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Somali Language and Oral Tradition in Post-conflict Life in the US: What Does the Future Hold?

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Abstract

As global conflicts increasingly force people to leave their homelands, it is important we become aware of the issues that impact on different aspects of refugees' lives in foreign lands. A variety of problems are associated with forced migration, notably challenges of cultural adaptation such as language issues, cultural assimilation, cultural adaptation, identity, loss of social networks of relatives, friends and neighbours, harsh climates, racism and so on. This article discusses some of the concerns expressed by Somali refugees living in Mid-West United States of America. They fear that the Somali language and oral traditions might be lost if attempts are not made to preserve them. Specifically, the authors examine the efforts to and challenges of preserving the language and oral traditions in a post-conflict setting. The article concludes by pointing to a question about the future of third generation Somali-Americans who have adapted the English language and see no economic and social benefits in the Somali language for them.

Key Terms: Somali refugees, language, oral traditions, culture, post-conflict setting.

Résumé

Pendant que les conflits dans le monde poussent de plus en plus les populations hors de leur terroirs, il devient important d'être conscient des facteurs qui affectent la vie des réfugiés dans les terres étrangères. Différents problèmes sont associés à la migration forcée, en particulier les défis liés à l'adaptation culturelle avec les

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problèmes de langue, l'assimilation culturelle, l'identité, la perte de réseaux sociaux des parents, des amis et voisins, les climats insupportables, le racisme, etc. Cet article discute des préoccupations exprimées par les réfugiés somaliens vivant aux USA dans le Mid-West. Ceux là craignent que la langue somalienne et les traditions orales soient perdues s'il n'y a pas d'efforts de préservation. Les auteurs examinent particulièrement les efforts et les défis quant à cette préservation dans un contexte d'après guerre. L'article conclut par la question relative au futur de la troisième génération des Somaliens-Américains qui se sont adaptés à la langue Anglaise et qui ne voient aucun bénéfice économique et social pour eux dans la langue somalienne.

Mots clés : Réfugiés Somaliens, langue, traditions orales, culture, contexte de post-conflit.

Introduction

If we lose our language how will second generation of US-born Somalis communicate if they decide to go back to Somalia? What about Somalis scattered all over the world who have to learn different languages other than English? How will we communicate if we lose our language?
— Somali elder in Central Minnesota.

The effects of violence in Somalia are enormous. Most obvious effects include the loss of life and social networks, human suffering, displacement of people, lack of a functioning government and continuing instability in the country. Generally, Somali refugees have to address major concerns arising around issues about the survival of Somali language and oral traditions in addition to everything else that has happened to them and their native country. This article is concerned with issues surrounding the Somali language and oral traditions among Somali refugees in central Minnesota. Martin and Nakayama (2003) observe that language is powerful and can have tremendous implications for people's lives. As we will see in this article, the impact of language on people's lives is illustrated in emerging concerns by Somali refugees about how being in a new cultural environment, which calls for the need to preserve their language and oral traditions. The sentiments expressed about the possible loss of language and oral traditions by the Somali elder bring to the forefront the need to raise awareness about this issue. Indeed, this concern is among many problems resulting from the displacement of Somalis from their homeland to foreign lands, in particular the US. That the Somali language and oral traditions might be lost in the cause of cultural adaptation – the long-term process of adjusting to and finally feeling comfortable in a new environment (Kim 2001 cited in

Martin and Nakayama 2003:277) – explains the issues discussed in this article.

Concerns about what identifies Somali people as a cultural group raise a critical question about how language accounts for group identity and membership. According to Davies (1999) language is more than a cluster of words or a set of grammatical rules; it is a flash of the human spirit by which the soul of a culture reaches into the material world. It is in this context that one sees how the desire to preserve the Somali language in foreign lands is paramount to Somali culture, identity and cultural membership.

This article begins by discussing the history of Somalia and proceeds to describe the presence of Somalis in the US and the context in which concerns about language and oral traditions were expressed. It ends by describing the efforts taken by Somali refugees to ensure that the language and oral traditions survive and do not get lost as they adjust to life outside Somalia.

Historical Background

The colonial history of Somalia is complex. Following the scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century, Somalia was partitioned in five territories. The British colonized the north, the Italians the south, the French the region now known as Djibouti, and the British also colonized the south, which was ruled by Kenya and the Ogaden region controlled by Ethiopia. The British controlled north became independent on June 26, 1960, followed by the Italian controlled region on July 1, 1960 (Gerard Prunier 1995). After independence, Somalia became known as Somalia Republic. The lands in Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia, however, were not united with the North and South regions that composed the new Somalia Republic. The new government concentrated on unification of all regions and did not accept the existing borders. Despite the political divisions, Somalis had a sense of national identity, a common language and culture, and in Islam a faith that brought all of them together. The five-point star on the Somali flag represents the five segments or clans of Somalia, and traditional clan rivalries were held in check as a *Greater Somalia* was a goal of all during this time and viewed as the way to overcome their colonial past (Meredith 2005).

After the military coup in 1969, staged by General Mohammed Siyad Barre, Somalia became a Marxist state. However, in 1977, the friendship and co-operation treaty with the then Soviet Union was broken after the latter supported Ethiopia in a war with Somalia. The events that followed could be said to explain the political instability in present day Somalia.

Meredith (2005) discussed the opposition to Barre's decision that led to the formation of political movements affiliated to different clans in the country. By the 1980s, armed violence had rocked the country as evidenced by the genocidal massacres of over 50,000 people at Berbera (Jones 2004) and bombing raids on Hargesia where thousands of Somalis were killed (Meredith 2005). Additionally, key infrastructure like schools, hospitals, water, power, ports, telecommunications, roads, bridges and refineries were destroyed or left not functioning. The United Nations (UN) and US intervention in the early 1990s did not bring stability in the region and so their withdrawal a few years later was inevitable. The rest of the 1990s continued in political turmoil in spite of numerous failed attempts at bringing peace and political stability to Somalia. It is safe to say that there has been no functional government in Somali up to date. As *The Economist* reported, Somalia remains Africa's most palpably failed state.

The Presence of Somalis in Minnesota

Since the early 1990s, the state of Minnesota has been home to the largest population of Somali refugees in the US. According to the Minneapolis Foundation (2004), Minnesota is a preferred resettlement area, primarily because of an established Somali community and the availability of unskilled jobs that do not require English proficiency. It is estimated that 70,000-90,000 Somalis live in Minnesota, and about 7000 Somalis live in central Minnesota where this study was conducted. This number is based on estimations by local Somali groups in the area. The exact numbers are unknown because census data are not current, and also there is no option to specifically identify Somalis on the census form. In most cases, their identification is checked as African or 'other' and this makes it difficult to keep track of actual numbers.

The challenge of accounting for Somalis around the globe may not seem so much of an issue in comparison to the immense pressure to learn the national language of the countries in which they settle as refugees. In Minnesota, Somalis like other immigrants or refugees, must learn English to navigate the new cultural environment. The new language allows them to obtain an education and employment. At the same time, the ability to communicate in English gives them communication skills to resist racism, ethnocentrism and discrimination. For Somalis, learning English is basically a survival tool in the post-conflict life situation. While this is the case, however, there is a concern as expressed by the Somali elder about losing the Somali language and oral traditions, especially among the younger generations of Somalis. The elders want to see Somali language and oral traditions preserved as it becomes clear that their children and grandchildren

are rapidly learning English and becoming 'Americanized'.¹ Those who are new to the country still speak Somali, but youth who have resided or were born in the US use English instead of Somali in their everyday communication except when they are at home.

This earticle is concerned with describing what the Somalis are doing to preserve their language and oral traditions. We will highlight the efforts put in place by the Somali community that teach about their desire to preserve for their culture.

Somali Language and Oral Traditions

A review of the literature revealed many aspects of Somali culture and language. According to Adam (2005), Somalis have a culture based on oral traditions and the language uses Arabic and Omaryic scripts that did not include a written language founded on the Roman alphabet until 1972. Somali poetry, songs and proverbs reveal that they are the avenues through which 'language and culture were transmitted orally and historical events, stories, customs, lineage and customary laws were passed on from generation to generation' (Adam 2005:51). Many Somalis 'date their oral history from the ascent of the Prophet Mohammed' (Abdi Sheik-Abdi 2002:61). While all aspects of Somali culture are important and valuable, oral traditions, and in particular the art of oral poetry and song, is where Somalis excel (Briton Putman and Cabdi Noor 2004). Language was used for humour, puns, word play and poetry or songs were used for courting, political rhetoric, and expression of life (Briton Putman and Cabdi Noor 2004).

According to Adam (2005), 'Somali oral literature is full of intriguing stories of legendary personalities that have managed to survive the test of time over the generations' (p. 33). The art of story telling is evident in the narration. Adam (2005) notes that the narrator of a story usually begins with *sheekoy sheeko*, *sheeko xariir*, meaning 'story story, beautiful story' and then proceeds with the story. As elsewhere in Africa, stories were told at night after the work for the day was complete. With a lack of modern forms of entertainment, stories, riddles, proverbs and songs became the means through which cultural values, morals and character traits were instilled. It is said that communication by word of mouth among families and friends helped Somalis make their ways to refugee camps and different Somali communities already settled in the US (Adam 2005).

According to Nogueira (2003), 'oral tradition' congregates knowledge, memories, values and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of a non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature, objects with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable

collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by the laws of traditionality (p. 164). The question at hand is how the concern about Somali language and oral traditions becomes an important aspect of Somalis lives in foreign lands.

Historically, concerns about the need to preserve African languages and oral traditions have been expressed. Colonialism impacted on African language and oral traditions due to the introduction of European languages and cultural practices to African people. Many aspects of African traditional communication were affected. An example is what Okpewho (1985) says about how the coming of Europeans and other foreigners to Africa reduced the importance of the traditional African communication. However, in the post-colonial era, African languages and oral traditions are seen as viable tools in the struggle for decolonization. On African languages, renowned African writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, asserts that to write in the language of the colonizers is to pay homage to them, while to write in the languages of African is to engage in an anti-imperialist struggle (cited in Smith 2005:36). As Okpewho (1983) has noted, the necessity to preserve something of the old ways is in the interest of history and cultural continuity. This seems to explain the implications of Somali elders' concerns.

Research Question

In order to understand the concerns expressed about Somali language and oral traditions, we sought to establish ways that the Somali community in Central Minnesota had responded to ensure continuity of their way of life in a new cultural environment.

Given our informal conversations with members of the community, we sought to address the following research question: What efforts are in place, within the Somali community in central Minnesota, to preserve Somali language and oral traditions?

Methodology

We employed community action or emancipatory research and action research approaches to understand the concerns expressed by Somali elders about their language and oral traditions. Community action or emancipatory research is defined as 'a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems' (Smith 2005:127). Similarly, action research is defined as research that 'aims to solve pertinent problems in a given context through a democratic inquiry where professional researchers collaborate with participants in the effort to seek and enact solutions to problems of major importance of the local people' (Greenwood and Levin,

1998:75). Both approaches to inquiry were preferred for their focus on the involvement of research participants in the research process rather than treating them as passive participants. This research approach informed how to conceptualize the research problem, gain access to the community and identify appropriate data collection tools. Additionally, it provided insights about the need to create strong networks and trust with the Somali community in order to solidify the collaboration.

Research Participants and Setting

The participants were Somali refugees who are residents of a small central Minnesota town with a population of 63,702 people. A total of 63 Somalis over the age of 18 participated in the study. Ten informal interviews were conducted. Fifty-three of the participants responded to surveys (both in English and Somali) distributed at five English as Second Language (ESL) sites. The profiles of the participants were varied in terms of their length of residency in the US, fluency in English, age, gender and education status. Participants were not compensated for participating in the research. The view that the community felt as if they were being 'studied' by the university limited the number of people who would have participated in the study. This sentiment was expressed in response to the increase in the number of studies focusing on the Somali community.

The survey containing both open- and closed-ended questions in both Somali and English was administered at ESL sites. The administration of the survey was made possible by support given by ESL teachers and some members of the Somali community who were involved with the research project. For example, their involvement was significant in helping to explain some of the survey questions.

Participant observation was carried out at different sites where issues affecting Somali people were addressed such as the local Refugee Advisory Council office. These were also sites where Somalis frequently gathered, such as the La Cruz Community Center. Following Lincoln's (1990) principles of naturalistic inquiry, observation data were recorded as they emerged without interpreting what we thought they meant. This new information, which we did not know or understand from the observation data, necessitated follow-up consultations with our contacts in the Somali community.

Data Analysis

Data were organized into common themes derived from the interview and survey responses as well as from the participants' observation field notes. Units of data were categorized into themes based on what Lincoln and

Guba (1985) call the 'look/feel-alike' comparison (cited in Maykut and Morehouse 1994:136) meaning that units were grouped together based on similarity.

All these were coded into themes and analyzed using constant comparative method (CCM) which is a 'procedure that involves examining the meaning of people's words and actions' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994:121). Propositions about Somali language and oral traditions use and preservation were written based on the themes that emerged.

Results

Seven essential themes about the use and preservation of Somali language and oral traditions in the US emerged from the interviews and survey. Specifically, they reveal ways that Somalis in Central Minnesota are engaged to preserve valuable cultural aspects of Somali culture in enduring post-conflict life in the US. The efforts reported in the findings are viewed by the Somali community as opportunities to keep their language and traditions alive.

Communication at Home

The participants overwhelmingly reported that 'home' was the place where Somali language was frequently used and oral traditions preserved. Of the 53 respondents, 84.3 per cent reported that they always spoke Somali at home. In addition, 76.6 per cent of the respondents reported that they told Somali folktales in Somali language at home. In the home setting, communication and interactions among family members, extended family and the community occurs most frequently in Somali language. The elders were said to play a vital role in ensuring that Somali language and oral tradition was preserved for the younger generations. They seek support for activities and programmes that keep Somali youth grounded in their culture and encourage families to see the home as the core of any culture. Tse (2001) observed that passing language and traditions to the younger generation from the elders is the most common form of preservation; even though this alone is not effective enough for preservation, as it typically only includes conversational language and leaves out academic language and literacy.

Resources Available in Somali

There seemed to be a deliberate effort to publish material in Somali language. Numerous Somali/English documents were available mostly in the form of handouts and reference materials. These resources are provided by public service providers – either government or non-profits – to both Somalis

and people working with the Somali population. Most of these resources are at county human services offices, hospitals, Minnesota League of Cities, and at events such as the World Refugee Day and Minnesota Human Rights Conference, to name a few. These resources serve the community with educational, information and entertainment needs. There are books, information materials and handouts about interpreters/ translators, internet sites, music and videos/DVDs, all available in Somali. Many of these resources are produced by Somalis and also in collaboration with the Minnesota Humanities Council (MHC) which has produced four Somali folktale books and a bilingual (English-Somali) CD. Additionally, videos are available with English subtitles to help Somali learn English and also people interested in learning about Somali culture. Videos are available to view on the internet and to purchase at the Somali malls in the Twin Cities and St. Cloud. Unfortunately, these resources are not available in the mainstream outlets such as bookstores and libraries. A valuable resource cited by respondents was <http://www.hiiraan.com/>, a website available in Somali and English with news and information on Somalia and Somalis in the Diaspora.

Somali Businesses and Cultural Events

Somali businesses, places of worship and cultural events are places where the Somali language and oral traditions flourish. At these sites, Somalis often gather and feel bound by their common culture. In particular, business outlets such as the grocery stores and restaurants not only sell foods from Somalia and Kenya but also act as cultural spaces that keep the Somali heritage alive. These sites and events accord with Martin and Nakayama's (2008) description of cultural space as the particular configuration of the communication that constructs meanings of various places. Additionally, cultural events such as weddings, religious holidays and the like provide opportunities to celebrate Somali culture as well as talk about experiences in a new cultural setting. Overall, it was reported that these sites and events are what make Minnesota home away from home to many Somalis.

Somali TV Programming

Two elders interviewed spoke extensively about their desire to establish a media outlet for Somali language television programming. Minneapolis Television Network (MTN) provides public access in Minneapolis on three channels for eight hours a week. MTN has partnered with Minnesota International Health Volunteers to create culturally-sensitive health education videos and programming. Lack of funding has limited extended broadcasting in Somali language. The interviewees expressed the view

that Somali broadcasts would sustain the language and oral traditions through the programmes aired.

Bilingual Mentoring and Tutoring Programme

The need to keep Somali youth connected to their culture as they adapt to a new cultural environment is the reason that the Catholic Charities sponsored bilingual mentoring and a tutoring programme. The responses received indicated the relevance of this programme to Somali youths. The programme is located in a residential area where most of the Somali reside in the town where this study was conducted. The Somali co-ordinator of the programme serves as a liaison between the Somali community and others in the greater community. The programme's co-ordinator's bilingual skills have been invaluable in helping Somali youth navigate both Somali and American cultures and languages.

Somali Classes

While it was clear from many of the responses received that Somali classes were needed, the meaning of 'class' varied extensively among the respondents. Thoughts ranged from a Saturday morning event to a Somali school where the language of instruction is Somali. In January 2008, the Somali Elders Council began teaching Somali twice a week to community members who worked with Somalis. Later that year, a Somali literacy class was started at La Cruz Community Center for Somali women illiterate in Somali. Unfortunately, these efforts closed after a short operation because of a lack of support and funding.

Re-learning Somali Language

The need to preserve the Somali language was exemplified in efforts by some Somali refugees to re-learn the Somali language. This group needing to re-learn Somali comprises of refugees who are not fluent in Somali language. They are members of the Somali community in the US referred to as 'Somali sijui', a Swahili phrase that means 'I don't know Somali'. It is a label used to describe Somalis who were born and raised in Kenya following the Somali civil war in the 1970s. Many of them now resettled in the US have to (re)learn Somali which they did not learn or which they 'lost' while growing up in Kenya. Interviews conducted with members of this generation of Somalis revealed both benefits and detriments of learning or not learning Somali:

My parents escaped from Somali in the early 1980s. I lived in Kenya for a long time. I did not speak Somali before I came to America six years ago but now I speak it. I learned from my friends here. I want to be part of the

Somali community in America. I do not want to be isolated from my fellow Somalis just because I cannot speak Somali [Abdul].

You are looked down upon if you cannot speak Somali. I know my uncle has to answer questions about why I do not speak Somali. I was born and raised in Kenya. I grew up as a Somali refugee but also as a Somali-Kenyan. As a result, I am fluent in Swahili and English. This is the reason why I don't speak Somali [Fatou].

I had to learn Somali language to 'fit in'. All I did was to learn by listening to others ... being around Somali speaking people. I did not speak the Somali when I came to the US ten years ago. After I started interacting with Somalis, I started to pick up the language. I know older Somalis blame parents whose children do not speak Somali. They feel that they should have ensured that their kids did not lose the language in Kenya. You get criticized for not speaking Somali. When this happens, and you are one of the 'Somali sijui', you tend to isolate yourself from those fluent in Somali. As a result, you are forced to learn the language whether you like it or not. In my case, when we settled here there were not many Swahili-speaking Africans and so I did not have anyone to speak to in Swahili. I didn't have another community to belong to besides the Somali community. I must say that I have done well because I am now a Somali interpreter! [Salama].

In view of these responses, one can see the historical significance of language and the factors that determine its survival or demise. Social status, and to some extent economic status, such as getting a job as an interpreter, for the Somali language among this generation of Somali refugees is evident in these responses. Nevertheless, further research is needed to establish whether or not these benefits would be true for their children who would be the third generation Somali-Americans.

Discussion

This study began as a response to a concern expressed about the need to support the use of Somali language and oral traditions among young Somali refugees in Central Minnesota. Specifically, the study sought to establish what the Somali community was doing to preserve their language and oral traditions. A major finding emerging from the study is that Somalis are actively involved in efforts to sustain their Somali cultural identity in a new cultural setting. This was demonstrated in ways that respondents' sense of belonging not only shaped their cultural identity but also individual self-concept and group identity. For example, a concept that describes this sense of self-identity as well as group-identity emerged from some respondents' views that the Somali language cannot be lost because Somali people are 'born with it'. This finding concurs with Schmidt and Rose's

(2006) study that reports how Somalis speak of their language as ‘our language’ or ‘my language’. Put together, these two views echo Lustig and Koester’s (2006) view that the individual’s self-concept is built on cultural, social and personal identities. Although there might be benefits of speaking Somali; elders passing language and traditions to the younger generations as a common form of preservation, and also internalizing the view that the language cannot be lost, this does not seem enough for preservation. Tse (2001) observed that this form of preservation alone – speaking the language – is not effective enough for preservation as it typically only includes conversational language and leaves out academic language and literacy. The findings do not show evidence of focus on Somali language literacy. Okpewho (1992) offered advice on preservation efforts that places responsibility on the communities that want to preserve their language and oral traditions. This approach observes that preservation efforts need to be initiated and owned by the community, not an imposition by any persons outside the community.

The concern expressed about how Somalis would communicate if they were to return to Somalia was not addressed directly in this study. However, peripheral conversations revealed respondents’ optimism for a peaceful Somalia in the future. This positive outlook for the future explains the efforts in place to ensure the survival of Somali cultural identity.

Although the focus of the study was not how to preserve Somali language and oral traditions, it is nonetheless interesting to note the emphasis placed on speaking the language as opposed to language literacy and documentation. The emphasis on oral communication seemed palpable, given that some programmes intended for language literacy were closed due to lack of funding. On the other hand, it was unclear how the preservation efforts would serve their purpose besides what the Somali seemed focused on – oral methods of communication – which are susceptible to change as Somalis begin to speak English more often than their indigenous language. As earlier discussed, the concept of ‘Somali sijui’ reveals that changes in a new cultural environment can lead to the loss of indigenous language. The act of re-learning Somali seems to suggest that speaking Somali is vital to sustain their identity wherever they settle in the world.

Conclusion and Implications

Somalis in central Minnesota feel obliged to preserve their language and oral traditions. Even though respondents understood that the new cultural environment demanded of them to adapt in a new cultural environment, such as learning English to acquire employment and communication skills to navigate a diverse American cultural landscape, they still feel the need

to preserve their Somali cultural identity. They have to learn a new language (English) amid challenges of learning and preserving their own (Somali) language. The effort to adapt, though hampered by the desire to still maintain a Somali cultural identity, appeared to make the older generation of Somalis fearful of total immersion into the new American culture at the expense of losing their own identity. In this regard, one sees implications for future considerations of peace communication if Somalia were to be peaceful. With this increasing anticipation of a 'peaceful Somalia', many middle-aged Somalis remain confident that Somali language can still survive in America. The question remains about what the future holds for the third generation Somali-Americans who will have adapted the English language and perhaps see no economic and social benefits of the Somali language for them.

Note

1. The term 'Americanized' is used to refer to ways that Somali youth have adapted to American way of life. We asked our interviewees who used the term to explain its meaning. Their responses seemed to point to American lifestyles that seemed to endanger the survival of Somali language and oral traditions such as speaking English (all the time) and getting 'hooked' on the American entertainment industry. The concept of 'home' refers to residency, that is, apartments, town houses or single family homes. It is not to be confused with the idea of home when used to refer to Somalia.

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