

Somalia became known as a place of terror and mayhem after the killing of United Nations peacekeepers between 1992 and 1995. SAADA ABDIKARIM

describes another Somalia where sand dunes meet the sea, society is governed by complex kinship structures and everyone is a poet.



A Nation of Poets

Somali people have been living in the Horn of Africa for centuries. During this time a rich culture has evolved founded on clan membership and the Islamic religion. An integral part of Somali culture is a vibrant tradition of poetry and song that document major events like war and famine and captures the details of day to day life in an arid environment.

Before the outbreak of civil war in 1991, Somali culture was a conglomeration of ancient traditions and contemporary influences. The majority of Somalis are nomadic people, whose prosperity and well being is dependent on their livestock. They spend their lives crisscrossing the country in search of water and grazing land for their flocks. Another part of the population is intensely modern, establishing import and export businesses or travelling to Arab countries to find work.

One striking feature of Somali culture is its homogeneity in comparison to other African cultures. Somalis have one common language, known as *Somali*, one religion, which is Islam, and similar customs. What inspires the Somalis with a sense of common national identity is the Islamic religion and a legend that all Somalis originated from one man who gave each clan their tribal name.

The four largest clans in Somali society are the northern nomadic clans of Hawiye, Darood, Isaq and Dir. However there are other smaller clans and numerous sub-clans, which combine to form the complex fabric of Somali society. If someone wants to know what clan a person belongs to, they will usually ask them which part of the country they originated from. A person's clan membership determines their place in society and their relation to other people in it. For the northern nomadic clans the identification of clan is very important but for other clans, who are settled mostly in one place, less emphasis is placed on clan identification.

Somali language was not expressed in written form until 1972, when the English alphabet was used to document the language. The language is melodic and lends itself well to the expression of poetry and verbal arts.

Poetry is widely practiced and recited and plays an important role in Somali history. A good orator and poet can become a very influential person in Somali society.

Often poetry and songs are embedded with cultural values and carry strong messages. For instance when Somali went to war with Ethiopia songs that motivated and encouraged Somali troops were released weekly and broadcast on radio.

Unfortunately, the civil war has had a devastating impact on the Somali tradition of poetry. Large sections of the Somali community are displaced by fighting or become refugees in foreign lands and the memory of their traditional poetry is disappearing. The fact that many of the poems have not been documented only exacerbates this problem.

The Somali capital of Mogadishu was established 1000 years ago as a Persian and Arab trading centre. It continued to flourish over the years and during colonisation, by the British and Italians, it was a popular tourist resort. Mogadishu's seaside location, its unique architecture, with Arab and Italian influences, and its bustling markets with friendly locals made it an enticing holiday spot. Since 1991, Mogadishu has been decimated by the civil war and today it is a city in ruins.



Somalia has a diverse landscape with mountain ranges in the north of the country, areas of desert and sand dunes along the coast. The environment has made a significant contribution to the shaping of behaviour and settlement of Somali society. Almost 80% of the Somali peninsula is an arid semi-desert unfit for reliable cultivation, with seasonal rains. People move from one place to another in search for water and pasture. During the centuries Somalis have evolved a way of life particularly suited to their demanding environment. A unique social organisation emerged that encouraged collective action and mutual aid.

Camels form the mainstay of Somali pastoralism and were described as the "mother of man" by the great Somali poet Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan. They are of hardy constitution and their value stems from their ability to survive in the harsh climate, their unflinching capacity to produce milk, and as a source of meat or transport for nomads. Camels are a viable currency in Somalia. 'Blood money' and compensation for homicides are paid in camels, as are dowries.

Only the southern part of Somalia has rivers, the Genale and the Shabeelle, that flow from inland Ethiopia and dry up before they meet the sea. The existence of these rivers has allowed people to settle and farm in some areas and these people have a completely different life style from other Somalis who are pastoral nomadic. The same applies to the northwest of the country around the towns of Gabilay and Boorama where there is an extension of fertile highlands stretching from Ethiopia.

There is some animosity between farmers and nomads, with each group feeling more superior than the other. The nomads have a proverb *geel la'aani waa geeri* which means "camel-lessness is death". Farmers who are settled believe the nomads are abnormal people who can never settle. They are known to discriminate against some of the

major clan groups and treat them as outcasts.

Somalis recognise four seasons, two of which are rainy (*gu' and dayr*) and two dry (*jiilaal and haggaa*). A person's age is calculated in terms of the number of gu's he or she has lived. That is why you find most Somalis do not know their date of birth.

The *gu'* rains last from April to June, producing a fresh supply of pasture and briefly transforming the desert into a blooming garden. This is the season of plenty for the nomad. Meat, milk and water are abundant and the animals do not require much care taking which leaves time for social activities. Traditionally *gu'* was a period when clans assembled to engage in banter and poetic exchange or a new cycle of hereditary feuds. Sometimes a girl was given out for marriage to settle a dispute between clans. These traditions still exist today but in different ways.

Somalis have a patriarchal society where the man is the head of the family. It is not important whether he is the breadwinner or not, he always makes the decisions. In the old days men looked after the camels and women looked after the goats and cattle. Camels are the more important animals in the nomadic economy and strength was needed to guide them, which gave a sense of power to the man who looked after it. Goats and cattle were considered small animals, but they required more attention and hard work to look after than the camels.

Women and children were treated as one category and they could not participate in decision-making during clan meetings. A woman was represented in these meetings by her husband or, if she was not married, by her father, brother or paternal uncle. In these circumstances, women still found a way to subtly exercise their power. A woman could attain a large degree of respect by looking after her livestock and children well and being supportive to her husband's role and identity. There was a proverb that says *nin waa*

naagtuu qabo, meaning behind every successful man there is a great woman.

As more Somali people started living in the city, the role of the women and men remained the same. Women were active participants in the country's economy and some had their own businesses. Others stayed at home and supported the family but either way, they usually had more duties than men did and less power.

When a Somali reaches the age of 14 they are no longer seen as a child but a young person. They only become adults when they marry or leave their mother's home. However it is very unusual for a young person to live on their own in the same town as their family. It is more common for them to stay with the family until they marry. Conversation is shared across age groups, which is different to other African cultures, such as the Masai, where a young person can never talk or sit with an elder.

In the last decade, Somalia has caught the world's attention as a result of the violence that is occurring there. Few of the media reports ever try and explain who the Somali people are. Their identities and culture are subsumed by the tragedy that has befallen their country. Somali people themselves have no choice but to focus on the violence that has torn their country apart. There are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people within Somalia and many more in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Almost everyone has been traumatised by the violence in some way. Now more than ever it is important for Somalis to gain strength from what is good in their culture. ■

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