects, usually written and published soon after the projects have ended, do not reveal if collaboration between museums and such groups has continued (Crooke 2007: 93). The premise of the present study is that in order to promote inclusivity and produce knowledge about the possibilities for collaboration with migrant and diaspora communities, there is a need to place greater focus

on the communities with which museums are expected to work. This ethnographic study aims to construct a thick description of how one migrant and diaspora community in a particular location – Somalis in Finland – preserve and discuss their cultural heritage. The research focuses upon: representations of Somalis in Finnish museums; how Somalis' cultural heritage has been discussed and managed in collaborative museum projects; how Somalis have experienced their encounters with museums in Finland; and the cultural heritage activities initiated independently by Finnish Somalis.

Somalis were chosen as the focus group for various reasons. Firstly, in countries with African diaspora communities that date back to the transatlantic slave trade, many museums and archives focusing on their histories and cultures have been established by these communities. These materials have also been invaluable to other heritage institutions and historiography more broadly. However, despite the large number of Somali diaspora communities around the world, there is very little research on the preservation and transformation of Somali cultural heritage within diasporas, or on the relationship between Somali diasporas and cultural heritage institutions in different locations. In February 2023, the website of the Somali Museum of Minnesota stated, 'At last update, the Somali Museum of Minnesota was the only museum of Somali culture anywhere in the world'. Swedish-Somali archaeologist Sada Mire, who has studied Somalis' cultural heritage both in Somalia and in the context of the diaspora, presents herself on her website as 'the only active Somali archaeologist working in Somalia and Somaliland'. According to Mire, Somalis' 'lack of interest in museums and… archaeological sites…comes from the Nomadic pastoral culture – where people keep very little and they keep (intangible) knowledge instead' (2017: 152). This takes place through oral transmission. Knowledge of cultural heritage work with and by Somalis in diasporas is important not only for developing the inclusivity of cultural heritage institutions in the countries they live in, but for the reconstruction and development of work on heritage in the Somali countries (Mire 2007). Although plenty of studies about Somalis in Finland have been published over the years, research on their cultural activities, let alone their cultural heritage activities, is absent. Secondly, in the Finnish context, Somalis make a relatively large and already multigenerational group of citizens, consisting of both migrants and people born in Finland. This allows for an examination of generational differences and many other aspects of their multiple identities and agency as people of Somali background in Finland. Thirdly, our networks and contacts among Somali communities – and earlier collaborations with them – including projects related to museums and cultural heritage, made it possible to explore transformations within local Somali communities and their involvement in cultural heritage work over a longer period of time.

A short introduction to the Finnish Somali community will now follow. After that we explain the theoretical framework used in this study, and how it has guided our choices concerning our research materials and analyses. In the conclusion we discuss how, based on our findings, cultural heritage institutions could do more to develop inclusiveness and support Somali communities' cultural heritage work. We also conclude that museums could benefit from dialogue and cooperation with them.

Somali diaspora in Finland

Since the late 1980s when the civil war in Somalia started, hundreds of thousands of Somalis left their country, creating large Somali communities around the world, including Europe. Somalis currently form the largest African diaspora community in both Finland and other Nordic countries (Duh et al. 2014). There are Somali communities across the country, but most of the 22,000 plus Somali speakers in Finland live in the Helsinki metropolitan area.[2] Despite integration into Finnish society, their everyday lives are often shadowed by racism (Rastas 2019: 361-4).

Dozens of registered Somali associations have provided important bridge builders between the Somali community and the authorities. They have also supported Somalis' integration into Finnish society by offering a wide range of activities (Tiilikainen and Mohamed 2013). Of all Somali-speaking people in Finland, over 50 per cent are under 20 years old

(Mubarak et al. 2015: 82), and most of them grew up or were born in Finland. They know Finnish culture as well as their native peers do, but negotiating questions concerning their roots, national citizenship, diasporic imaginings, and experiences of racism are important aspects of their identities.

Research on Somalis and the global Somali diaspora has been dominated by the ethnicity paradigm (Barth 1969), which tends to approach the people under study as if they were 'internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes' (Brubaker 2002: 164). Commonalities across Somalis cannot be ignored in research on the cultural heritage of people who, as Catherine Besteman observes (1998: 115), have considered themselves religiously, linguistically and culturally as Somalis. However, by putting too much emphasis on the supposed ethnic characteristics of Somalis (Duh et al. 2014: 236), diversity within Somali communities is easily overlooked. Already before the civil war, the social order in Somalia was based not only on the clan system, but on race, region, language and class (Besteman 1999: 21; Hoehne 2015). The lives of Somalis in diasporas are also defined by migrancy and transnationalism, identification with other diasporas, and a particular status in social hierarchies as Muslims, refugees and people with an African background (Duh et al. 2014; Rastas 2014).

According to Mulki Al-Sharmani, a scholar of Somali background based in Finland, Somaliness, referred to as somaalinimo by Somalis themselves, refers to a collective diasporic identity rooted in 'an imagined moral community' (2007: 72). She describes somaalinimo as a discourse of resistance and empowerment that is very much shaped by the rights and living conditions of refugees in their host society (Al-Sharmani 2007: 75). Approaching Somalis as diaspora subjects, instead of merely as migrants who identify with Somalia, inevitably expands how Somali communities can be defined and how Somalis' agency and experiences should be examined.

Theoretical framework, research materials and the 'critical theoretical practice of ethnography'

The present study builds on the 'critical theoretical practice of ethnography' (Malkki 2007), which draws upon theoretical ideas from different research traditions for an organized reading of a large body of research materials. Ethnographic research requires a dialogue with the studied people, mapping their culture(s) through a variety of materials, and taking into account their perspectives and ways of knowing in the analysis of data, as well how research questions and outcomes of the study are formulated. Since the current study draws on our long-term cooperation with Somalis in Finland, we have been able to contextualize and, when necessary, verify individual pieces of information.

Our study is located within the fields of anthropology, museum studies, critical heritage studies – emphasizing heritage as a cultural practice and area of critical inquiry with potential for change (Smith 2006; Turunen 2020) – alongside diaspora studies. The diverse meanings of the word diaspora – and the consequent difficulty of using it as an analytical concept – have been widely discussed in migration and diaspora studies (Clifford 1994; Vertovec 1997; Wahlbeck 2002; Brubaker 2005; Olaniyan and Sweet 2010; Turner and Kleist 2013: 194-95; Wright 2013). The need to position our project within both African diaspora studies and Somali diaspora studies adds further dimensions to our research design.

Most studies on Somalis in Europe can be positioned in migration studies and in research on the 'new African diaspora' (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009), where diasporas are defined as transnational migrant communities that maintain attachments to their countries of origin. However, as stated by Michelle Wright, 'the majority of publications on the Black/African diaspora tend to reflect the ancestral experience of many African Americans' (2013: 217). This vast area of literature mainly concerns the transatlantic, Black African diaspora (Gilroy 1993), emphasizing the meanings of race and identification with Blackness, Africaness and the global African diaspora. These two traditions of African diaspora studies understand and approach many questions differently (Rastas and Nikunen 2019: 207-9). We argue that, in the case of Somalis, it is necessary to draw on both of these traditions, and on the emerging

field of Black European (Hine et al. 2009) and Afro-European or African European studies (Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020). This requires a research agenda in which both Somalis' contacts with Somalia and the global Somali diaspora, as well as their identifications with Blackness and the global African diaspora, are acknowledged.

In this article, the notion of diaspora is used to refer to a collective identity and a type of consciousness (Vertovec 1997), and to 'a process, a condition, a space, and a discourse' (Zeleza 2009: 32). Because diasporas are global and transnational by nature, diaspora cultures and their transformations are influenced by local conditions, transnational connections, and various global cultural, political and economic flows, such as ideas embedded in particular cultural movements and discursive paradigms, or visual representations of Africanness and blackness circulated through artworks and the media (Zeleza 2009: 45-53). This has meant an attempt has been made in this study to collect many types of data, including online materials concerning Somalis' activities in other countries, as well as identifying different articulations of Somalis' multiple identifications – as migrants, as diaspora subjects, and as Finns – in the analyses of our materials. We understand and talk about communities as a form of social action (Crooke 2007: 28), which leads us to question preconceived definitions of diasporic or ethnic communities, and to examine diversity and transformation within them.

The present study focusing on Somalis in Finnish society was conceived as a sub-project of a wider research project focusing on the production of knowledge of the global African diaspora in museums in different countries.[3] Our collaboration had already started during *The African Presence in Finland* exhibition project, held at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas in 2015, which represented the action phase of a research project on the African diaspora in Finland.[4] The participants represented over 20 different countries of origin. Dozens of Somalis and many Somali organisations were involved in the project between 2013 and 2015. Materials focusing on Somalis from that research project, which we have used in the present study, include fieldnotes, recordings of workshops, and the materials (texts, photos, films, and art works) produced by or with Somalis for the exhibition.

The Helinä Rautavaara Museum, directed by Ilona Niinikangas,[5] has been cooperating with Somalis and other migrant communities in the greater Helsinki area for more than 20 years. In 2019 we decided to gather all materials documenting the Helinä Rautavaara Museum's cooperation with Finnish Somalis, and to combine them with new materials to explore Somalis' activities in relation to their cultural heritage in Finland. Materials from the Helinä Rautavaara Museum consist of over 30 documents, such as project proposals, reports, interviews and museum information packages for educators, including information about the objectives of the projects, the funding sources, and the roles and different activities of both museum staff and the Somali participants. All these projects were conducted with external funding, which may explain why the voices of Somali collaborators remain rather faint, or are entirely absent from reports.

To emphasize Somalis' perspectives and experiences in this study we hired a research assistant who, as an artist and activist of Somali background, had knowledge of the Somali language and local Somali communities. This was made possible by the wider project on the global African diaspora mentioned above. It also provided us with field notes and online materials about African diaspora communities and museums in other countries. The interviews conducted by our assistant, Warda Ahmed, focused on Somali associations' collaboration with Finnish museums, and on other cultural heritage activities.[6] To explore young people's perspectives, we organized an all-day workshop for young Somalis. Transcriptions of recordings of the workshop at the Helinä Rautavaara Museum with 16-20-year-old boys and girls provided us with their knowledge and experience of museums in Finland, their ideas of Somali culture, and how this culture should be preserved and presented. The different methods that we have used to organize and analyse these extensive materials – for example, content analyses, discourse analyses, and visual methodologies – have varied depending on the type of data and issues at stake, which is typical of ethnographic research.

Somalis in Finnish museums

According to one interviewee, 'you can't find anything about Finnish Somalis in museums'.[7] This statement is very close to the truth. Very few museums have presented anything related to Somalis. Only the Helinä Rautavaara Museum has put on a series of exhibitions about Somalis and has cooperated with local Somali communities. In recent years, there have been numerous exhibitions about refugees in European museums (Marselis 2021), and the theme has also been dealt with in Finnish museums.[8] In some museum exhibitions, photographs of Somalis have been used to represent topics such as migration, cultural difference, or refugees. These ways of presenting Somalis are common in public discussions and representations. Therefore, it is important to ask how Somalis deal with being positioned like this in cultural heritage projects, and how they want to be presented.

The African Presence in Finland exhibition project created a space in which people could perform their Finnishness, their diasporic subjectivities and transnational agency, and discuss their contributions to Finnish society and culture (Rastas 2020). Only a few of more than 200 participants had previous experience of working with museums. They were promised that they would have power over how they would be presented in the exhibition. Many communities and individuals, including Somalis, stated that this was a condition for their participation.

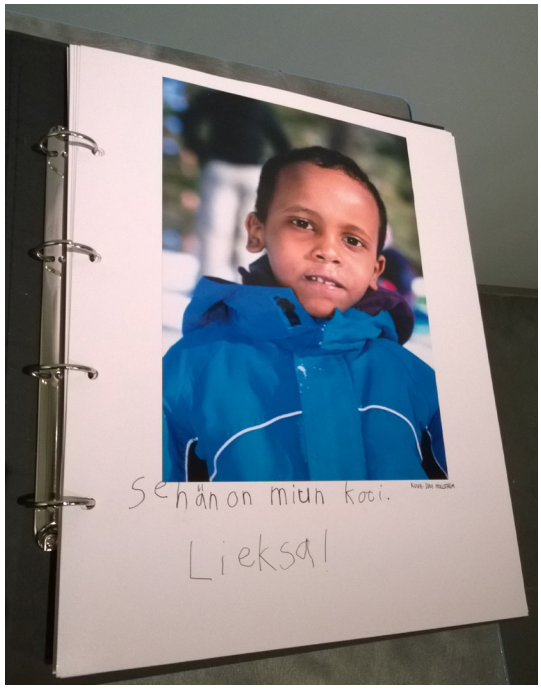

Fig. 1. Somalis from all over Finland participated in the planning and implementation of The African Presence in Finland exhibition. This photo album was made by a Somali community in Lieksa, a small town near the Russian border, together with a team of researchers from the University of Eastern Finland. The text 'Lieksa – sehän on miun koti' ('Lieksa—it's my home') was written in the local eastern Finnish dialect by the child in the photo (by Suni Hollström). Credit: Anna Rastas.

Analysis of the materials from this exhibition project reveals that, when Somalis were able to decide how their cultures were represented, they did not want to be presented primarily as migrants and refugees. Representations that are common in migration museums, such as

suitcase installations, travel documents or maps with migration routes (Insulander 2019: 118, Naguib 2015: 78), were absent from the exhibition. Works planned and made with or by Somali organisations presented their political activities as Finns and transnational diaspora subjects. This included a map of their development cooperation projects in Somalia, and a photograph of a seminar hosted by the Finnish Somali League in 2014, during which the Nordic Somali Organisation was established. Individual Somalis contributed photographs of their families, including those with mixed children, or those with one parent of Somali background and the other parent of white Finnish background.

Younger Somalis who contributed to *The African Presence in Finland* exhibition were mainly people who had grown up in Finland. Their works focused on their multiple identities, racism, islamophobia, and the stereotypical ways they are portrayed by some Finns. These negative phenomena were often discussed with humour or sarcasm that 'talks back' (hooks 1989: 9) and questions the stereotypical ways Africans and migrants are generally depicted.

When communities are approached as ethnic groups – in public discourse, in research, or in museum projects – some aspects of their histories and cultures are easily reproduced, whereas diversity within communities, and their contact, collaboration and identification with other groups, may remain invisible. Discussions with Somalis about if and how they wanted to participate in the planning of *The African Presence in Finland* exhibition showed that multiple senses of belonging and both identification and solidarity with other marginalized groups were understood as more important than promoting specific ethnic identities. For example, young artists and activists focused on cross-ethnic solidarity in their works, with references to other minorities such as the Sami and the Finnish Roma. Some Somali men who were active in Finnish Muslim organisations said that, instead of contributing something about their religious activities to the exhibition at the Finnish Labour Museum, they had plans to organize their own exhibition that would also include those Muslims in Finland who do not identify with the African diaspora.

The African Presence in Finland exhibition encouraged some people to start their own documentation and cultural heritage projects, but it did not significantly increase cooperation between diaspora communities and the museum. The employment contracts offered to people of an African diaspora background by the Finnish Labour Museum for the exhibition project ended when the project funding ended. When the people who acted as a link between the museum and the communities disappeared, cooperation between the museum and participants also ended. Some people who worked for the project said how some of their ideas were not necessarily understood because other workers in the museum were white Finns who had little previous experience of the themes and of working with ethnic and racial minorities.[9] In predominantly white cultural institutions, raising such issues can be difficult, and following principles and rules defining research ethics can make studying them impossible (Engman 2023, 255-6).

In the Helinä Rautavaara Museum: from short-term affairs to long-term commitments

The Helinä Rautavaara Museum was established by a private foundation in 1998 to represent the city of Espoo, the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Anthropological Foundation, and the Finnish Museums Association. Helinä Rautavaara (1928 – 1998) was a Finnish journalist who, from the 1950s onwards, made her career documenting foreign cultures and religions on her travels to South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean and South America. In 2018 the museum moved to its current premises in a large shopping mall located in the administrative centre of the city of Espoo, an area with a significant proportion of immigrants. The museum aimed to build a more culturally diverse Finland and a more socially just world through active audience work, through both inclusive exhibition projects and other forms of documentation (Helinä Rautavaaran Museo 2022). The Helinä Rautavaara Museum is currently the only ethnographic museum in Finland open to the public. Free admission makes visiting the museum accessible for everyone.

Fig. 2. The theme of the collection exhibition at Helinä Rautavaara Museum is encounters. The exhibition sections have been curated jointly with representatives of the communities from which the objects originated and who now live in the greater Helsinki area. Credit: Karri Anttila / Lvngroom.

From the very beginning, the Helinä Rautavaara Museum collaborated with local migrant communities, including Somalis. Between 2010 and 2019, 11 different projects celebrating living heritage involved more than 300 members of local Somali communities. A Year of Celebration (2010) introduced migrant communities' annual festivals to school children, and in the global education project In the Run, At Home (2013), Somali-speaking project workers gave hands-on workshops that taught Somali cooking in elementary schools. *Arooska-Somali Wedding* (2011 – 2013) was an exhibition project that portrayed how changes in cultural heritage to diaspora were seen in the Somali community. During the Looking for Signs project (2011), the museum collected women's experiences in the city space with photographs taken by the project's participants.

Fig. 3. During the Arooska-Somali Wedding exhibition project in 2013, Somali-speaking museum staff and interns built an aqal hut outside the WeeGee exhibition centre. The hut, covered with a traditional raar mat, was made from Finnish hay. It was soon demolished by guards, who considered it an unauthorised dwelling. Credit: Nina-Maria Oförsagd.

Fig. 4. Wedding party, Espoo 2013. This photo was used as one of the opening photos of the Arooska-Somali Wedding exhibition. Credit: Nina-Maria Oförsagd.

Some of the projects aimed to give participants, especially women, new skills to help them to enter the labour market. Power Through Peer Learning in 2014 equipped participants with the know-how to give hands-on workshops in schools and libraries. The My Mind, My Tongue (2013 – 2014) project, created and led by artist and activist Warda Ahmed and cultural producer Wisam El Fadl, trained Somali women to lead Somali language workshops for children in daycare. In these projects, the focus was placed on cultural heritage work, although their objectives were also to support participants' integration into Finnish society.

The Helinä Rautavaara Museum has also provided a space for joint exhibitions with Somali associations and other associations that have links to Somalia. For example, *Mogadishu Now and Then* (2018) combined Somalian poetry and photographs of the capital of Somalia before and after the country's war. In 2022 the museum ran an adult education project called Moving Memories: Creative Drive for a Changing Europe, during which Finns of Somali background were interviewed to collect their personal histories.

Both in the Helinä Rautavara Museum and the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, projects involving immigrants, especially refugees and other so-called vulnerable groups, have been encouraged and partly financed by the European Union and other national authorities. This has led to a discussion about how the rules for collaboration between museums and migrant communities should be defined and organized, that is to say, the extent to which rules are defined by the cultural institutions themselves or the communities they intend to work with. External funding has encouraged museums to take part in integration policies and to hire people from migrant communities, but this has also meant only short-term employment contracts.

Over the years, dozens of trainees of Somali background, most of them women, have been recruited to work in the Helinä Rautavaara museum and in projects focusing on Somali culture. People often disappear after contracts end, sometimes for several years, but perhaps surprisingly, many of them return for new projects or indeed with their own ideas for new projects and collaborations. The museum has offered short-term employment in the form of museum guards, helping young Somalis for whom finding jobs or internships in the Finnish labour market is more difficult than for their native peers. Commitment to actively hiring Somalis and other migrants has turned out to be an effective way of building trust and sharing information between museum and migrant communities.

Although time has passed and the location of the museum has changed several times,

relationships between the Helinä Rautavaara Museum and local Somali communities have been maintained, partly because there has been little turnover in the museum's staff, but also because previously established contacts have been nurtured in various ways. It is common that people who have been working at the Helinä Rautavaara Museum often turn up to greet the staff and show their new grandchildren. Among the Somali-speaking trainees, there have been young people whose parents have also worked at the museum.

In the spring of 2022 an event was organized at the museum that was initiated by local Somali-speaking politicians to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Somali language as a written form. Snippets of the event were also broadcast on the news in Somalia. Our analyses show that, even short-term relations, if nurtured, can produce familiarity and networks that make it easier for local communities to approach museums with their own ideas and to accept museums' invitations to participate in documenting and rewriting local histories.

Museum initiatives in Finland to preserve the cultural heritage of migrant and diaspora communities are influenced by national policies concerning museum collections. The documentation of new collections is closely influenced by the network set up jointly by Finnish museums and the Finnish Heritage Agency.[10] The guidelines of this network currently make no mention of diaspora communities or cultures; they only mention immigrants. According to the network, the recording of cultural encounters and the transmission of immigrant traditions is primarily the responsibility of the Helinä Rautavaara Museum, whereas, for example, the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas is now responsible for collections on anti-racist activities. However, diaspora communities cannot be considered as 'migrant' communities forever; therefore, preserving diaspora communities' cultural heritage may require collaboration both with local communities and across the museum sector. To identify the different transnational spaces – social, cultural, and political – that are integral to African diaspora communities (Rastas and Nikunen 2019), international cooperation may also be required. Another crucial issue here is that the diversity and plurality of diaspora cultures can make it difficult to place them into existing collections.[11]

Cultural heritage for/of young people

According to many studies, performing Somali identity can sometimes be a demanding and even heavy burden for young people (Mubarak et al. 2015: 88, 99), especially if their parents see the culture(s) of the host country or, for example, non-Muslim Black cultures, as threats to their children's cultural identity. Our interviews and online materials show that the need to give space to the views of young Somalis and their cultures has also been discussed in Somali associations.

In recent times both traditional poetry and rap performances by young people have been presented at Finnish-Somali events. Yet in our workshop with young Somalis, all participants talked about the need to question and diversify common stereotypes and perceptions of Somali culture and Somalia.[12] Those who had visited the country observed how surprised they were. As one individual put it, 'all I knew was about the countryside, camels and … you know. But they have modern lives in the cities. And many good things. In Finland, people know only about bad things'. When one participant said that the perception of Somalia as a country defined by 'pastoralism' is 'overemphasized', others agreed.

When we asked how 'their culture' is different from that of their (white) Finnish peers, young Somalis offered us a long list of issues related to family life, especially taking care of their younger siblings. This discussion soon led to the planning of a 'homework club' on the museum's premises, where they could bring their younger siblings and therefore get more time off for themselves. They also suggested other ideas about how to make museums more useful. Their wish list included events with young Black activists and rappers ('Somalis, if possible, but not necessarily'), video workshops, screenings of their own films, and in particular, opportunities to gain work experience and contacts in working life, where Somali youths continue to face prejudice and discrimination. They agreed that the best way to welcome their parents to museums would be to translate information about exhibitions and other events into Somali. Young participants were also asked to comment on the museum's

permanent collection. Their attention was first drawn to items referring to Somalis, such as photographs. In these images they tried to find people who they might know. Their favourite collection item was a cartoon by Warda Ahmed, in which the artist presented herself as an activist and a 'nightmare for xenophobic Finnish politicians'.[13]

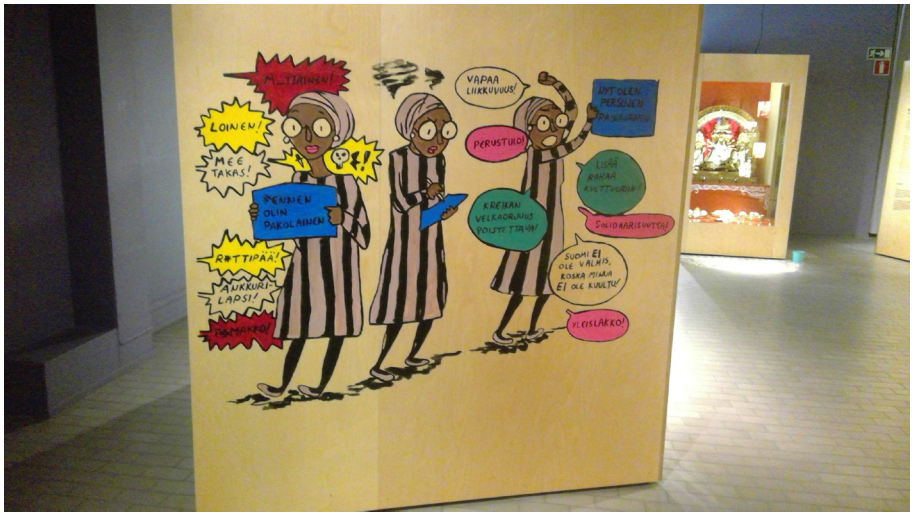

Fig. 5. Warda Ahmed's artwork has been on display at the Helinä Rautavaara Museum since 2017. It comments not only on the racism and xenophobia faced by Somalis in Finland, but also on how to combat it. Credit: Mosi Herati.

In her ethnographic study of young refugee men in Finland, Elina Niinivaara (2022) writes about her visit to the Helinä Rautavaara Museum with one of her interlocutors of a Somali background. She describes the young man's disappointment when he realized that Somalia was completely absent from the museum's 'Africa room'. During their visit in the summer of 2015, the museum was situated on another premises. Only the permanent exhibition was on display at that time, which included objects acquired by Helinä Rautavaara from her travels, but she had never visited Somalia. Additions to the collection – including photographs from Somalia – became part of the permanent exhibition in 2017. The current permanent exhibition also contains photographs from the *Arooska-Somali Wedding* and *Mogadishu Now and Then* exhibitions, as well as the artwork by Warda Ahmed mentioned above.

According to Niinivaara (2022: 281-5), going to the museum sparked many questions and an intense conversation between the researcher and young Somali man, exploring issues such as Finnish understandings of Somalis, the politics of representation, and the complexity of identity for many young Somalis living in a diaspora. Similar to Niinivaara's study, our materials show how questions of belonging and non-belonging inevitably become topics of discussion that would merit reflection in ethnographic museums. This highlights the potential of museums as safe spaces to discuss difficult issues and address tensions between and within communities (Crooke 2007: 137). However, our ethnographic materials show that Somali cultural heritage work in Finland is carried out mainly independently of museums. This issue we discuss next.

Beyond museums

Our materials show that Finnish-Somali associations have been active in presenting Somali

culture in various forums outside museums. The associations also have photographs and other materials on display in their offices and on their websites. Somali association events have included poetry, music, dance, and exhibitions on various topics, usually curated by volunteers. The objects on display were borrowed from local Somalis, some of whom are well known for their passion for passing on their culture to younger generations. One interviewee said that when Finnish Somalis visit Somalia, they often buy 'old objects' to donate to their association so that young Somalis who cannot travel to Somalia can also learn more about their history and culture. Another interviewee, who had participated in building several short-term exhibitions, said that in her apartment one room is reserved only for the storage of objects from Somalia. She mentioned the Somali Museum of Minnesota and talked about her dream of establishing Europe's first Somali museum in Finland, to which she would donate all her collected items.[14] Although preserving knowledge instead of objects is part of what Mire describes as Somalis' 'distinctive view on heritage' (2007: 49), these examples show how, in the diaspora, new meanings may be attached to objects.[15]

Libraries, cultural centres, and festivals have become places where Somali culture is presented both for Somalis and other Finns. Many of these events can be described as typical celebrations of multiculturalism, with samples of Somali food, clothing, or other items on offer. However, Somalis have also created ambitious exhibitions and rich cultural programmes that include collected items in display cases, films, public discussions, and other events.[16] The people involved in these projects are proud of them. They talk about their exhibitions as important forums where they can transmit Somali culture to young Somalis and spread information about Somalis and Somalia to other people in Finland. However, according to some interviewees, participants from the associations lack expertise in planning and building exhibitions, or marketing events.

Sometimes objects and other materials for Somalis' exhibitions come from Somali diasporas in other European countries. The global circulation of materials and approaches to presenting Somali culture can be seen by comparing websites advertising 'Somali week' and other Somali cultural events in different countries. Some of our interlocutors were aware of Somalis' cultural heritage projects in the other Nordic countries, such as the Mobile Museum Somalia project led by Abdi-Noor Haji Mohamed in Sweden.[17] One interviewee talked about the collaboration between Nordic Somalis in an exhibition at the cultural centre STOA in Helsinki in 2016, which was about Somalis who toured Northern Europe to perform Somali culture in the early twentieth century. According to him, the exhibition was compiled of old photographs collected by a Somali researcher from Denmark.[18] The Interviewee's description of what he called the 'circus exhibition' lacked the critical reflections that are typical of contemporary discussions about human exhibitions or 'human zoos' (Andreassen 2015).

In another interview, a Somali woman who also had an active role in organizing this exhibition, stressed how important it was to show people how Somali people 'travelled around the world and Europe more than 100 years ago'. Like the other interviewee, she did not use the terms 'human zoo',or 'human exhibition' which was offered by the interviewer during their conversation, but instead 'artists' or 'group of artists''.[19]

A similarly positive interpretation can be found on one Somali association's website in an article about this exhibition focusing on 'the history of Somali diaspora'.[20] On the website, these exhibitions are compared with 'today's circus' instead of human exhibitions. Such interpretations of past displays could be explained by the interviewee's ignorance of discussions on decoloniality and critical debates concerning human exhibitions in the early twentieth century. However, they can also be understood as an expression of what Lehtola (2022) defines as 'our histories' (*meijän historiat*) in his study on the Sami peoples' own interpretations of their histories. The way past events and encounters are told and passed to younger generations among marginalized communities may dispute official historiography that often presents marginalized groups and people who have been considered as 'others' merely as victims. A more positive interpretation of the past emphasizes the agency of Somalis who performed in those exhibitions, suggesting that Somalis have a history here and that Europeans were interested in Somali culture.

Conclusion

Our findings are consistent with those of studies that explore how established policies and practices of museum work do not necessarily create ideal conditions for collaboration (Boast 2011; Crooke 2007), and how working with diaspora communities inevitably puts new demands to renegotiate national narratives (Gouriévidis 2014; Levitt 2015; Mason 2013) and address issues of racism on museums (Dixon 2016). As shown in studies from other Nordic countries (see Engman 2023; Lagerkvist 2008), in Finland, museums' cooperation with migrant communities has been both encouraged and confined by national policies governing museums, as well as national and international funding opportunities for the integration of immigrants. However, our findings raise some questions that have received less attention. With a few exceptions, Finnish museums have not been interested in presenting Somali communities or including them in presentations of Finnish society; neither have museums worked enough to reach Somalis as museum audiences and collaborators. The paucity of research on museum projects about Somalis or that collaborate with Somalis suggests that the situation may be similar in many other European countries with large Somali communities. Our analysis also shows how living in a diaspora seems to have transformed what Mire (2007) has described as Somalis' lack of interest in museums into various activities aimed at preserving and presenting their Somaliness, as well as diversifying and challenging stereotypical representations and narratives about Somalis and Somalia. There is no reason to doubt that independent cultural heritage work in Somali communities is also being carried out in other countries, but more research is needed.[21]

Ethnic and racial minorities do not necessarily perceive predominantly white cultural institutions as welcoming partners (Dixon 2016; Littler and Naidoo 2005), and many of the principles and practices that guide museum work create 'logics' (Engman 2023) that can be at odds with inclusivity and other efforts to decolonize. Although collaboration can be easier for smaller organizations that are closer to their local communities (Gouriévidis 2014: 20), our analyses of collaborative projects at the Helinä Rautavaara Museum show that building dialogue does not happen overnight, and maintaining it requires the nurturing of existing contacts. There are no shortcuts to inclusion or models that can be applied to all museums and communities (Lagerkvist 2006: 6), but studies on collaborative projects between museums and Somali communities in other Nordic countries also show that successful cooperation requires active recruitment and equal participation in planning (Appel Laursen et al. 2017: 85; Goodnow 2008: 241).

Our analysis reveals some differences between generations in terms of how Somalis want to communicate about their culture. The older generation has been active in preserving objects and stories, while younger Somalis' artistic projects about their multiple identities are often driven by expressions of anti-racism. However, different generations also learn and adopt from each other. Older Somalis have accepted rap performances as part of local Somali culture; likewise, discussions on the 'circus exhibition' show how younger people might try to understand older Somalis' interpretations of particular histories, even if they dispute the historiographies popular within activist discourse.

The repatriation of looted objects has been at the heart of debates on museum decolonization, and studies on diaspora communities have brought new dimensions to these debates. Some scholars have emphasized the importance of dislocated objects for diasporas (Basu 2011), while others have criticized how some museums are 'now claiming that source countries no longer have reasons to claim back their heritage, as the new diaspora communities also have the right to enjoy the heritage in their present locations' (Abungu 2019: 70). There is not space to take part in such debates here, but our findings remind us how new diasporas participate in moving objects from their original locations to new places. This is an interesting but potentially problematic topic that also needs further research.

Although in many studies museums are discussed as resources and platforms for change (Gouriévidis 2014), our research agenda and findings direct us to emphasize migrant and diaspora community expertise and potential contributions to museum decolonization. Even though it is the museum who 'sets the structure on which to construct the heritage

of migration and diasporas and who decides on its sustainability' (Naguib 2013a: 2187), in discussions about decoloniality, the demand for inclusiveness implies that marginalized communities have something special to offer for the 'epistemological decolonization' of museums (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2011).

According to Peggy Levitt we need 'people who know something about several different places, who can see the structures of common difference and what is in them and help explain why' (2015: 138). However, many museums lack the resources to become more cosmopolitan (Mason 2013 and Levitt 2015) by making use of the expertise of what Levitt calls 'the transnational class of museum professionals' (2015: 9), referring to people who have become experts in helping museums to make sense of migration, globalization and the demands of decoloniality. Heritage work is, among other things, about negotiating traditions and 'diaspora is a place where traditions operate but are not closed' (Hall 1998: 299). The specific expertise of the large Somali diaspora communities that museums could benefit from stems from their transnational connections and knowledge of Somali cultures, their marginalized position as non-white people of refugee and Muslim backgrounds, and their diasporic identities. Somalis' 'epistemic advantage' (Harding 1996), referring here to their ability to identify, talk back (hooks 1989; Rastas 2014:198-201), resist racism, eurocentrism, and other manifestations of coloniality (Quijano 2007), has become visible in our analysis both in the projects that they have carried out with museums and in their independent heritage activities.

Somalis' independent heritage work reminds us that, although museums are understood as *the* institution responsible for documenting cultural heritage, they are not the only – or even the best – places for diaspora communities' heritage projects. Our analyses make visible Somalis' concerns about their lack of skills in designing and marketing their exhibitions and other events. Museum professionals could also start building networks and learn from diaspora communities by offering their expertise, knowledge, and other assistance to diaspora communities' own cultural heritage projects outside museums.

Notes

1. For an exploration of the various understandings of decoloniality in the context of museums, see Soares and Witcomb (2022).

2. Statistics Finland, 'Foreign-language speakers, Number by country', 2022. https://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/vieraskieliset_en.html#number-by-country, accessed 9 October 2023.

3. The 'Rethinking Diasporas, Redefining Nations: Representations of African Diaspora Formations in Museums and Exhibitions' (2015-2020) research project was directed by Anna Rastas. For more information on this project, see the project's website: https://www.annarastas.com/rethinking-diasporas-redefining-nations-representations-of-african-diaspora-formations-in-museums-and-exhibitions-en/, accessed 9 October 2023.

4. For more information on this research project (2012 – 2015), also directed by Anna Rastas, and the exhibition, see Rastas (2020), or the project's website: https://www.annarastas.com/the-african-presence-in-finland-action-research-project-and-exhibition/, accessed 9 October 2023.

5. More information about the Helinä Rautavaara Museum can be found on the museum's website: https://www.helinamuseo.fi/en/, accessed 28 February 2023.

6. The names of the interviewees are not stated since only some of them have given their consent to the publication of their names.

7. Interview recorded on 24 April 2019. Digital recording conducted by Warda Ahmed.

8. For example, between 2016 and 2018 over 10,000 asylum seekers and migrants, as well as 15 Finnish museums, took part in The Museum as Asylum project lead by the Helinä

Rautavaara Museum. This was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

9. Anna Rastas' fieldnotes of discussions in 2015.

10. TAKO-verkosto, 'Network for Collections Management and Contemporary Documentation in Finland', TAKO-verkosto 2023. https://www.takoverkosto.fi/en/tako, accessed 9 October 2023.

11. For example, once the African Presence in Finland exhibition at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas closed, it proved difficult to deposit its materials within a Finnish museum. This led the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas museum to set up a collection of anti-racist activities.

12. Digital recording of the workshop organized at the Helinä Rautavaara museum on 18 June 2019.

13. Warda Ahmed worked as an assistant to gather research materials for our study, but she did not participate the workshop with young Somalis.

14. Interviews on 24 April and 22 August 2019. Digital recordings conducted by Warda Ahmed.

15. On transnational migrants' material practices see Povrzanovic Frykman (2019: 30).

16. For example, the 'Somali Culture Week' at Cultural Center Caisa, 13 January 2011 – 22 February 2011; the 'Pop up Somalimaja' exhibition at Kulma, Turku 26 April – 9 May 2012. In an interview conducted by Warda Ahmed on 22 August 2019, one Somali woman spoke about events that she had organized in eastern Finland, where there are relatively few Somalis.

17. Abdinoor Mohamed, 'Mobile Museum Somalia' ['Madxafka wareege ee Somalia'], YouTube 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh1EGul0FBk, accessed 16 March 2023.

18. The interviewee's expression 'Somali researcher from Denmark' probably refers to Bodhari Warsame, who visited the exhibition organized by Somalis in Finland in 2016. On social media he defines himself as an independent researcher. When talking about his language skills, he mentions Swedish instead of Danish. Our research materials also include an email sent on 5 December 2016 from Bodhari Warsame to Anna Rastas' research assistant, in which he writes that Somalis 'toured around Europe and beyond for about 40 years, from late 19th C to early-mid 20th', and that, to his knowledge, 'they have visited some of the Nordic countries and have left rich history behind, including a good number of cultural items kept to date in some European museums (Sweden)'.

19. Interview recorded on 22 August 2019. Digital recording conducted by Warda Ahmed.

20. See Suomen Somalialaisten Liitto, 'Kirjaesittelyjä ja somalialaisen diasporan historiaa'. Suomen Somalialaisten Liitto 2016. https://somaliliitto.fi/2016/10/26/kirjaesittelyja-ja-somalialaisen-diasporan-historiaa, accessed 20 December 2022.

21. For an example of Somali collaboration with museums in the UK, see the Somali Object Journeys project at the British Museum; for an example of independent Somali projects in the UK, see Dele Meiji Fatunla, '"Living Museum" of British-Somali Heritage Heads to East London', The Art Newspaper 2020. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/09/07/living-museum-of-british-somali-heritage-heads-to-east-london, accessed 20 December 2022.

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