

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

People from Somalia have settled in Australia over the past 20 years. But during the 1990s, when civil order in Somalia collapsed, the numbers of Somali students in AMEP classes increased noticeably, and many new settlers continue to arrive. The prior experiences and culture of Somalis are significantly different from those of many other groups of learners in the AMEP, and teachers working with Somali students need to be aware of these differences.

Historical background

The Somali people have been settled in the Horn of Africa for at least 2000 years and are now considered likely to have originated in the Ethiopian highlands. Somalis have lived in present-day Somalia and Ogaden (eastern Ethiopia) since the first century AD.

In colonial times, northern Somalia was annexed by the British in order to secure its Red Sea trade routes, and the southern and central regions were annexed by Italy. In the 19th century, Ethiopia occupied the Somali territory of Ogaden, which is populated by Somalis. This has been a source of great resentment among Somalis and, as a result, a number of wars, including one as recently as the late 1970s, have been fought between the two countries.

In 1960, the two former colonial territories – British Somaliland in the northwest and Italian Somalia, which had become an Italian protectorate after World War II – merged to form the Republic of Somalia. The democratically elected government was weakened by the propensity among the ruling elite to organise governance largely on clan-based relationships. Following a coup d'état in 1969, Siad Barre took over as president but failed to address this propensity. He resorted to maintaining his position by the use of strong-arm tactics, including bribery, widespread abuse of human rights and encouraging disputes and tensions among other clans, while confining most government appointments to members of

his Darood-Marehan clan. Opposition to the Barre regime progressively increased throughout the 1980s until the regime eventually fell in January 1991.

In May 1991, northwest Somalia declared itself the independent Republic of Somaliland, and a Somalia-wide government ceased to exist. The civil war that ensued has caused more than 500 000 deaths in the past decade. In 1992, during the worst turmoil, an estimated 800 000 Somalis were refugees in neighbouring countries, and two million were internally displaced. The United Nations attempted an intervention aimed at ending the internal conflict, but UN forces withdrew in 1995 after failing in their peace-keeping mission. Southern Somalia disintegrated into ongoing conflict between rival militias based around different clan groups, with no central source of authority or power. In the northwest, the region of Puntland declared itself autonomous, although still affiliated with the northern Republic of Somaliland. In the late 1990s, anarchy, armed conflict and food insecurity persisted throughout southern Somalia. In October 2000, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization rated Somalia as the 'world's hungriest country'.

In 2000–01, violence and insecurity prevailed in parts of southern, eastern and western Somalia. Clan-related attacks and continued militia and factional rivalries resulted in hundreds of fatalities and casualties, mostly civilian. Gunfights in the capital, Mogadishu, in Merca and other locations have left hundreds dead. Humanitarian agencies also continued to experience targeted attacks. Factional conflict, drought and floods have displaced an estimated further 20 000 people from their homes during this period, adding to the nearly 800 000 Somalis uprooted in previous years.

There was some hope for an end to the unrest in August 2000 when many of the warlords cooperated with the formation of a Transitional National Government (TNG), which has worked towards creating a national government. However, the authority of the TNG is not recognised by Somaliland, Puntland or by many of the warlords in the south. Sporadic fighting has continued in Mogadishu.

People and culture

Somalia is the most ethnically homogeneous nation in Africa, with about 85% of the population being Somali. Almost all Somalis are Sunni Muslims, and Islam is the official religion. The estimated population of Somalia is about 9 million people, although this number increases to an estimated total of about 13 million Somalis when those living outside Somalia (such as in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia) are taken into account. Life expectancy is short by Australian standards, being 46.2 years for the overall population (44.6 years for males and 47.8 years for females).

Despite the relative ethnic homogeneity, Somalis are strongly aligned with their clan groups. Of the 8.9 million Somalis living in Somalia, 80% belong to the Somali or Samaale group in the north and the remaining 20% belong to the Sab, or southern Somali. All believe they are descended from the same male ancestor and his two sons, Somali and Sab. Such a closeness has brought a long history of both strong alliances and bloody feuds. A basic historical distinction between the two has always been that the Somali in the north were more nomadic than the Sab in the south. Communities are united into larger social and political units, each of which is called a *rer*, and each of which has its own elected leader.

Somalis see their first affiliation as being with their family, then the extended family, subclan and clan. Responsibility and generosity are valued within the close-knit family and clan groups, with more reserved and distant relationships maintained with strangers. Clan structures and affiliations have contributed to the breakdown of order that has overtaken Somalia in the past decade or more.

The predominant language spoken is Somali, which is also the official language. Arabic, Italian and English are also used. Standard Somali is based on forms of Somali spoken in the north. There are regional dialects of Somali spoken in different parts of the country and by different clan groups. While most of these are mutually intelligible, speakers of some dialects are not so easily understood by other Somali speakers.

Somali language and culture are strongly oriented to spoken language, and Somali did not have a written form until 1972. Skill and adroitness in using spoken language is highly valued, and poetry plays an important role in reminding Somalis of their traditions and past.

Economy and education

In most of the country, Somalis have traditionally been nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists who have moved about with their herds of goats, sheep and cattle to find fodder and water in what is generally a harsh land that is often subject to drought. Camels

have been used as beasts of burden and were a symbol of status and wealth. Nomadic pastoralism is still practised by many Somalis today, although a significant proportion of the population lives a more sedentary life in cities and in the more fertile parts of the country. Sedentary agriculture has traditionally been practised in the south of the country. Mogadishu (in the south) is the main urban centre, with a population of about two million people.

The economy has been based on agricultural production, with some small-scale industrialisation based around agricultural products. Some international and aid projects intended to establish larger scale industrialisation have failed over the decades, either through the nationalisation policies of the Barre regime, or as a result of the collapse of civil authority in the 1990s. In the present situation there has been development of a cash economy based on foreign currency that has enabled some development of modern infrastructure, such as mobile phone networks in the cities, but this remains minimal.

A mixture of traditional and western-oriented practices characterises the Somali education system. Traditional practices include socialisation into the Somali way of life within the family (both immediate and extended), as well as the more formal instruction in Koranic schools. A more modern secular education system emerged from the limited education systems established by the British and Italian colonial authorities. While there was expansion of the secular education system under the Barre regime, and a major literacy campaign in the mid-1970s, the education system was increasingly disrupted in the late 1980s as opposition to the Barre regime led to increasing unrest. The outbreak of civil war in 1991 completed the breakdown of the formal education system. With the exception of Koranic classes, no formal education took place for at least two years (1991–92). Under United Nations auspices, there was an attempt to revive the education system in 1993 and 1994, but the withdrawal of UN forces in 1995 curtailed the success of this campaign.

As a result, literacy rates in Somalia are relatively low. However, because of the general political situation in Somalia there are no official statistics. Estimates of the functional literacy rate range from 24% to about 40% of the overall population, with women having noticeably lower literacy rates than men (about 25% for women compared to just under 40% for men are the estimates for 2001 provided on the CIA World Factbook website).

Somalis in Australia

Somali refugees have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Camps in Kenya and Ethiopia have provided temporary haven for the vast majority of displaced Somalis, but small numbers have also gone to Yemen,

Djibouti, Tanzania and Egypt. Some have resettled in European countries and North America, as well as Australia. Many people have lost contact with family and friends in this diaspora. The experience of many people in the refugee camps has been highly traumatic.

Somali immigrants to Australia include a relatively high proportion of women with their children, whose husbands and other male relatives have often died or are missing. These families may be separated from family support and structures that they would normally rely on in Somalia. They have also experienced relatively high levels of trauma, deprivation and distress, and may be suffering after-effects of such experiences. There are relatively few older males, who traditionally play a significant role in the development of male adolescents and young men. This means that community structures to support cultural maintenance or the negotiation of new values have to be created in Australia at the same time as settlement is occurring. The sense of continuity in family groups can be highly disrupted. For outsiders, when the disruption is coupled with a social practice of realigning families over time, there can be difficulties in perceiving family links.

Clan divisions have remained significant through the initial phases of settlement in Australia, with concentrations of Somalis of different clan affiliations in different suburbs or parts of cities. There may be little sense of community or cohesion among Somalis of different clan affiliations. In these communities there may be a wariness and caution towards strangers and people who are unfamiliar, whatever their role or status. This can mean that only the advice of trusted friends or family members is highly regarded.

Classroom issues

Clan affiliation is the primary source of identification for Somalis, and so students from Somalia may not identify strongly with other Somali students from different clans. Teachers should be careful about assuming that because a number of students are from Somalia, they will automatically feel a strong sense of affiliation.

Perhaps because of the lack of a written form of Somali until comparatively recently, the English spelling of Somali names may vary slightly in different sources.

Literacy learning may be a significant need for many Somali learners of English. This may be especially the case among women, and there may be mismatch between speaking and writing skills among Somali learners.

A high value is placed on verbal skill and adroitness in Somali culture, which may mean that Somali students use styles and strategies of speaking that may strike teachers as unusual, or even brash, challenging or confronting.

Annotated bibliography

BBC country profiles website

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1072592.stm

This site provides a brief overview of some statistical information about Somalia and a brief description of the recent history, present leadership and media outlets.

CIA World Factbook 2003 website

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/so.html#Intro>

This link provides a concise and up-to-date overview of statistical and other basic information about Somalia. A much more comprehensive, though less recently updated, source of background information is the Library of Congress country handbook for Somalia. This is available in hardback format as Metz, H. C. (Ed.) (1993). *Somalia: A country study*. Washington, DC, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. This volume in the Area Handbook series of the Library of Congress provides a comprehensive description of the history, geography, demography, economy, society and military of Somalia. The online version, available at <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/sotoc.html>, is updated from time to time, and so has the advantage of reflecting more recent developments than the hardbound volume.

Ethnologue website

http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Somalia

This site provides information on the languages spoken in Somalia, as well as maps showing the distribution of different languages spoken in the country. The site includes information about the dialects of Somali spoken by different clan groups, and in different regions of Somalia, the Ogaden and neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Djibouti, where Somali is spoken.

Lonely Planet. (2001). *Africa on a shoestring*. Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd.

The Lonely Planet budget travel guide to Africa contains a relatively small section on Somalia, written in the late 1980s. This provides some description of the country and its people from a tourism perspective. The note at the beginning of this section illustrates the current situation in the country. It reads: 'Due to civil war and general anarchy we were unable to return to Somalia to do first hand research ... At the time of writing, Somalia was not safe to visit, nor likely to be in the immediate future.' (p 689)

Northern, North East, Central Eastern Area Mental Health Services (1999). *Breaking the cultural barriers: Somali women*. Melbourne.

This booklet for mental workers working with Somali women in Melbourne provides information on a wide range of topics relevant to the background and circumstances of Somali women living in Melbourne. This includes information about Somalia, cultural values and practices relating to the Somali community at large, as well as those that relate specifically

to women, such as female genital circumcision. There is discussion of the reasons for resettlement in Australia, settlement issues faced by Somalis, the impact of stress, trauma and torture, and problems associated with Somali women accessing a wide range of health and mental health services. While the writing directly addresses an audience of mental health professionals, the information provided is useful for providers of a wider range of services for Somali immigrants. While the resource focuses on the needs and circumstances of Somalis in Melbourne (such as the listing of community organisations and contacts), much of the information will be useful for AMEP providers working with Somali students in other parts of Australia.

Somali Cultural Association website

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/%7Esomalia>

This site provides some background information on Somalia, a link to current news stories on Somalia, and information about some children's literature and folk tales from Somalia.

Compiled by Alan Williams

Senior Researcher

Adult Migrant English Program Research Centre

La Trobe University

Based on contributions from Tanya Naumova, of West Coast College of TAFE (Adult Migrant Education Service)

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