

**Star City Treasures
AmeriCorps Oral History Project
Transcript**

**Interview with Khamisa Abdalla
Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project
900 West Saunders Ave
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Interviewed by Ieman Eltakawi
AmeriCorps Member**

IE: Uh, the following interview was conducted with Khamisa for the Star City Treasures uh, AmeriCorps history project. It took place on uh, June 22, uh, 2006 at my home. Uh, the interviewer is uh, Ieman Eltakawi. Um, first of all I want to welcome uh, Khamisa Kambal. Um, she is uh, from Sudan and um, I have the pleasure to make this interview with her. Uh, first we want to—we want you to—tell me about uh, where you grew up.

KA: Uh first um, thank you Ieman. Uh, my name is um, Khamisa uh, Abdalla. My family name is uh, Kambal. Uh, I from Sudan from uh _____. But I grew up in southern Sudan where I spent uh, most of my childhood there.

IE: Um...uh, tell me uh, about your family.

KA: Yeah, um, usually we as Sudanese uh, people, we have large family. Um, I come—come fr—I'm come from a large family. So, this would be like uh, our tradition to have uh, um, large or big family. It mean for um—it mean a lot in our traditional. I have um, six boys, one girl and this is like mediu--medium uh, fa—family, it's not a lot I mean, according to our culture, so...

IE: Hmm

KA: ...because my mom had like fourteen child.

IE: Oh...

KA: I have half of that so...

IE: Oh...

KA: [laughs]

IE: So um...uh, is it something common that uh, most of the families they have uh, many members in the family?

KA: Yeah, this is uh, according to our culture that—long time ago when you have a big family that you—that mean—give you a power and respect among your tribe, so...

IE: Mmm hmm...Mmm hmm

KA: It is common to have a large family.

IE: Yeah. Uh, I think this is uh, something common in uh, all Sudan—all part of [KA: uh, yeah] Sudan. [KA: Mmm hmm] Yeah. Uh, so uh, tell me about some of uh, your family traditions like um, such like recreation and food, and like the life.

KA: Actually, all our life--when you see uh, African life you find most of the life is tradition. We have fall traditional, summer traditional, um so, even in the life of family we have traditional—when we have a newborn you have a special tradition and marry you have special tradition—even death, we have traditional. So, our lives kind of um...life or happiness for all the times, see people have for events and life uh, have a lot of activities and movement so...In my own family we have um--I think the special tradition we have for Ramadan. This is the month that all of the family be together and we have a lot of thing going on in this—all the good thing we have in—in our um, life like agreeing to have marriage or think about buying a new house or a new farm—all that have uh, tak—took place in um, Ramadan because we think this is the month that everything you do—we gonna have uh, bless of God, so...

IE: Mmm hmm...[KA: mmm] So uh, for example, now you are going to uh, marry your uh, daughter.

KA: ...yeah

IE: ...so what are the traditions uh there, which uh, take—take place in your daughter's marriage?

KA: Yeah...my daughter marriage here in America. This sometimes I feel sad because it—it doesn't take uh, exactly tradition we have in our country [IE: Mmm] in my f—in my country when we have a marriage in family special—for our first daughter that it take tradition—it take a long time like three months before preparing until the day for—she go to her husband house. So, for—for all these days there will be traditional for like um, paying some dowry or people gathering together to say yes, we agree or dis—or—just a lot of tradition—we miss part of this here. [IE: Mmm] So we conclude with all the marriage in one days or two days--one henna days and—and uh, day of uh, agreement of marriage that will be a _____ and the last day will be like a big party and so _____ there is no chance to make like a whole or long traditional. But the good thing here—we gonna have a lot of people come from different state—maybe [IE: Mmm] over 400 or 300 [IE: Oh great] between—Yeah. [IE: Mmm] So, there [that's a big number] will be a lot...yeah—number of people.

IE: Mmm, mmm...And um, uh for—for uh, this uh, number, how are you going to locate accommodation for this big number of people?

KA: Yeah most of them will—will come in the same day of the—we're gonna have a party. They gonna come like um, noon.

IE: Mmm

KA: Uh, or like seven or six o'clock the day. They will come direct to the place of the—have the party—after party most of them gonna leave. But for my plan now we have some friend um—they offer—do you know Sudanese people they're—they can cooperate and help each other so...

IE: Yeah...mmm...

KA: They will be spread in several houses here.

IE: Hmm mmm...

KA: And I have o—one of my friend—actually, she is my Sudanese student. She give me her house office and then I'm gonna leave all my apartment [IE: laughs] for—for guests, so...

IE: Oh, great. [laughs]

KA: Mmm hmm.

IE: She was your student?

KA: Yeah.

IE: Wow...

KA: ...my student...

IE: Great, great. Uh, so you are going to have uh, great help from the Sudanese commun—

KA: Yeah, even I have—I feel people gonna help me but I feel nervous because this is my first daughter or my first big we—I don't know if I can handle it in the right way or not, so...

IE: [laughs] No, I hope uh, you will [KA: yeah...]—I hope you will handle it in the right way.

KA: 'kay thank you.

IE: Especially you have many friends here—you have many people you know...

KA: Yeah, I know.

IE: And Sudanese in general are very helpful and generous you know [KA: yeah], the traditional culture of Sudan.

KA: Yeah, I know.

IE: Uh, c—uh—can you explain uh, what is henna because you mentioned that uh, there will be a henna day [KA: yeah] uh, in the wedding and this is a Sudanese tradition?

KA: Yeah, henna is similar to tattoo here in America. So...but we use um, we cannot use chemical it just like kind of blunt that it make like flowers or it mix it with the water, so we use it for uh, bare foot and hands or make some flowers from it...it doesn't mean like just uh, for beauty but—the word henna, it mean like um, um...lovely or be close uh, or something like this so, it means something for feelings and something for um, gathering people together so...it kind of lot of traditional of being having something good when you have henna. So...

IE: Hmm...

KA: ...we do that.

IE: Yeah...Um, uh, what about education? Can you tell me about your education?

KA: Mmm, actually um, I study um, graduate from um, education college in Sudan. I teach math, science, and art, uh, but when I move here in America so I s—I just start from scratch because you know, here in American y—they didn't accept your education there [IE: mmm] so, I stopped—I—I actually um, change my major [IE: mmm] to human service to helping people because I think uh, education and work with people-- there's connected between them, so...

IE: Mmm...mmm...

KA: I like to help people.

IE: Hmm...

KA: So, I'll study now, uh, social work and human service [IE: yeah...] beside the medical interpreting to help a newcomer.

IE: Mmm hmm...And uh, does this has—uh—have some relation with your work now? That's why you decided [KA: mmm, yeah] to take human uh, studies—[KA: yeah] social studies?

KA: Uh, before—when I came here I start—uh, after two years, I start helping the newcomer so...but I think this not enough because sometimes when I taking them to the doctor there is some terminology I don't understand [IE: hmm] and this is like sensitive word you need to interpret exactly so I decide to go to college and study this.

IE: Mmm...

KA: After that so I decide to study also human service to work as social work...so...[IE: mmm]

IE: Yeah good. Uh, where are you working now?

KA: Mmm, I'm working with African community [IE: mmm] but now our uh, office is located in uh, Lincoln Action Program.

IE: Mmm hmm

KA: For a while, so...I don't know for how long but when they didn't move for our own center.

IE: Great, and um, uh, as a uh, here uh, before uh, you were working for African center...

KA: Mmm...

IE: So, um, you were used to work with Africans.

KA: Yeah, I used to work with, actually not uh, African only—maybe sometimes um, people who speak Arabic, so [IE: mmm] I interpret for arriving people [IE: mmm hmm] and...because I work part time job in Lincoln Public School. [IE: mmm] When I go to like, conference, I just interpret for people who speak Arabic just not—it is not uh, African ol--on--only. So...

IE: Mmm, mmm...so you work for Iraqis also?

KA: For Iraqi in Lincoln Public School—for people who speak Arabic.

IE: Mmm...

KA: It doesn't matter Iraq or...

IE: You still—you still do that?

KA: Yeah...I'm still doing that.

IE: Mmm, great.

KA: I translate also some document...

IE: Mmm...OK, great. Uh, tell me about the schools you attended and the courses you took.

KA: Now, in um,

IE: Just now you talk—

KA: In Lincoln?

IE: Mmm

KA: I take a lo--I take a lot—I about to graduate. Maybe in the beginning of next year but my last quarter I take um, human sexuality and woman issues. I like woman issues, so...[IE: Mmm] they support woman a lot. It doesn't matter for the whole world, the woman it support.

IE: Mmm...mmm hmm—woman issues?

KA: Yeah, the class uh, called woman issues.

IE: Issues.

KA: Mmm hmm

IE: Uh huh. I see, it's generally about uh, woman?

KA: Wo--woman, yeah--because woman—you see even in American culture that uh, woman is not even have the same qua—equal with the man.

IE: Mmm...

KA: When you see the same—they have the same educations [IE: mmm] the man have wages [IE: mmm] bigger than woman. So...

IE: Yeah...mmm

KA: This is not the issues for that but for the womans—they need to be together so...[IE: mmm] for good, so...

IE: Mmm...So it's generally uh, about wom--woman, uh?

KA: Yeah, the class all—only about, uh, woman. Yeah.

IE: Uh, can you tell me about your teachers and your classmates?

KA: Uh, here in um, America?

IE: In Sudan.

KA: In Sudan? [sigh] I don't know. I work maybe in the--boss in--in a elementary school, high school, and middle school because I teach math and math is my favorite als--also science--sometimes I go to high school and teach some math, um [IE: mmm]...but I real like and enjoy to work with um, elementary school--especially in Sudan.

IE: [laughs] Mmm...s--

KA: But the problem there fo--um, the class will be over on--hundred. [IE: mmm hmm] student in one--in one class so...[IE: wow] some of them jumping from the window, go outside [IE: laughs], do whatever they want to come but teacher don't know about it so...[laughs]

IE: [laughing] Can you make control--how did you [KA: No, you can't control, it's too--] [laughs]...So, the class has more than [KA: So many, yeah.] one hundred students! [KA: mmm hmm...it is amazing.] Wow. Yeah, [Ka: mmm hmm] yeah.

IE: And uh, was--was that in uh, elementary school?

KA: Elementary school, yeah...

IE: W--Where? What town?

KA: Can you believe it--this is in the capital of Sudan.

IE: Oooh...

KA: Yeah.

IE: Mmm...So that was in Kartum [KA: yeah] and _____ [KA: mmm] Mmm...wow...Tell me about how this helped prepare you for your profession. Uh, the schools you are attended, the education you attended and the teachers--how this uh, helped to prepare your uh, profession?

KA: I don't know, when you say profession--that for the future when, what I need to do is my educations [IE: mmm] After I'm study human service but is this not what I'm thinking to be professional because some artist--I'm thinking about um, actually, I have um, signed for UNL to enter it and uh textiled, so maybe it's will be my profession in the future, so...

IE: Mmm, hmm. Um, now we are going to talk about marriage and family customs. Uh, tell me about your family and your family customs relating to marriage--I think we have discussed this.

KA: Mmm hmm...

IE: When--do you have more thing to mention about it?

KA: Uh, the mention in our American Sudan to um, uh, any woman or uh, girl cannot accepted to have any relationship with the man before--before marriage.

IE: Mmm, this [KA: so..] is a tradition.

KA: Tra--uh, yea--traditional [IE: mmm]. Also it, just is not tradition. If you look for the health's issues [IE: yeah] it's good. Mmm.

IE: Yeah. And um--uh, is this uh, applied in most of the areas of Sudan, or in some areas?

KA: Uh, I think most--most of Sudan agree that--even some tribe that um, believe in having married but some of them need to make sure that this woman they gonna marry--she gonna have a child so mos--some of them have tradition like--they agree between men and um, maybe boys and girls to be married but they need this girl to have first child in her house [IE: mmm] before she leave her house [IE: Mmm] so they make sure that she gonna have baby [IE: mmm] in future so [IE: mmm]...this just kind of...some of the--

IE: check-up. [laughs]

KA: Yeah.

IE: Um, tell me about meeting your spouse...or...

KA: Actually, we--I don't know. My marriage is arranged marriage. [IE: uh huh] I have been engaged from the first hour I was born. [IE: wow] Yeah. [IE: mmm]. S--bu--he is my cousin so, the first time I--first hour I was born--he--my--c--um--my uncle come to my mom and--and ask her this girl will be her future wife for his huh, wi--er for his son, so...[IE: mmm, mmm] this agreement uh, when I grew up I found--I know myself that I gonna be married, so...

IE: Mmm...

KA: But for our um...at that time it is not the arranged marriage can be acceptable so we have agree with him--if he find the girl he love, i gonna help him [IE: mmm] to marriage her. Also, he ask me if I find the man I love [IE: mmm] he gonna help me because we cannot broke this agreement [IE: mmm] It's difficult [IE: mmm hmm. Good--] So, but for time we find ourself we love each other so...

IE: Uh huh, OK, good. [KA mmm hmm (laughs)] So, it was arranged first but then uh, [KA: the love] the love [KA: mmm] come...came...uh still is there. [laughs]

KA: Ah, I hope [laughs]

IE: So...what about coming to America? Tell me about when and why you decided to come to America.

KA: I dunno-I always, since I grew up--I look for the bright future. I just like some--I think my--my family always call me the _____ you have crazy ideas all the time. [IE: laughs] It is not crazy idea. I'm always looking for um, something different or something better for me and for my...[IE: mmm] So, when I see the Sudan in general, everything's going down um, economic, uh, education, health, [IE: mmm] or--so I think some place for good living for my kids [IE: mmm] So, I'm decided one day and told my mom _____ Mom, Mom, I need to go to America. She laugh with me--How can you go to America? You don't have money, you don't have any resource. [IE: laughs] I tell her I just have ideas. [IE: laughs] And ideas is better than moneys [laughs]. [IE: laughs] So d--one by day--day by day--my ideas become like

created to a plan it real for it, so...I found myself in my--my way to get from Sudan and come to Egypt--from Egypt to came here.
mmm hmm]...So this is how you came to America?

KA: Yeah.

IE: Going to Egypt first...

KA: To Egypt, yeah. [IE: mmm, and then--] From Egypt [IE: mmm] I apply for--to be like refugees and [IE: mmm hmm] ...yeah. [IE: Mmm hmm] And it is not easy--you supposed to have a good reason. You have like, more than three interview [IE: mmm] with lawyers to tell your story. [IE: mmm hmm] My story's simple. Sometimes they look--this is your story? I say yes, this is my story. [IE: mmm] I need a good life for my--good place, safety...[IE: mmm] I need to place that you can sleep without worry for tomorrow, [IE: Mmm] what you eat, because it is--for me it is bad to think about what--what you gonna eat tomorrow because this not--this no--time of thinking about what to eat.

IE: Yeah, you are right.

KA: Yeah, so I feel bad when my--when my kids ask me, Mom, when we--what we gonna eat tomorrow in the morning? So...[IE: mmm] I need them to ask me, Mom what are you gonna be t--tomorrow [IE: mmm] so I gonna help him to find his way and this is I found here in America.

IE: Yeah, mmm... [KA: mmm] Good..[pause] Uh, tell me about what it was like to first come to America.

KA: Yeah...it--it--it's huge. It is different. Very different to come from Africa to America. When we first have our interview in um, in Egypt, they tell us um, America is land of dreams. [IE: mmm hmm] Or, America is heaven. So, I think this is not good um, ideas to give people that you gonna go to the--land of--thi--it is real land of dream--but it's not real like heaven. When you think about heaven that mean you come and find everything easy. [IE: mmm hmm] But it's not like this, so...[IE: mmm] this is really disappoint me after three months here. I supposed to work tomorrow, got everything..._____

IE: Mmm...So, uh..You didn't find it easy as you expected?

KA: It is not easy but [IE: mmm] uh, but for me it is not a big deal. E--once I have my freedom to do whatever I want to do, [IE: mmm] I think this is enough. [IE: mmm] And this is why they say it is the land of uh, dream. [IE: mmm] You can do whatever you want to do. [IE: mmm] I go to school I'm forty my--my forty. so I go to school. In Sudan, uh only you are in forty, and you there and y--you thinking about, you gonna die, [IE: laughs] you went--you want to give you work to people that about what they're supposed to do after you die--but I think um, here, you can do whatever you do. You go to school, you [IE: yeah] --you educated yourself--you can be whatever you want to be.

IE: Yeah, [KA: mmm hmm] and uh, beside that, there is uh, it's a good place for education. [KA: mmm hmm] Yeah. Uh, what about coming to Lincoln? Why you decided to come to Lincoln and not to New York or to Chicago?

KA: Actually, I didn't choose Lincoln, Lincoln choose me, so...[laughs] I found myself here. [IE: uh huh] I didn't choose to be to Lincoln I--because I don't know uh, the different between any state here [IE: mmm hmm] I leave this to--this choice to the people who brought me here. [IE: mmm hmm] I think when I came here I realize why they brought me here because it is a--a good place for family, [IE: yeah] a good place for education--I have eight children. It is a safety place. It is not a bigger like Washington or New York. It is place that near to where I came from. So, I don't know--I think it is a good choice [IE: yeah] and I like it.

IE: Yeah, good. Mmm hmm...Uh...tell me what it was like to uh, first come to Lincoln? [KA: mmm] Did you find as--what you expected? Did you find something different?

KA: I fou--I don't know. For--the thing I found different here--Or I cannot expect it like, I think I gonna find like uh, high floors for like, hundred or whatever and it is um, a lot of guns--f--gun in--in the street like I see in movie [IE: laughs]...robbing or whatever, [laughs] so...

IE: [laughing] you--you--you thought that?

KA: Yeah I thought like, I supposed to buy a gun before I came to America. [IE: laughs]. Because I see in the movie, everyone have guns [IE: laughs] and s--robbery-robbery everywhere. But, uh, this isn't life--just movie.

IE: Yeah.

KA: Yeah, it is calm and [IE: quiet] people are here are welcome.

IE: Mmm hmm...So--

KA: I also when I see the movies, see people like, naked, like nothing. You--you feel like America is place for just people having sex and everywhere but it is not like this. [IE: mmm hmm] People here have uh, their traditional [IE: mmm] and their values. [IE: mmm hmm, yeah] Yeah, so...

IE: Yeah. Some are conservative even [KA: yeah]...Mmm...So the--the movies uh, give negative idea. [laughs]

KA: Yeah, I don't know--[laughs]--this is the movies I saw when I was in Sudan, so...But the real thing about the movies I saw in Sudan--I remember I watch film in Sudan called The Jungle. Do you remember that?

IE: Yeah....yeah, I remember.

KA: The Jungle is some kind of cowboys uh, films...they like--one of them he come in--hero of them--they broke in the house and by he shoot like just by his hand or by kicking it. Really, the house here like this, it most--it--it is uh, whole right side, so...when my kids playing around and one of them fall with head and the floor--the wall--the wall is broken I say, OK, this is the jungle house now. [IE: laughs] S--the jungle is not a strong one but their house is weak s--[IE: because it's made of uh...wood]...uh, of, wood...of uh, some [IE: Mmm] kind of m--heavy heavy woo--heavy paper I think.

IE: Mmm, [KA: so...] Yeah, so uh, that is a big difference. But most of the houses are made from wood, bu--[KA: yeah] some of them are made uh, from bricks maybe.

KA: Here?

IE: Mmm, so...

KA: I don't have chance to live in bricks until now. Almost [IE: laughs] every pla--every house I move is from the same material. But the good thing is, the service good. [IE: yeah] You have air-condition, sun--heat in the winter and nice room. It is [IE: yeah] nice. [IE: yeah] It is really nice.

IE: Yeah. Uh, tell me about citizenship? Do you wanna be a citizen here in the states or uh, uh, have you ever or, already been a citizen?

KA: Actually, I'm American now.

IE: Oh good. [KA: mmm hmm] So...when did you have that--

KA: I think like three months ago, [IE: oh] I passed the test and...

IE: Congratulations.

KA: Thank you.

IE: So, wha--what uh, are you intending to do--are you intending to stay here or go back to Sudan or...?

KA: I see this for _____ uh, I'm applying for _____ not now but after I get my citizenship, the first thing I think I gonna vote. [IE: oh] yeah...[IE: good] for next voting, yeah.

IE: Yeah. [pause] So, as you look back, what do you think about leaving the country you were born in and coming to the United States?

KA: I think what--what--what matter what happen to you--the place you grew up--it is still in your heart. Uh, and it is hard to leave your home. It look like uh, when I came here this is my feeling until now. Like when you pull the plant from its roots and you need to plant it in another place--different--different climate, different weather--different--even the--the all environment. It

took you a lot to let this plant again to grow and look like natural and like--t need a lot of work. So what I going doing now--I'm just trying to--to put my roots but It's hard to digging this--what is [laughs] [IE: laughs]. I don't know if I can be able to dig and put my roots here or [IE: hmm] my roots cannot die or whatever so, it is--it is real hard...for me.

IE: Uh, what recommendations would you give others who are following behind you?

KA: I don't know--for me, when you came here, I know a lot of people have um, trouble and have bad uh, experience, they have in life before. Just leave it behind you. [IE: mmm] Don't look for your bad. Look for the future. [IE: mmm] Look for better. I think the life is short and when you leave from this life you supposed to do like, a good thing--people can remind you about uh, and also have uh, forgiven you know, have...

IE: Yeah...[KA: mmm hmm] So, um, when did you uh, entered uh, Lincoln first time w--?

KA: Uh, in um, 200--the end of 2000.

IE: Mmm, so now, mmm--?

KA: Five years...five years and a half.

IE: Six...Five years and a half.

KA: Yeah.

IE: Yeah, OK. Long time.

KA: Yeah, seem like a long time. Wh--but when I compare this to people who say like, we have like fifteen years or twenty years...

IE: Here in Lincoln [KA: I ca--]?

KA: Yeah.

IE: Uh huh. [pause] What do you want your children to learn and remember from this?

KA: From what?

IE: From this experience of coming from Sudan to a new country.

KA: I think my children already go through hard time uh, when we came to Egypt--the oldest of them is 17 years and the youngest is like, 3 years. Um, all of them are working. Especially--from, I think six years old until thirteen years old. They are working from six in the morning until midnight. [IE: mmm] In hot weather every--[IE: mmm] uh, it's very hard for--in Egypt to live.

IE: They were working in Egypt?

KA: Yeah, they working to pay our rent.

IE: Yeah, [KA: yeah] mmm...

KA: They tell us, Mom, you cannot go and work in any place, we gonna help you. [IE: yeah] When they like, six years old. [IE: woah, mmm] Yeah, all of them work now. [IE: mmm] And also, I remember one day, was--was uh, last year or this year, [IE: mmm hmm, mmm hmm] one of them have a interview in newspaper and he talk about his experience there and he--[IE: mmm] can you imagine child for six years or working from the morning until midnight and [IE: what--?] he have like only uh, ten dollars in a week?

IE: Oooh, what--what did he work s--?

KA: He deliver--deliver um, like some--uh, people call him--call from home--they need something from supermarket, [IE: uh huh] they just...[IE: mmm] also it is hard to get like, ten or five fruits.

IE: Mmm, was he six years old [KA: yeah] at that time?

KA: Mmm hmm, [IE: whoa] all of them are working. [IE: mmm] So when they--they came here in America--it's--it is easy for them to find a job beside going to their college, [IE: uh huh] so they--

IE: So, it's helped them.

KA: Yeah each of them [IE: mmm] have experience and uh, he can take care of himself.

IE: Very good.

KA: So I tell him, [IE: mmm] this is the part of life you--you can take care of yourself and try to take care of people---don't--don't let yourself down. [IE: yeah] All the time look for up. [IE: mmm] Have your self-esteem [IE: mmm] and be strong.

IE: Very good.

KA: Yeah. [IE: mmm hmm] So I think this is the good ex--things they added from [IE: mmm]...Sometimes hard times good [IE: mmm] to give you the--your live--in your life.

IE: Give strength.

KA: hmm mmm, strenth er...

IE: Yeah, very good. [KA: mmm hmm] Uh, well do you have anything to add? [laughs]

KA: [laughs] I'm OK, thank you. Thank you very much.

IE: OK, Khamisa uh, thank you very much and I'm very happy to--uh, make this interview with you...um...and uh, I hope uh, the best of luck for you and for your daughter who's gonna marry uh, next week.

KA: OK

IE: Thank you very much.

KA: OK, thank you.