Multilingual Somalia: Ploy or Pragmatic
Mohamed Haji Mukhtar

Somali people speak a number of languages and dialects, Maay1 and Mahaa2 being the lingua franca of the majority. None of the Somali languages and dialects was written until late 1972, due to disagreements based on clan-related scripts or religious and political issues that dictated whether these Somali languages should be written in an Arabic- or a Latin-based alphabet.

In 1972, however, a Latin-based Maay script was adopted, and Mahaa became the only official national language of the country. This experiment alienated speakers of other Somali languages, especially Maay speakers who, in 1976, formed a literary association called Af-Yaal, “the language keepers” whose main concern was the protection and revival of Maay culture and language. By 1980, many of the members of Af-Yaal were jailed, harassed and killed by the Barre military administration forcing some into exile. It was the expatriate Af-Yaal that developed mostly new Maay scripts. Since 1994, one of those scripts Af-Maay, the Maay Alphabet, has been circulated in Somali academic circles and found most suitable.3

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Historical Background

The Somali languages and dialects belong to the Eastern Cushitic sub-branch of the Afroasiatic family, they are related to languages such as the Saho-Afar spoken in the northeastern part of the Horn, Galla-

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and an advocate of an Af-Maay script, was transferred from Mogadishu to Bal‘ad and could not contribute to the work of the commission. Nevertheless, the commission could not come to a consensus, and the government decreed that Arabic, English and Italian remain official languages.

During the second civilian administration (1964-67), the government invited a committee of three foreign experts sponsored by UNESCO. The experts arrived in Mogadishu in March, 1966 to a city shaken with demonstrations hostile to the adoption of a Latin script. The UNESCO Committee reviewed existing scripts and interviewed most of their devisers. Although they could not come up with a specific recommendation, they were critical of indigenous and Arabic scripts and had few objections to Latin based scripts. In October 1969, the coup d’état led by Mohamed Siad Barre established a military administration, the Somali Revolutionary Council (SRC), which, in 1971, appointed the Guddiga Af-Somaliga, the Somali Language Commission without, however, specific instructions to recommend a script. The choice of a script would be political, and, indeed, on 21 October 1972, on the third anniversary of the coup, a helicopter dropped multicolor leaflets in a new Latin script over the parade passing before the tribuna of leaders and dignitaries. From that day on, this script became official, though few could read it. Af-Maay speakers, and speakers of other Somali languages, soon discovered that the script was only suitable for Af-Mahaa speakers, but all criticism was repressed in the name of cultural homogeneity and monolinguism. Thus, it was through the adoption of this script that one form of Somali, Af-Mahaa, became the only officially acceptable national language.

**Introducing a New Script**

By 1974 a major literacy campaign was launched to teach nomadic Somalia, particularly the non-Maahaa speakers, how to read and write in the official form of Somali, Af-Mahaa. The ensuing literacy drive involved a national mobilization. Schools and colleges all over the nation were closed and some 25,000, almost the entire student population, were sent into the country were closed and some 25'000, almost

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The Af-Maay speaking regions were overwhelmed with schools, but students were denied the right to speak Af-Maay their true mother tongue in the school environments. First graders were anxious to go to schools with playgrounds full of kids but were disturbed when they were told not to speak their mother tongue, Af-Maay. If they did, they were sent to the principal’s office and spanked. Eventually, they dropped out of school or played truant. The result for the Af-Maay community was illiteracy and economic misery. A significant number of students tried to assimilate and “mother tongue” in Af-Mahaa as soon as possible. But still, they were called Eelay wiiy, “the devil Eelay” every day. They pretended they did not hear and suppressed their feelings and make all kinds of excuses and did not fight back. After they graduated and became “mother tongued,” they became outcasts. Many young men accepted their imposed identity and even married non-Reewin wives, giving their children non-Af-Maay names. Many of them could no longer make sense in Af-Maay, not even to their relatives. They lowered themselves and humiliated their children when they forced them to speak Af-Mahaa only.

This was also true in meetings and public speeches. Speakers were reminded to always speak Af-Somali, meaning Af-Mahaa: Warya! Af-Somali ku hadal (‘Hey! Speak Somali’). Siad Barre announced that civil servants had to learn the new script in three months. Before the coup, Af-Maay speakers had their own political parties and cultural associations and MPs in the National Assembly deliberated in Af-Maay which was then translated and transmitted through headphones as in the meetings of the United Nations. Indeed, debates and speeches in the parliament were in Arabic, Italian, English and local Somali languages. Before Af-Mahaa became Af-Somali, all students studied and were taught in Arabic, Italian and English. Ironically, learning and being taught in Af-Maay disadvantaged speakers of not only Af-Maay but all other Somali languages. It is evident that, before Af-Mahaa became the language of instruction, Af-Maay speakers excelled because of their knowledge of writing and reading Arabic from the daksii Qur’aanic schools, which was not usually the case for Af-Maahaa speakers. Af-Maay students had to study suugaanta Somalia, Somali literature, a course that dealt with poetry, story telling and cultural matters, but which excluded their own literature that was not even translated. The Af-Maahaa children’s stories were not like the familiar stories they heard from their parents, Gekogecko. “Once upon a time,” nor were the riddles Diilley, the ones they knew by heart. They did not memorize their own Reeqay classical poetry. This suppression and official eradication of Af-Maay culture and literature was a major bone of contention and a cause of disenchantment and disunity under Siad Barre’s regime. It also contributed to the demise of the Somali state itself.

When the military regime was overthrown in January 1991, the assertion of homogeneity came under attack. The Inter-Riverine Studies Association (ISA) emerged in 1993, and, at its first congress, adopted a new, Latin-based script for Af-Maay called Alif-Maay, “Maay alphabet.”

**Cultural Renaissance**

From independence to the fall of Siad Barre (1960-1991), the agro-pastoral Reewin who spoke Af-Maay were outside the traditional political system. Their language and culture were considered inferior. Little attention was given to the history and traditions of non-pastoral communities. However, the collapse of the state might well have been a blessing in disguise for agro-pastoral communities in the Riverine Region as well as elsewhere in the country. In 1991, the Fannaaniinta Arlaadi, an alliance of artists to preserve the Maay heritage of music, drama and poetry, was founded in Baidoa. Many of its members had been active since 1959 when Radio Mogadishu dropped Af-Maay programs in favor of Af-Mahaa. Previously, members of that alliance served in the civilian and military regimes as educators, civil servants, or soldiers. At the collapse of the Barre regime, in 1991, and the man-made famine and violence of the clan militias in the Inter-Riverine region, some poets began to speak out. A music teacher, Abdulkarid Ali Hassan, wrote a poem called Ay Tiringney Maqahaqhene, Isly tiiriineeg, “Let us save our name, and hold onto it proudly” to restore Maay pride. It was adopted as the signature tune of Radio Baidoa, the first broadcast voice of Af-Maay, and the national anthem of the Riverine State founded in 1995. The soldier Issak Nuuroow Eedig, a Reewin known by an Abgal name, Issak Abgaalow, wrote Mawqif Mijahid, “The way of the warrior,” and Isla Goroneeng, “Let us agree,” poems which mobilized young men and women to defend their culture. Radio Baidoa broadcast Maay folk music, poetry, plays, and stories and, thus, served as a catalyst for Maay cultural revival. Indeed, Radio Baidoa was the first ever to broadcast and produce programs exclusively in Af-Maay.

Since 1992, the group Fannaaniinta Arlaadi has been producing a newsletter named, Arlaadi, “Homeland”, irregularly published in Baidoa. They also produce videos of songs and plays. Moreover, they revived the publication and study of Af-Maay classical literature: Gopy, “poetry,” Weeyr or Bayting, “war songs,” Dheel, “dances,” Adar, an oral Maay poetic genre dealing with animals, especially with camels, Naby Ammaang, and Dikii “religious poetry.” They revived Gekogecko stories, sometimes set to music, and Diilleey riddles. In this context, a particularly old poem in Af-Maay regained popularity. Shoofin is a poem chanted by Kutaaba, “Qu’anic school students,” at the closing of a day session, a school anthem in the daksii tradition. Composed by the millenarian Sheikh Ibdille Issak (1796-1869) in Af-Maay, the poem is chanted to “keep the devils at bay” – such is the meaning of the title. It has an epic sweep from Creation to the Day of Judgment and lays out fundamental spiritual and moral values.

**The Recognition of Af-Maay as Official Language**

No decision is made in Somali affairs without the consideration of clan politics. The adoption of a modified Latin script for Af-Mahaa is a good example of clan intrigue. This script was created, modified, and propagated by Shire Jama Ahmed, member of Marehaan clan, in 1960. The Majerteen, the ruling clan of the time looked down on the Marehaan as reer baddaayi, “Bedouins,” and supported, under the guise of political correctness, the Ismaniyya script invented and propagated by Yassin Isman, a Majerteen. The Marehaan script was set aside as the Majerteen dominated Somali post-independence politics. The first Prime Minister, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke (1960-64),
The marginalization of agro-pastoral societies and their culture has been addressed by their representatives in the Somali national reconciliation conferences since the collapse of the state. Many of these Af-Maay defenders were assassinated or were blackmailed to such an extent that their lives were hardly bearable. However, the struggle continued. Truth eventually prevailed when the Somali Peace and Reconciliation Conference of 2003 at Mogadishu, Kenya, acknowledged that Af-Maay would be another official language of the Somali Republic. The Transitional Federal Charter of the Somali Republic of 2003 stated in Article 7: “The official language of the Somali Republic shall be Somali (Maaya and Maahatir [Af-Maahaa]).”

Conclusion

In many religious traditions, the spoken word has creative power, but that word need not be confined to one language; thus, a diversity of languages and cultures is valued. In the Qur’an, the variety of linguistic expression among groups and individuals is seen as one sign of Allah’s creative omnipotence: wānîn āyātihū khalqā s-sâmâwîtî wa al-‘ârîdîn wa l-‘âlîmîn, “And among his signs is the creation of heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors; verily in that are signs for those who know” (Qur’an 30:22). Islam encourages multilingualism: man tâllama lughata qawmin amma minkirin “He who learns other people’s language is safe from their mischief” (Hadith). Some cultures praise silence in given circumstances, as the wide-spread saying goes, “Speaking is silver; to be silent is gold.” Others do not put an explicit emphasis on the role of language. But most place a high value on “speaking well”: “knowing how to speak” was, and is, a sign of wisdom and high social status. Those in high places cultivate many forms of verbal and rhetorical art. Commonly, language and self-reflection—“I am what I say”—are seen as what makes people human, and identification with one’s own native languages defines individual and group identity.

Somali society, like other oral societies, places a heavy weight on speaking well. To tell well can make one a respected person. There are many expression used by Af-Maahaa speakers to humiliate and degrade speakers of other Somali languages—in- 

dicates the degree of exclusion of (for example) Af-Maay speakers, particularly after Af-Maahaa had been politically endorsed by the government under Siad Barre. Consequently, many non-Af-Maahaa languages and dialects have either disappeared in recent decades or are at grave risk of extinction. Hostile governments actively suppress some; as larger languages spoken by politically more dominant groups replace others. Unless action is taken to support and foster linguistic diversity, many languages and dialects will cease to be spoken.

Somali scholarship so far has failed to note that the imposition of monolingualism on a multi-linguistic people is a form of cultural and social oppression that contributed to the disunity of Somalia, which again paved a way for the continued collapse of the Somali state. The ethnocentric civilian and military regimes decreed that multi-culturalism, or the expression of multi-cultural issues, was treason. Now that Somali society is in disarray with no central authority, it is necessary to re-evaluate the diversity of Somali culture. Perhaps, at last, the arrogance and sing- 

lived enemies of monolingual empire builders will be condemned and cast aside, making space for a new and truly egalitarian Somali polity.