



SOMALIA

Area: 246,657 square miles

Population: 16.94 million (2022)

Capital: Mogadishu

Ethnic Groups: Somali, 85%; Bantu and non-Somali, 15%

Languages: Somali (official), Arabic (official)

Religion: Sunni Muslim, 99.9%

Life Expectancy: 56.29 years

Literacy: 49.7% male; 25.8% female

Economy: Agriculture: bananas, sorghum, corn, sugarcane, cattle; Industry: a few small industries, including sugar refining, textiles; Exports: bananas, livestock, fish, hides

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 36.8 (2017 data; comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.776 (comp. US=0.204 Very High)



The Past in Word and Image

The earliest Somali history is preserved in images and words. Ancient rock art attests to the long presence of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists in the Horn of Africa. Somali is an ancient Eastern Cushitic African language spoken in Somalia, Djibouti, parts of Ethiopia, and the northeastern region of Kenya. With roughly 20 percent of its vocabulary consisting of borrowed words from Arabic, the Somali language reflects the centuries of extensive cultural and commercial contacts with the peoples of Eastern and North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Indian Ocean. Northern clan-based groups were coastal traders since at least the Greco-Roman era, when the fabled Land of Punt became a cultural and commercial crossroads with connections through Egypt and the Red Sea, Persia, and parts of Asia. From the 8th to the 14th centuries, they expanded Islam and absorbed other people, using powerful sultanates to control vast territories. A highly elaborate oral culture relied on poetry and song for political expression and daily life.

The bewildering variety of colonial interference by Egyptians, British, French, Italians, and Ethiopians left the region divided by a scourge of military expeditions beginning at the end of the 19th century despite fierce resistance. Among the most famous anti-colonial freedom fighters was the Somali religious scholar Muhammad Abdulla Hassan (whom the British called the “Mad Mullah”), leader of the Dervish Movement and a talented poet whose nationalist struggle against British colonialism was only ended when aircraft was used for the first time in 1920 to bomb the African resistance fighters. In 1960, the British Somaliland Protectorate and Italian Somalia were united to form the independent Somali Republic.

Unity and Division in Modern Somalia

In the modern era, many have noted that post-independence Somalia is unique as an African nation with one dominant ethnic group, speaking one language, practicing one religion. Yet this unity is also rife with divisions: opposing views on gender, exploitative manipulation of clan membership, differential access to material wealth and education, outside interference, and competing political views have led to conflict. Nine years of democracy ended with a military coup led by Colonel Siad Barre. His oppressive régime (1969-1991) exacted a heavy toll and received support from both the Soviet Union and the United States. The régime and its opponents utilized poetry as either a tool of propaganda and/or resistance. Mariam Haji Hassan (initially under the alias Araweelo Ararsame) began composing poetry in 1979, when it was broadcast by Radio Kulmis from Kenya. Using the sacred image of the camel, she warned: “*Haybad* [she-camel] just gave birth and rich with milk... Then she fell into the hands of ruthless people... If only Allah made her talk, she would tell all of her worries” (Jama, 191).

Mariam Haji Hassan portrayed the suffering of Somali people, and she was not the only woman poet to find a political voice. Through recorded poetry widely distributed on cassettes, Habiba H. Aden encouraged others in what became an armed struggle against Siad Barre using allegory in the classical style of Somali poetry in her famous composition “Irony”: “The hyena which eats the lambs/is used to drinking blood/and grasping its rump/for it’s used to eating young goats/ it hides the truth. But the evidence can be seen. /It is ironic, they said” (Jama, 194).

When Barre's government finally collapsed, a civil war ensued among clan-based warlords vying for power amidst the chaos. In 1992, Somalia suffered the worst drought in 60 years, plunging the country into a severe famine that killed 300,000 people. U.S. troops were sent in to protect the delivery of food in December 1992, and in May 1993 the UN took control of the relief efforts from the United States. The warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid ambushed UN troops and dragged American bodies through the streets of Mogadishu, causing an about-face in U.S. willingness to involve itself in the fate of Somalia. Now remembered as the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, it is better known as the "Black Hawk Down" incident in the United States. The last of the U.S. troops departed in late March, leaving 19,000 UN troops behind.

Somalia's central state has not recovered since then. Recurring drought, crop failures, high food costs, food insecurity, a tsunami, and the control of vast areas of the country by Al-Shabaab forces have displaced more than two million Somalis, forcing hundreds of thousands into refugee status around the world. A few filmmakers are beginning to quietly emerge across the Somali diaspora and recent films produced against great odds in Somalia itself have garnered international attention from critics. More than a century since Italian newsreels were produced in the colony and a decade after theaters were shut down, audiences worldwide remain eager for Somali cinema.

Meanwhile, local audiences also continue to rely on the traditional *xafidayaal* (memorizers) to transmit poetry orally. Like the poets of earlier times, the writers often use animals to speak to a human and inhumane world. In his poem "Good Sense," the Somali poet Xasan Sheekh Muumin (2022) compares the elephant grazing about at night where the enemy hunts and the termite who is protected by his own mound: "Different in size, the two/In manners, wisdom/And sense are opposite/See how good sense/Is superior to strength/And think on it."

Further Reading

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Jama, Zainab Mohamed. 1994. "Silent Voices: The Role of Somali Women's Poetry in Social and Political Life," *Oral Tradition* vol.9 (1): 185-202. https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/9i/8_jama.pdf

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