

The Development Process of the Somali National Language and Script¹

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Abstract:

Somalia is a country with a single language and a single ethnicity. Through immigration, religious dissemination, and colonial invasions, various foreign languages and scripts have successively integrated into the lives of the Somali people. These influences have enriched and contributed to the development of the Somali native language and script to some extent. However, the dominant position of the Somali national language in Somali social life has remained unchanged. The development and evolution of the Somali national language and script are important reflections of Somalia's history, culture, and social transformations. This paper traces the process from the origins of the Somali language and script—beginning with the era of oral transmission without written form, through the introduction of the Arabic script, the adoption of the Latin script, the creation of indigenous scripts, and finally the establishment of the modern Somali language and script. It summarizes the challenges encountered during this development and offers prospects for the future of the Somali language and script.

Keywords:

Language and Script; Somalia; Development Process.

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Introduction

Somalia is one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in Africa, with ethnic Somalis making up 97% of the population. The country also exhibits significant linguistic uniformity, with approximately 95% of its residents speaking Somali.³ However, throughout history, the Somali language existed primarily as an oral language; it had no official script and left behind no written records. In the early stages of its development, there was no dedicated writing system, and the language relied entirely on oral transmission. Somali oral literature is exceptionally rich, and Somali culture is renowned for its poetry, proverbs, and folktales, earning it the reputation as the “Nation of Poets.”

1. The Oral Tradition Period Without a Writing System

The oral tradition period of the Somali language refers to the historical stage in which the language was transmitted and expressed entirely through speech, without any form of writing. This phase lasted for thousands of years and continued until the mid-20th century, when a formal writing system was finally established. During this era, Somali culture, history, social norms, and literary works were passed down orally from generation to generation. The content of oral transmission typically included Somali history and collective memory, contemporary laws and social codes, poetic and literary creations, religious rituals, and cultural practices. One of the most important literary forms in Somali oral tradition was poetry, particularly “Gabay”, which held a prominent role in both social and political life. These poems were often rich in satire and criticism, and Somali poets were known for their linguistic mastery, complex structure, and symbolic depth. Narratives and folktales, known as “Sheeko”, were also vital cultural components. Through these stories, people conveyed historical memory, moral teachings, and practical wisdom. Songs and ballads “Hees” were often created collectively, touching on themes such as labor, love, and warfare, and encouraged active participation from the community. These forms of expression represented the most significant manifestations of Somali oral tradition.

Beyond artistic and cultural value, Somali oral tradition served as a key mechanism for education, social cohesion, historical preservation, and cultural identity. In the absence of a writing system, Somali history and ethnic memory were preserved through oral histories. The chronicles of clans and tribes, heroic deeds of ancestral figures, major events, and records of wars were all passed down through extensive narratives, poetry, and songs. These stories were typically told or recited by oral historians, elderly people, or poets.

Somali society upheld a customary legal system known as “Xeer”, a traditional form of tribal law. Though informal, it was crucial and was maintained entirely through oral

³ Dubnov, Helena. *A Grammatical Sketch of Somali*. Köln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag. [EB-OL] (2003) [2021-11-15]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somali_language

agreements and public discussion. This system regulated social relationships, resolved conflicts, and upheld justice within and between clans. It emphasized harmony, responsibility, justice, and respect for elders. Poetry, especially the “Gabay”, played a pivotal role in oral tradition. More than just an art form, it functioned as a medium for emotional expression, political commentary, historical documentation, and social regulation. These long-form poems narrated history, conveyed opinions, praised heroes, expressed love, and described nature, all while being rich in metaphor and rhythm making them a powerful symbol of Somali culture. Although Islam was introduced to Somalia in the 7th century, religious knowledge and practices during the early oral phase were also passed down verbally. Islamic teachings and rituals, particularly the Qur'an in Arabic, were taught through recitation and oral instruction.

Oral tradition also covered the transmission of social roles and cultural customs such as marriage practices, feast etiquette, and ritual ceremonies which were usually passed on by elders or experienced community members during family or clan gatherings. In the absence of a formal educational system, oral tradition was the primary means of education in Somali society. Elders or tribal leaders taught moral values, historical narratives, and cultural knowledge, while the younger generation learned social norms through listening and imitation.

This oral culture helped maintain strong social bonds within and between clans and communities. Through collective ceremonies, storytelling, and poetry, both individual and collective identities were shaped, strengthening community cohesion. Ultimately, in the pre-literate era, oral tradition enabled Somalis to remember and transmit their history. Events such as wars, peace treaties, migrations, and clan alliances were all preserved through spoken words, allowing people to maintain a strong sense of identity across generations.

2. The Influence of the Arabic Script

The Arabic script began to influence the Somali language with the introduction of Islamic culture to Somalia in the 7th century. During this period, traders, missionaries, seafarers, and travelers played a key role in shaping Somali perceptions of the wider world. Particularly influential were members of Sufi religious orders, who spread Islamic teachings across the Somali region by introducing Arabic religious texts, performing prayer rituals, establishing mosques, and founding Qur'anic schools. As a result, Arabic script became, for a considerable period, the primary writing system used by Somalis to write their native language.

⁴In the 11th and 12th centuries, rulers along the Somali coast and inland regions began referring to themselves as sultans, establishing various sultanates. Major coastal sultanates included Zeila, Berbera, Mogadishu, Merca (Marka) and Brava (Barawa). The inland kingdoms included Majeerteen, Hobyo, Dhulbahante, Warsangali, and Geledi, etc. During this time, Arabic spread widely as a religious language alongside the

⁴ The Somali genealogy and religious poems in Somali mosques are recorded.



expansion of Islam. Somali children learned to read and recite Arabic script in Qur'anic schools to memorize the Qur'an, further reinforcing the Arabic script's role in Somali education and religious life.

This integration of Islamic and traditional Somali education helped popularize the use of Arabic script to write Somali, and it became the most used script for writing Somali within certain spheres. The earliest recorded Somali texts in Arabic script were primarily religious manuscripts written by Somali scholars. One of the most influential figures in this tradition was Sheikh Uways Al-Barawi in the late 19th century.⁵ Two of his surviving manuscripts, written in Arabic script, recorded the Somali language: one is a narrative about the Somali national hero Sayid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan and his resistance against British colonialism, and the other is a collection of religious poetry composed by Sheikh Uways himself. These works were widely embraced by the Somali public and played a role in inspiring anti-colonial sentiment. Another prominent advocate of writing Somali in Arabic script was Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Makahil, who authored a work titled "The Institution of Modern Correspondence in Somali Language", in which he explicitly encouraged the use of Arabic script for Somali. He was one of the most vocal supporters of this practice. Other notable figures who used Arabic script to write Somali include Osman Yusuf Kenadid, Musa Haji Ismail Galal⁶, Sheikh Abdirahman Qadi⁷, Dr. Ibrahim Hashi Mohamud⁸, and even British officer Dhamme J.S. King⁹.

Although Arabic traders and missionaries introduced Islam and Arabic to Somalia from the 7th century onward making Arabic an important language in religion, education, and trade the Arabic script ultimately faced limitations when applied to Somali. This was primarily due to the inability of the Arabic alphabet to fully represent the unique phonetic features of the Somali language. Despite these technical challenges, Arabic exerted a lasting influence on Somali vocabulary, particularly in religious and legal contexts.

3. Development of the Somali Latin Script During the Colonial Period

Beginning in 1827¹⁰, with the signing of the first treaty between British colonizers and Somali tribal chiefs, Western colonizers arbitrarily divided one of Africa's few

⁵ Sheikh Uwais was born in 1847 in Barawe, a small town in southern Somalia. He was a famous Somali poet and writer, as well as a fighter against colonial rule and an important leader of the famous anti-colonial armed group "Brotherhood" at that time.

⁶ In 1933, he created the "Gadabursiga" alphabet named after his tribe to write Somali. He also invented 7 new alphabets to write Somali, which are said to meet the needs of Somali for vowels that are not found in the Arabic alphabet.

⁷ He created the Kadariya alphabet in 1954 to write Somali.

⁸ Dr. Ibrahim Hashim Mohammed wrote and published "Al Suamliyah bi Lughat al Qur'an" in 1963, which explains how to read and write the Qur'an using the Somali Arabic script.

⁹ He is the only European recorded to have used Arabic script to write Somali. After him, Europeans began to write Somali in Latin script.

¹⁰ The treaty signed by the Somali chiefs was also signed in the context of legal experts from European countries unilaterally drafting such treaties in their native languages and then convincing African chiefs to sign such agreements without them knowing the contents.

homogenous regions - Somali territory - into five separate parts¹¹. Somalia entered a brutal colonial history, during which Western scholars including linguists, colonial officials stationed in the colonies, missionaries, and travelers conducted over 200 years of continuous research on the Latin script of the Somali language¹². It is said that when Europeans first arrived in Somalia and found that the region had a language but no script, they invented a Latin-based script to write Somali based on their own writing systems. Reportedly, the initial purpose was to help Western religious priests spread Christian doctrine in Somali society at the time¹³. During colonial rule in Somalia, Western scholars played an important role in promoting the development of the Somali Latin script. They used their self-created Latin-based Somali script to write dozens of textbooks and books on the Somali language. Among the more influential works were missionary De Larajasse's 1897 publications in London: "Somali-English and English-Somali Dictionary", and "Practical Grammar of the Somali Language with a Manual of the Sentences". The terminology in these two books for writing Somali in Latin script served as models for a long time.

Next was the renowned scholar and writer Leo Reinisch, who in 1900 published two volumes in Vienna written in Latin script. The first volume, from the perspective of a Somali named Heinrich Bensch, tells the story of a Western traveler named Dr. Walter Adolf Schleicher. The first part of the volume discusses Schleicher's work and experiences in many parts of East Africa and his great interest in the Somali language. The second part includes many Somali oral stories and histories, told in different ways to illustrate Somalia's social history. The third part is an English vocabulary dictionary translated into Somali. The first part of the second volume contains Islamic religious stories within Somali culture. The second part includes Somali proverbs, folktales, legends, and fables. The third part consists of Somali social customs and some traditional Somali linguistic records.

Later, German linguist Maria von Til wrote a book in 1918 titled "The Vowels of the Definite Article in Somali" (*Die Vokale Des Bestimmten Artikels Im Soma*), and in 1925 she published another book¹⁴ in Berlin titled "Somali Texts – and Studies on Somali Phonetics" (*Somali-Texte Und Untersuchungen Zur Somali-Lautlehre*). At the time, ¹⁵this

¹¹ Italian Somalia (Somalia), British Somalia (Somaliland), French Somalia (Djibouti, which became independent in 1977), the northern border region (now the Northeastern Province of Kenya, parts of the former Jubaland of Somalia) and eastern Ethiopia (Ogaden region), which is also one of the historical roots of the conflict in the Horn of Africa. The discussion here is based on the example of North and South Somalia (Mogadishu and Hargeisa).

¹² According to statistics, foreign languages written in Latin script in Somali include English, Italian, German, Austrian and French.

¹³ Currently, 99% of Somalia's residents believe in Islam, and most of them are Sunnis. In 1974, Somalia also joined the Arab League.

¹⁴ It mainly introduces her knowledge of Somali grammar and pronunciation. Maria has never been to Somalia, but she collected research on Somali in German and interviewed a Somali man named Mohamed Nur .

¹⁵ It consists of three parts, the first part is a survey and definition of the Somali language and its pronunciation, as well as the origin and nature of these pronunciations. The second part is a survey report by a Somali, Mohamed Noor, talking about his personal life and the general life and culture of Somalis.



book was considered the most advanced for learning the Somali language.¹⁶ Other contributors included Italian scholars Mario Maino, Enrico Cerulli, Martino Moreno, and Bruno Panza. Among the English-speaking researchers were C.R.V. Bell, Liliad E. Armstrong, I.M. Lewis, Bogumi Witalis Andrzejewski, and John Drysdale. German scholars A. Klingnheben and Carl Lang, and Austrian scholar Reinisch also contributed.

Somali scholars involved included Halimo Mohamed Ali, Abdi Kheyre Awaate, Abdullahi Haji Mohamed, Musa Haji Ismail Galal, Shire Jama Ahmed,¹⁷ as well as Joseph Pia, Jeanne Contini, and Dr. Castagno. It can be said that starting in the late 19th century, as European colonial powers fully entered Somalia, the linguistic environment in Somalia became increasingly complex.¹⁸ Western scholars' research into the Somali Latin script also contributed to this complexity to some extent. Colonizers prioritized foreign languages and neglected the development of Somali, limiting its use in written and educational fields. Additionally, the spread of Somali was confined to oral communication within families and clans, and a unified written script failed to develop. Therefore, during the colonial period, the Somali national language was marginalized while colonial languages became dominant, and Somali's status in formal contexts was suppressed. However, as a mother tongue, spoken Somali remained the core of people's daily lives and cultural communication. The Somali Latin script studied by Western scholars failed to gain broader influence.

4. Exploration and Attempts of Indigenous Scripts

The earliest recorded Somali indigenous scripts appeared in the 1920s. After World War II, the national independence and liberation movements in Africa spread from North Africa across the entire continent. In this context, the Somali people experienced a rise in national consciousness, and the indigenous creation of the Somali national language saw unprecedented development. As a result, during the period leading up to Somali independence and the early years following independence, many outstanding works using indigenous Somali scripts emerged.

Somali scholars, based on the characteristics of the Somali language, independently created various indigenous Somali scripts. These scripts best reflect the sounds and meanings of the Somali language and played a very important role in its development. However, Somalia's nearly thirty years of civil war also caused the loss of many materials related to these self-created Somali scripts. Here, the author selects three of the most influential independently created Somali scripts for introduction.

¹⁶ Ibraahin Yuusuf Axmed Hawd. Dadaalkii Reer Yurub Ee Far Soomaalida. [R] (2014-05) [2023-01-01].

¹⁷ The current Somali script is based on the Latin Somali script that he modified and edited.

¹⁸ British Colony (Northern Somalia): English was introduced into the education and administrative systems. Italian Colony (Southern Somalia): Italian became the main official language in the south. French Colony (Djibouti): French dominated the language environment in the Djibouti region.

4.1 *Osmanya Script*

In the 1920s, Osman Yusuf Kenadid created the ¹⁹“Osmanya alphabet,” named after himself, to write the Somali language. The Osmanya script is written from left to right and consists of 22 consonants and 8 vowels, capable of representing all the phonemes and letters of Somali. The emergence of the Osmanya script not only made a significant contribution to the development of indigenous Somali writing at the time but also played a decisive role in the Somali people's resistance against colonialism.

In 1971, members of the Osman clan published a Somali language textbook written in Osmanya script, titled “Our Language and Its Script”. The book provided detailed instructions on learning the Somali language using the Osmanya script. Osmanya is the earliest and most influential indigenous script created by Somalis for recording their language. Although it ultimately did not become the official writing system for Somali, it is estimated that about 50,000 people used it before the Latin alphabet was adopted as the official script²⁰.

The Osmanya alphabet is a native writing system specifically designed for the Somali language and effectively represents its phonetic features. However, due to limited resources and restricted usage, it ultimately did not become a nationally adopted script.

4.2 *Gadabursi Script (Gadabursiga)*

The Gadabursi script was created in 1933 by Musa Haji Ismail Galal. He was fluent in both English and Arabic, born into the Gadabursi clan in a northern Somali city. Galal was an Islamic elder and a teacher of English and Islam at the Ministry of Education in northern Somalia. The script is named after his clan.

The Gadabursi script is phonetically accurate and incorporated strengths from both the Arabic and Latin scripts used for Somali. However, its close association with a specific religious sect limited its dissemination and acceptance.²¹

4.3 *Kadare Script (Kadare)*

This script consists of 41 letters and four writing styles²², written from left to right. It was invented in 1952 by Sheikh Ahmed Kadare and named after himself²³. During the 42nd anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Somali written language, he was the only living creator among the three indigenous Somali scripts. He also won first place for his indigenous script at the first Somali Language Commission.

¹⁹ Osman Yusuf Knadid was born in 1898. He was fluent in Arabic and Italian and was a writer and poet. At first, Osman also wrote Somali in Arabic, but later he found the defects of writing Somali in Arabic. Therefore, a new script was created based on the pronunciation characteristics of Somali to write Somali.

²⁰ Cabdirashid M. Ismaaciil, Cabdalla C. Mansuur, Saynab A. Sharci. Afmaal[M].Djibouti: Akadeemiye-Goboleedka af-Soomaaliga.2015

²¹ This is Somali written in Gadabursiga script Cabdirashid M. Ismaaciil, Cabdalla C. Mansuur, Saynab A. Sharci. Afmaal[M].Djibouti: Akadeemiye-Goboleedka af-Soomaaliga.2015

²² In the 1961 report of the Somali Language Commission, it was assessed as second , with Sher Jamal Ahmed's revised Latin-script Somali being ranked first.

²³ He was a young staff member at the Mogadishu radio station at the time.



In the early 20th century, as Somali intellectuals explored writing systems suitable for the Somali language, the Gadabursi and Kadare scripts were both limited to local experimentation and failed to achieve widespread adoption. Although the Osmanyas script achieved significant progress, it ultimately lost the opportunity to become the official writing system for Somali. Thus, all attempts to establish a native Somali script ended in failure.

5. Introduction and Standardization of the Latin Alphabet

5.1 The Struggle for Somali Script Led to the Introduction of the Latin Alphabet

British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland gained independence on June 26 and July 1, 1960, respectively, and merged into the Somali Republic on July 1, 1960. During the early period of independence, the wave of revolution sweeping across Africa awakened Somali national consciousness, and Somali scholars began to recognize the importance of a national language and script. At that time, Somalia lacked its own writing system. The education system still followed the colonial tradition, and to facilitate governance, the government used Italian, English, and Arabic as official languages, while Somali continued to be used orally. During this period, Somali scholars created many indigenous scripts based on the linguistic features of the Somali language. However, due to various factors, the Somali government had yet to establish an effective language policy, and multiple scripts and languages continued to coexist in Somali society. This situation further reinforced the government's resolve to develop a national language and script. To accelerate the development of politics, economy, and culture, the Somali Republic established the Somali Language Commission during the early days of independence.

In 1961, then Minister of Education Ali Garad Jama appointed a nine-member Somali Language Commission to assess the feasibility of a Somali writing system²⁴. The commission set 17 basic criteria and ²⁵evaluated 18 candidate scripts—11 was newly created by Somali scholars, 4 were variants of Arabic script used for Somali, and 3 were Latin-based scripts. After analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of each, the commission produced a comprehensive 76-page report. On page 74, a modified Latin-based Somali script developed by Shire Jama Ahmed ranked first, while the indigenous Kadare script created by Hussein Sheikh Ahmed Kadare was ranked second. However, before the report could be submitted, internal disagreements emerged. Yasin Osman

²⁴ Musa Haji Ismail Galal Chairman 2.Yasin Osman Kenadid 3.Mohamud Saleh (Ladane) 4.Dr. Ibrahim Hashi Mohamud Member 5.Khalifa Saudi 6.Mustafa Sheikh Hassan 7.Shire Jama Ahmed 8.Hussein Sheikh Ahmed (Kadare) 9 .Yusuf Meygaag Samatar

²⁵ Waa inay xuruuftu cod leedahay 2.Waa in qoraalka xurufteedu sahan yahay 3.Waa in aysan lahayn calaamado gaar ah oo codka kala saara(diacritics) 4.Waa in aysan lahayn calaamado hal wax ka badan loo isticmaalo 5.Waa in aysan lahayn laba ama calaamado ka badan oo codadka keliya kala saara 6.Waa in aysan lahayn calaamado laftoodu cod u taagan ama leh 7.Waa inay leedahay qalabka wax lagu daabaco oo hada waddanka laga heli karo 8.Waa inay nidaamka Calaamadaha Caalamiga ah waafaqsan tahay 9.Waa inay habbeysan tahay (standarised) 10.Waa inay hab

Kennadid, ²⁶a key advocate of the Osmanya script, withdrew from the evaluation process. Influential members Ibrahim Hashi Mohamed and Mohamed Jama Afbara also resigned before the report was finalized. Eventually, six commission members signed and submitted the report. Prime Minister Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke and Education Minister Ali Garad Jama rejected the report²⁷. It was neither discussed at a cabinet meeting nor submitted to parliament and was instead archived in the Ministry of Education. The first Somali Language Commission was subsequently dissolved.

In 1965, the Somali Language Commission was re-established. UNESCO sent renowned Somali experts Bogumił Witalis Andrzejewski, Stefan Strelcyn, and Joseph Tubiana to participate. This second commission reviewed seven scripts based on the 1961 report and eventually narrowed the discussion to three²⁸: the Osmanya script, a Latin-based Somali script, and an Arabic-based Somali script. Each script had its own supporters within the commission, and the debates centered on why one was more suitable than the others. The final report listed all three options but made no definitive choice, as societal divisions over the Somali script had become politically charged.

The establishment of the Somali Language Commission reflected a national urgency to unify the Somali language and script. Despite extensive efforts by both commissions, no effective policy emerged. The various scripts that had appeared throughout Somali history failed to gain widespread recognition due to deeply rooted clan-based ideologies and interests. Consequently, the Somali Republic's Constitution did not specify an official language or script. Article 3 of the Somali Republic Constitution "Equality of Citizens" only addressed language in the context of equal rights and obligations regardless of ethnicity, origin, nationality, language, region, gender, economic status, or social/political identity.

Religious education has also become an essential part of compulsory schooling²⁹. Most Somali children were sent to Quranic schools before formal education to learn reading and writing in Arabic. Islam had become an inseparable part of Somali culture, and Arabic, as the language of religion, could not be overlooked. Since independence, Arabic was one of Somalia's official languages. The Somali Republic also declared Islam as the state religion.

During Somalia's long colonial history, Italian and English served as administrative and working languages and were widely used in education. These combined factors contributed to the stagnation of Somali language policy during this period. The government continued to favor foreign languages, and there was even a time when

²⁶ He is the nephew of Osman Yusuf al-Kennadid, the creator of the "Ottoman script"

²⁷ Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, also known as Abdirashid Shermarke, was Prime Minister of the Somali Republic from July 12, 1960 to June 14, 1964, and President of the Somali Republic from July 6, 1967 until his assassination on October 15, 1969.

²⁸ native Somali scripts, one Latin script and one Arabic script

²⁹ Original SINNAANTA MUWAADINIINTA: Dhammaan muwaadiniinta Dalka iyagoon loo kale soocin xag jinsiyadeed, Dal uu asal ahaan ka soo jeedo, dhalasho, luuqad, Gobal, jinsi (lab/dheddig), dhaqaale ama heerka aqoonsi ee uu Bulshada ku dhex leeyahay ama aragti/rayi, waxay yeelanayaan xuquuq iyo waajibaad simman/isla eg sharciga hortiisa.



multiple foreign languages held official status. The coexistence of multiple languages and scripts was the defining feature of Somali language policy at the time, reflecting the political and societal fragmentation of the era.

5.2 The Reform of Somali Script Promoted the Standardization of the Somali Latin Alphabet

In 1969, the Somali military government came to power and established the Somali Democratic Republic. The Siad Barre government recognized that the Somali language was the mother tongue and national language of the Somali people, and that its greatest current problem was the lack of a unified script. Seizing this difficult issue, the Somali Language Commission was reinitiated in 1970. This time, the Somali Language Commission consisted of 21 well-known language experts and scholars of the time. It was a massive and highly influential effort. The experts of the Somali Language Commission were required to each write a grammar book, a 5,000-word scientific terminology dictionary, and textbooks for all school grades in Somali, based on the three scripts selected in the second report of the previous Somali Language Commission. The Somali Language Commission had no authority to decide which script would become the final Somali script, as only the script that completed the task the fastest would be adopted as the official Somali script. By the third anniversary of the founding of the Somali Democratic Republic, only the Somali Latin script had completed the assigned tasks. On October 21, 1972, President Mohamed Siad Barre of the Somali Democratic Republic announced the use of the Latin script to write Somali.³⁰ This decision not only officially gave the national language Somali its own spelling system but also resolved the long-standing controversy over language and script, and marked Somalia's first major ontological planning of the national language. This script includes 21 consonants and five vowels and is still used as the Somali script today³¹. To further amplify the influence of the Somali language and script, the Siad Barre government soon launched a top-down, massive "literacy campaign".

In January 1973, the government of the Somali Democratic Republic began promoting the Somali script nationwide. Primary schools began using Somali-language textbooks, and by 1975, middle schools and universities also began using Somali textbooks. In addition, the first newspapers written entirely in the new Somali script were launched. On March 7, 1974, the Somali Democratic Republic government launched a mass literacy campaign targeting all rural areas. The literacy campaign raised Somalia's literacy rate from 2% before independence to 60% during the Somali Democratic Republic period.

The Somali Democratic Republic government also stipulated that all levels of civil servants must pass a written and reading test in the new Somali script within three months or be dismissed; later, the time limit was extended to six months. Meanwhile,

³⁰ In 1972, the government promulgated the Somali Orthography, which stipulates the official writing method.

³¹ Later, a glottal consonant was added, so most scholars now recognize that Somali has 22 consonants.

in a short period, the new Somali script spread to other Somali-speaking regions such as Western Somalia (Ogaden), Djibouti (French Somaliland), and northeastern Kenya (NFD). As the influence of the Somali language and script expanded, the Siad Barre government, in the 1979 “Constitution of the Somali Democratic Republic”, officially designated Somali and Arabic as the official languages for the first time³².

During this period, the Siad Barre government deliberately promoted the national language and Somali script in Somalis’ daily communication, business communication, and education. The Somali script quickly spread and was widely used in Somali-inhabited areas in neighboring countries and among the Somali diaspora and was also used by Somali minority groups.

6. Somali Language and Script Development and Challenges

6.1 Interruption of Language Development Due to Civil War

In January 1991, the government of the Somali Democratic Republic fell, and the country was left fragmented, with various institutions facing a vacuum. The turbulent society not only hindered the continued development of the Somali language but also severely impacted the national education system and language promotion efforts. Schools were closed, and there was a lack of educational resources, leading to the suspension of literacy campaigns.

Despite this, the Somali diaspora communities continued to use and spread the Somali language, and the Somali script was preserved within Somali communities in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Especially in the modern era, with technological advancements and digitization, technology has driven language development. As technology advanced, modern applications emerged, and Somali began to enter the digital realm. Somali language learning platforms and language processing technologies were developed, further promoting the modernization of Somali script.

As the standard writing system for Somali, the Latin alphabet became the most popular medium for international communication of the Somali language. Many social media platforms developed Somali language input methods and translation tools, and Somali was actively promoted in the media and on online education platforms. This was one of the key factors that allowed the Somali language and script to continue to thrive and spread during the decades of civil war in Somalia.

³² Original text(Diinta iyo Afka)1 Diinta Islaamku waa Diinta Qaranka2. Af Soomaaligu waa afka kaliya ee Shacbiga Soomaaliyeed ku wada hadlo iskuna wada garto.Afka Carabiguna waa afka Shacbiga Soomaaliyeed waana midka ku xiriiriya Ummada Carbeed oo uu ka midka yahay, Labadubana waa Afafka rasmiga ah ee Jamuuriyada Dimoqraadiga Soomaaliya http://somalitalk.com/dastuur/dastuurkii_1979.pdf In Chapter 3 Religion and Language and Description of the Constitution: 1 Islam is the state religion 2. Somali is the only language that the Somali people communicate and recognize among themselves, Arabic is the language of the Somali people and is the language that connects the Arab society, Somali is one of them, and both are official languages of the Somali Democratic Republic.



6.2 Further Development of the Somali Language and Script

In 2012, the Federal Republic of Somalia was established. Subsequently, the national constitution passed by the Constituent Assembly in its Chapter 1, Article 5, stipulates: “The official language of the Federal Republic of Somalia is Somali (with the southern dialect as Maay and the northern dialect as Maxaa), and Arabic is the second language³³”. ³⁴This constitution further clarified the status of Somali as the official language and changed the term “language” to “dialect” in the section on equal rights for citizens, affirming that the only differences are between dialects, not languages.

The President and other government officials have continuously called for the development of Somali, especially in the educational field. The Ministry of Education of the Federal Government of Somalia, in the National Education Plan (Qorshaha Waxbarashada Qaranka), made Somali the national teaching language, with the goal of making it the language used in schools across the country. The education policy also indicates that the Federal Government of Somalia is working to incorporate Somali into education, administration, and communication, in an effort to reduce the influence of foreign languages like English and Arabic in Somali society.

On January 21, 2015, on the 42nd anniversary of Somali script usage, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud announced the use of Somali in all official documents across Somalia, prohibiting the use of foreign languages in official documents. On February 21, 2015, President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti and President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud of Somalia jointly laid the foundation for the Somali Language Institute (The Regional Somali Language Academy) in Mogadishu. This was the first regulatory body for the Somali language, dedicated to preserving and developing Somali.

In January 2016, Mayor of Banaadir, Yusuf Hussein Jimaale, ordered that all advertisements in Mogadishu be published in Somali, with permits being denied for ads not in Somali. On January 21, 2016, Presidents Hassan Sheikh Mohamud of Somalia and Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti commemorated the second anniversary of the Somali Language Institute's establishment. This reflects the Federal Government of Somalia's attitude and determination in promoting the national language and the stability of its plans for the language's status.

The Somali diaspora has strengthened language education and ensured the transmission of Somali to younger generations. This measure has further promoted Somali in diaspora communities and globally, continuing to expand its influence. Somali scholars have also used literature, film, and music to advocate for the revival of Somali culture.

³³ The famous scholar Bogumił Witalis Andrzejewski divides Somali dialects into northern dialects (Af-Maxaad Tiri or Maxaad Tiri), southern dialects (Maay or Af-maay) and coastal dialects, while John I. Saeed divides Somali dialects into northern dialects , southern dialects and Benadir dialects . This is recognized by the international academic community , but Somali scholars tend to divide Somali dialects into northern dialects and southern dialects.

³⁴ Original Qodobka 5aad. Afafka Rasmiga ah Afka rasmiga ah ee Jamhuuriyadda Federaalka Soomaaliya waa Af-soomaaliga (Maay iyo Maxaatiri), af Carabigana waa luqadda labaad. <https://docs.voanews.eu/so-SO/2012/08/02/db7a18b3-f965-4201-9172-43511a5615dd.pdf>

6.3 Challenges Encountered by the Somali Language and Script

Since the collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic, Somalia's political landscape has been complex and ever-changing. The prolonged civil war and economic difficulties have affected the normal functioning of the education system, which has limited the spread of the Somali language. The dominance of English and Arabic in government, international affairs, and business has had an impact on the scope of Somali language use. The dialectical differences of Somali and the social turmoil may weaken the unity and promotion of Somali.

Furthermore, after the civil war, the Somali government failed to establish unified standards and policies for language education. Currently, Somalia's primary language policies are reflected in the constitution's provisions on official languages and in the educational strategic plans, which outline teaching languages and related pedagogical content. However, a specific language law or script law has not yet been formulated, and there are no detailed policies to ensure the implementation of an overall language plan. For example, the teaching language, educational structure, language curriculum planning, and management systems are still not unified across Somalia. There is also a significant difference between public and private schools, and multilingualism is common in school teaching languages. These issues reflect the lack of systematic execution of government policies, ineffective policymaking, and a lack of synchronization and coordination in their implementation. Consequently, the linguistic ecosystem of Somalia once again features a coexistence of colonial languages, religious languages, and indigenous languages.

During this period, multilingual education and religious education remain key features of Somalia. English has become the lingua franca and one of Somalia's diplomatic languages.³⁵ Although the Somali government continues to emphasize the official status of the Somali language and calls for the development and maintenance of its status, the primary goal is to increase the Somali people's sense of identification with the Federal Government of Somalia.

It is evident that since the establishment of Somali script, Somalia's linguistic ecology has undergone a significant transformation, transitioning from a society dominated by foreign languages to a society developing through its indigenous national language. From the first clear acknowledgment of Somali as the official language in the constitution to the emphasis by successive post-civil war governments on the official status of Somali, while Somali language planning is still in its early stages and remains a rough overall framework, the status of Somali in Somali society is unshakable. This is closely tied to the critical role Somali plays in building national and ethnic identity. However, for Somalia to truly achieve the comprehensive popularization and dominance of Somali in all fields of society, the Federal Government of Somalia needs to put in more effort,

³⁵ During the period of the Federal Republic of Somalia, a large number of Somali "elites" returned to their country, which also promoted the development of English in Somalia.

develop more comprehensive and specific language policies, and ensure their effective implementation.

7. Conclusion

The development of the Somali national language and script has undergone a long process of exploration, transitioning from an oral culture with no written system to various attempts at different writing systems, and eventually to the standardization of the Latin alphabet. It is not only a symbol of Somali national culture but also an important medium for social cohesion and national identity. Looking ahead, the potential for the development of the Somali national language is vast, but continuous effort is required, especially in education, policy, technological innovation, and cultural heritage.

Through mother-tongue education and government policy support, increasing literacy rates in Somali and enhancing its social application, modern technology can be utilized to develop more digital tools for the Somali language, adapting to the demands of the globalized era. It is also crucial to protect and promote Somali poetry, literature, and traditional arts, which will strengthen national pride. In the future, Somali will continue to develop into a more dynamic language with the dual support of technology and culture, contributing to national unity and cultural inheritance.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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