SOMALIA:
Culture, Traditions, People and their Heritage
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Ahmed Iqbal Ullah
Education Trust

The University of Manchester
Somalia: Culture, Traditions, People and their Heritage

Foreword & acknowledgments

This resource explores aspects of the cultural heritage of British Somalis. Somali students at Whalley Range 11-18 High School in Manchester worked with the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre to develop the resource. Over nearly a year, we investigated typical cultural traditions, objects that have cultural resonance, and some famous Somali people. We have put our findings together so that we can share with other schools a celebration of the rich cultural heritage of Somali people in Britain.

Most of the generation of young Somalis currently in British schools were born and raised in the UK but many of their parents arrived as refugees, in flight from the long civil war and continued instability of their country. This resource purposely does not address the continuing conflict in Somalia. In making a new life in Britain, Somali people have worked hard to build their communities and sustain their cultural traditions. We wanted to look at these positive strengths that our students find in their culture and community.

The resource is part-bilingual and we are grateful to Liban Ahmad for his translations. Liban also provided crucial editorial advice. Year 11 students Hibaq Hussein and Roda Ibrahim also made a major contribution to the final editorial process as well as significant work along the way.

Whalley Range 11-18 High School has engaged with the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre in numerous previous projects, demonstrating its commitment to exploring and developing cultural diversity. We would especially like to thank Sofia Zarar, Ayesha Dadabhoy and Juliet Kamal for their contribution.

Many of the photographs featured were taken by the project students, who were given photography training by Margaret Banton. Photographs in Part 3 were taken by Michael Pollard for the Naryuus Somali project at the Whitworth Art Gallery.

This project was part-funded by a grant from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council through Their Past Your Future 2 programme supported by Big Lottery. We are also grateful for continued financial support from Manchester City Council and the University of Manchester.

Jackie Ould, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre.

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Part 1
Basic Facts
<table>
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<td>Capital City:</td>
<td>Mogadishu</td>
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<td>Other Major Cities:</td>
<td>Berbera, Hargeysa, Kismaayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Rivers:</td>
<td>Shabeelle, Jubba</td>
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<tr>
<td>Official Language:</td>
<td>Somali, with dialects including barwani in certain areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency:</td>
<td>Somali shilling – 1 shilling = 100 cents</td>
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What does the Somali flag represent?

Blue is said to represent the bright sky. The star stands for freedom. The five points of the star stand for the five historical areas of the Somali people: Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, French Somaliland (Djibouti), the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and northeastern Kenya.

Somaliland is the north-western territory that declared independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991. Somaliland has its own elected president and parliament, but has not been internationally recognised as an independent nation.
Part 2
Culture & Traditions
Somalia: Culture and Traditions

This part contains information pages about some aspects of Somali culture and heritage:


There are also haikus composed by the students about aspects of their culture. Haikus are a type of Japanese image poem made up of seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern.

The students created haikus called:

Uunsi, Shaash, Canjeero
Part 2
Culture & Traditions

Religion - Islam

The religion of Somalia is Islam and almost all Somalis are Muslim. Muslims follow the five pillars of Islam:

Shahadah – to make a statement of belief: “There is no God but Allah and Mohamed is the prophet of Allah”.

Salah – to kneel in the direction of the Holy City Macca and pray five times a day.

Zakah – to give money to charity for the poor.

Sawm – to fast for 30 days during Ramadan so that you remember the fasting of the prophet.

Hajj – to travel to the Holy City.

This picture shows a prayer-mat that Muslims kneel on to pray. You can also see the Holy Qu’ran, which you read after you pray.

by Marwa, Amal, Fatima, Amal, Muna, Iptisam and Salma

Photo by Hibaq
Camels

Camels, sheep and cattle are very important animals in Somalia. Traditionally the people live nomadic lives, moving with their herds. For this reason animals are often featured in Somali folktales and poetry.

The Somali word for camels is geel; for sheep it is ido; and for cattle it is lo’.

Photo by Khatija
There is an ancient myth told by people in Somalia. It focuses on a group of stars that look like the shape of the camel. Ancient Somalis created this myth to show what happened when the Somali people tried to bring this ‘heavenly camel’ down to earth.

**The Heavenly Camel (Awrka Cir)**
The people decided that they would bring the heavenly camel to earth to help them. First, they all climbed up a high mountain, standing one of top of the other, making a giant human pyramid reaching up to the sky.

When the man at the top of the human pyramid got hold of the camel’s tail and wanted a rope to bring down the camel, he realized that he had forgotten to take the rope up with him. He had to shout down for the people to pass him the rope.

Everyone on the human pyramid passed on the urgent message to the person at the bottom of the pyramid, near the rope. The man at the bottom of the pyramid stood up very quickly to pick up the rope.

This caused everyone else to lose their balance and the human pyramid toppled over. All that they had managed to catch was a camel’s tail!

*by Marwa*
Henna comes from North Africa, Egypt, India and parts of the Middle East. Henna has been around for thousands of years. It comes from a plant and the ground-up leaves produce a strong dye. This is used to paint designs on women for special occasions such as weddings, Eid, parties, ‘2 get together’, leaving parties and holidays. There are many different designs and patterns. It is usually worn on the hands up to the elbows, but if you want you may have it done on your feet, neck or back. Henna artists earn money by designing and applying henna.

It can stain clothes and these stains are not removable so you have to be careful. Visiting relatives is a good time to wear henna.

Photo by Margaret Banton
How is Henna Paste Made?
To make henna paste you need soft henna powder that is green, black or red and some tea.

Make the tea without sugar.
Put the henna powder into a container.
Mix the tea with the henna powder.
Stir it up until it becomes brown and is like toothpaste.
Leave it in the fridge overnight so it will be ready to use.

How is Henna Paste Applied?
Put the paste into a plastic cone like an icing bag.
Paint the pattern you want on the skin.
Use different colours of henna to make your pattern look good.
Leave the paste on the skin to turn into a dry crust. Pick the crust off when it is very dry.

by Muna, Iptisam and Fatima

Drawings by Fatima
Somali Weddings

Traditional Somali Weddings have various ceremonies.

On a Somali wedding day, there is a dinner of traditional food of rice and meat for the men of the two families and their friends. This is when the formal Islamic wedding agreement takes place.

The women have a wedding party in the evening. Nowadays, the bride usually wears a white wedding dress to her party. The other women wear DIRAC and can wear their hair loose or covered with a scarf.

The groom and his family are expected to pay for these celebrations.

It is a tradition in Somali culture that a new bride remains in her home for a week after her wedding. On the seventh day there is a women’s party for the bride. On this occasion the bride will wear traditional costume, GUNTIINO with beads. The guests circle the bride singing and each lays a scarf (SHAASH) on her head. This event is known as SHAASH SAAR, which basically means putting the scarf on the bride’s head. This is form of respect due to her for being married and is a symbol of her becoming a married woman. The SHAASH is of silky material and can have many patterns and colours, but is different to the scarves worn by unmarried women.
Another event that takes place after seven days is that the bride’s family provide food and gifts for the groom’s family. Traditionally the food and sweets are placed inside special decorated containers called XEEDHO. These are wrapped in cloth and tied tightly. They have to be unwrapped by the groom or a man in his family.

by Roda & Hibaq, Photos by Hibaq
Fashion & clothes in Somalia

For everyday use, Somali women wear a BAATI – a long loose cotton dress made in many patterns and colours. It is usual for women to cover their hair with a scarf. These often match the material of the dress.

For special occasions such as weddings, parties or Eid, Somali women will wear a DIRAC. This is a silky, shiny and highly decorated top-dress. It is often transparent and you wear an under-dress beneath it.

Sometimes Somali women wear an outer dress called a JILBAAB that covers from head to toe and a NIQAB that covers the face.

Somali women like to wear gold jewellery including necklaces, bracelets, earrings and rings. Women often receive jewellery as a wedding gift.

Men wear KHAMIIS - a long loose overshirt that is suitable for a hot climate. Men usually wear small hats. For relaxing at home a man will often wear a MACAWIS – a long cloth wrapped around the body and tied at the waist.

The traditional costume of Somali women is a long cloth that is draped around the waist and over the shoulders. This is called GUNTIINO.

by Fatima, Muna and Amal
Additional information by Roda and Hibaq
Uunsi

Special Scented Stone,
Slowly melting over coal,
Swirling fragrant breeze.

By Amal, Fatima, Iptisam, Salma and Marwa

This poem uses one Somali/Brava word ‘Uunsi’ which is a block of perfumed resin. Traditionally the resin is added to a burner with a block of burning charcoal. This perfumes the room. On special occasions, women sometimes drape their clothes over the burner so that the aroma permeates the cloth.

Photo by Roda and Iptisam
Part 2
Culture & Traditions

SHAASH

Married sabbah days,
Singing guests circle new bride,
Draping patterned shaash.

By Najma and Iptisam

This poem uses two Somali/Brava words:
Shaash = scarf; Sabbah = seven

It is a tradition in Somali culture that a new bride remains in her home for a week after her wedding. On the seventh day there is a women’s party for the bride. The guests circle the bride singing and each lays a scarf (shaash) on her head. The scarves can be of many patterns and colours and are a sign of a woman being married.

Photo by Iptisam

shaash
CANJEERO

Sweet, hot or spicy,
Worth getting out of bed for,
Warm, soft, canjeero.

By Fatima, Amal and Muna

This is a picture of a Somali food called canjeero. It is a kind of pancake that you can eat for breakfast. You can eat it with sesame oil or honey or dip it in specially cooked lamb, goat or camel meat sauce.

Sawirkan waxa ka muuqda cuntay Soomaalida lagu yaqaan. Waa canjeero aad ku quraacan karto. Waxa lagu cunaa saliid macsaro ama malab ama maraqa hilibka idaha ama riyaha ama geela oo si gaar ah loo kariyey.

Photo by Hibaq
Part 3
Somali Artefacts
The students visited the joint exhibition of the Whitworth Art Gallery ‘Naryuus’ project and the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust project ‘The Distance We Have Travelled’, held at the Zion Centre, Manchester, in January 2008. They viewed traditional Somali artefacts and talked about the use of the items. The following pages contain these descriptions, together with photographs provided by the Whitworth Art Gallery, taken by Michael Pollard.

The Somali language translation was provided by Manchester resident Liban A. Ahmad. Liban is an author and translator who writes about Somali language and the use of standard Somali language for media and education.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Headrest & Comb/Barkin & Shanlo

This is a picture of a headrest known in Somali as barkin. It is made up from wood. It is a Somali pillow. After a day’s hard work to take care of livestock, the Somali nomad uses the headrest to sleep. The other picture is of a Somali comb, made from wood and is used for combing and styling the hair. The Somali word for comb is shanlo.

by Roda

Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Cup/Koob

This is a wooden cup on a long stick. It is a vessel used for collecting water or milk.
by Hibaq

Kani waa koob laga sameeyey qori dheer. Waxa loo adeegsadaa biyaha ama caanaha ku jira haan ama caag weyn.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Brush/Xaaqin

This is a sweeping brush made of straw. It is called Shpello in Brava or xaaqin in Somali. It is used to clean the floor and sweep houses in Somalia.

by Iptisam

Sawirkan waxa ka muuqdaa xaaqin oo af Baraawaha lagu yiraahdo Shpello. Waxa loo adeegsadaa nadiifinta guriga.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Camel/Geel

This is a sculpture of a camel and a camel bell. A camel bell hangs round the camel’s neck and makes it easier to locate the camel when it strays. The Somali word for camel is geel.

by Roda and Kairat

Sawirkan waxa ka muuqda geel la qoray iyo koor. Koorta waxa laga lulaa qoorta geela oo waxay fududaysaa in la helo awrka ama hasha dibbootay ama la waayey.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Sandals/Kabo

These are sandals. The Somalis word for sandals is kabo. This type of sandals are made of leather and worn in the countryside and in towns. Thorns and other sharp objects cannot penetrate the sole of the sandals.

by Batulo

Kuwani waa kabo. Waxa laga sameeyey harag waxana laga xirtaa miyiga iyo magaalada. Kabahani way celiyaan qodaxda iyo waxyaabaha kale ee wax mudi kara waayo salkooda ayaa adag.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Table-mat/Salliga-miiska

This is traditional Somali table mat made from dyed straw. The dish being served is placed on it. It has pizza-like shape with a handle.

by Marwa

Sawirkan waxa ka muuqda wax sallì u eg balse laga sameeyey waxa salliga laga sameeyo oo ah caw qaar ka mid ah la midabeeyey. Waxa la dul saaraa miiska wax lagu cunayo si loo dhowro nadaafadda. Qaabkiisu waa sida goobada ama biisaha la cuno oo waxa uu leeyahay sidde.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Fan/Babbis

This is a fan made of straw, with a wooden handle. It is made using many patterns and colours. You can fan yourself, your food or to cool the room you are in.

by Samira

Babbiskan waxa laga sameeyey caw, waxana uu leeyahay sidde la qabsado. Waxa babbiska loo yeelaa midabbo kala duwan. Waad isku babbin kartaa si aad qabow u dareento ama cuntada waad ku qaboojisan kartaa.
Spoons/Fandhaal

These are wooden spoons with various carved decorations on the handles - In Somali they are called fandhaal.

by Sakara

Kuwani waa fandhaarlo siddahooda loo xardhay si kala duwan. Waxa laga sameeyaa geedaha.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Bag/Boorso

This is a Borsa (Brava) boorso (Somali) – a bag made of straw that you can use to carry anything like bread or fruit or vegetables. It has a handle and comes in many designs and colours. It is beautiful.

by Fatima

Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Pestle/Kal and Mortar/Mooye

We call these two objects kal and mooye (pestle and mortar respectively) It is used to grind spices, onions and other foods to give flavour. They come in different sizes and are made of wood.

by Najma

Kani waa kal iyo mooye. Waxa loo isticmaalaa marka la burburinayo basasha iyo wax yaabaha kale ee cuntada dhadhanka wanaagsan loogu yeelo. Waxay leeyihiin noocyoo yar yar iyo noocyoo waaweyn. Waxa laga sameeyaa geedaha.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Jug/Dhiil

This jug is used for collecting & carrying milk. It has a lid and a handle.
by Aman

Dhiishan waxa lagu shubaa caanaha. Waxa ay leedahay fur iyo sidde.
Part 3
Somali Artefacts

Burner/Dabqaad

Dabqaad is a special kind of pot to burn coal with uunsi or foox to leave the room smelling pleasantly. The Somali Dabqaad can be made of special type clay found in parts of Somalia.

Dabqaadka waxa laga sameeyaa dhagax gaar ah oo laga helo meelo ka mid ah Soomaaliya. Dabqaadka waxa la adeegsadaa marka la shidayo uunsi ama foox si qolku ama gurigu u noqdo mid udgoon.
Part 4
Famous Somali People
The students researched and wrote about some famous Somali heritage individuals, including Amin Amir, Yasmin Warsame, Rageh Omar, Iman, Mo Farah and K’naan.
Iman Abdulmajid is famous for modelling and is a role model and inspiration for young Somali women because of her success and achievement. As well as being beautiful, she is an intelligent woman who can speak five languages fluently: French, Somali, Italian, Arabic and English. She attended High School in Egypt, and later studied political science at the University of Nairobi.

Iman has been married to British rock star and actor David Bowie since 1992. She is a mother to two children, yet she hasn’t lost her outstanding figure. Iman was the first woman to acquire the tag ‘supermodel’.

Since she left her career in modelling, Iman has worked to solve the lack of make-up designed for dark-skinned women. Iman’s great idea was to create cosmetics, skin care and fragrances that are designed for African American, Asian, and Latin women. Her cosmetics collection has been very successful and sells worldwide.

In 1992, Iman risked personal danger to visit Baydhabo city to draw the world’s attention to the plight of famine victims. She is also a spokesperson for ‘Keep a Child Alive’ which provides help to HIV and AIDS victims in Africa and Asia. Iman has proved herself caring, charitable and kind-hearted.

In 2001, Iman published a book about her career called ‘I am Iman’. Iman is very talented and can also act. She acted in Star Trek in 1991, playing the character Martia. Recently, Iman signed for fashion line Iman Global Chic.

As you can see, the achiever Iman has succeeded in various areas as well as her modelling career. Additionally, Iman is dedicated and determined about each step she takes in her life. She is an inspiration to me and hopefully to you too.

by Roda Ibrahim
K’naan is a Canadian poet and hip hop artist from Somalia. His surname means ‘traveller’. Both his aunt and grandfather are famous in Somalia. His aunt Magool was one of Somalia’s most famous singers whereas his grandfather was Haji Mohammed a well-known Somali poet.

In 2005 his debut album ‘The Dusty Foot Philosopher’ was released. The album reflects K’naan’s experience of growing up in the war torn country of Somalia. During the Somalian Civil War in 1991, K’naan and his family were still living in the country. K’naan spent much of his childhood growing up in a tough neighbourhood in Mogadishu known as the ‘River of Blood’. It was not easy for a young boy growing up in a country where there were no laws to stop guns being used. He learnt to fire a gun at the age of eight. And at the age of eleven, three of his close friends were killed.

K’naan’s father left the country to live in New York City because of the situation in Somalia: his father wanted to create a better life for his family. After he moved to New York, he got a job as a taxi driver and used to mail money to his family. For K’naan he would send Hip-Hop albums by artists like Nas and Rakim. When K’naan was still living in Somalia and speaking no English, he taught himself Hip-Hop and rap diction, copying the lyrics and style phonetically.

Eventually his mother managed to get the rest of the family on the last flight out of Mogadishu in 1991, before the airport was closed. In his new country and environment, K’naan began learning English and also began to start rapping.

K’naan is a unique Somali artist. Many describe him as ‘the voice of the new generation’. His album has won numerous awards both in Canada and other countries. He is now an international artist.

by Hibaq Hussein
Amin Amir is an artist who is most famous for drawing political cartoons. His art has also decorated children’s books and books of Somali folktales. People have said that “the pen is mightier than the sword” when they have seen Amin’s cartoons about the war in Somalia.

Amin Amir

by Fatima Mohamed and Amal Omar
Mo Farah was born in Mogadishu and came to England when he was 9 years old. When he came he didn’t know any English. He was spotted by a PE teacher who helped him develop his talent for long-distance running.

He mainly runs in 5000 metres races and became the second fastest UK runner ever at this distance in 2006. He ran the 5000 metres in 13 minutes 9.40 seconds. Mo runs for a club called Newham Essex & Beagles and also does 1500 metre and Cross country events.

In 2007, Mo Farah was voted UK Male Athlete of the Year by the British Athletics Writers. He is looking forward to the London Olympics in 2012.

by Amal Osman
Rageh Omar was born in Somalia and came to live in England when he was five years old. He lived in London. His family were from Somaliland and his parents have now gone back to live there.

Rageh Omar studied modern history at the University of Oxford. When he left university he decided to become a journalist. At first he worked for the black newspaper ‘The Voice’. In 1991, he went to Ethiopia with £800 in his pocket to start reporting from Africa. A year later he got a job with the BBC’s World Service.

He became very well-known for his news-reports from war-torn countries, including Iraq. Rageh Omar left the BBC and worked freelance. He is now reporting for Al Jazeera International. Rageh Omar has written a book called ‘Only Half of Me’, about growing up as Somali and Muslim in Britain.

by Muna Mohamed

Rageh Omar
Yasmin Warsame is one of the most successful Somali models. She moved from Somalia to Toronto in Canada when she was fifteen. In 2004, she was named “The most alluring Canadian” in a poll by Fashion Magazine.
She has modelled for many high profile designers such as Valentino, Dolce and Gabanna, Escada, Hermes, Shiseado, Chanel, Gap and H&M.

Yasmin Warsame has volunteered for the Somali Youth Coalition in Canada. She has inspired young Somali women, proving that any Somalian woman can achieve a lot in life.

by Salma Mohamed and Iptisam Mohamed
Why not give us a call or come and see us. We are open 5 days a week (Monday to Friday) 9:30am - 4:30pm.
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