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Author

Holmes, E. Selean

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Preserving Somali Culture

by

E. Selean Holmes

We all need tangible reminders of the people we have known, the places where we have traveled, the experiences that we have had, in order to remember who we are. So strong is this fundamental need that, in East Africa, when a certain ethnic group moves, they take with them, in addition to their personal artifacts, "the names of their hills, plains and rivers to the new country. . . carrying their cut roots with them as a medicine. Such portable symbols of the past, like the permanent artifacts of any landscape, aid in maintaining human continuity."¹

Our fast track world often renders the past as irrelevant to the needs of today. Knowing how monumental the task of collecting artifacts and oral history can be for museums, I often wonder how the relevancy of historical preservation can be foremost in the minds of individuals outside of the museum milieu. The attitude of history being irrelevant to our contemporary existence is especially detrimental when applied to societies where nomadism is prevalent. The pastoral lifestyle, common to various parts of the African continent, places less emphasis on material possessions and handicrafts, and more on items of temporary use. In this regard, then, how concerned are the Somali people about preserving their past, be it the history of the pastoral nomads or the sedentary city dwellers.

Any student of Somali culture knows that the strongest tradition in Somali culture is the oral tradition, with poetry at the apex. Somalis are often described as a "nation of bards" whose poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life.² Oral traditions are a form of history that cannot be judged by the same rules as our western sense of history. The precision that is characteristic of the latter is absent; instead, time may be couched in terms of the memory of individuals who recall events or people, or it may be formalized in terms of recited histories of kings or dynasties. Oral traditions may unconsciously change over time, because memory is selective and fallible, or they may be consciously reinterpreted for political or other reasons.³ Perhaps the question of using modern technology to preserve cultural traditions (tape recordings, videos etc.) Must be addressed by Somalis and those interested in African history and culture. Certainly contemporary Somali musicians and singers are "keepers of the story", their songs being full of traditional proverbs, stories and problems of everyday life. However, music is only one area; it must go further than this. Has the personal and professional

history of Mohamed Sulayman, a well known singer, been documented in any archives? Whenever the stability of a country is threatened by political strife, so are the cultural fibers of that society. Cultural centers that no longer exist must be restored.⁴ In the meantime, materials and techniques that are readily available to us must be utilized.

The use of oral history projects as a means of collecting and preserving the past and present can certainly serve as a method to begin the process. Imagine listening to an elderly relative tell of how she worked on the family farm, of how an uncle learned to read in Dugsi Koran, and went on to earn a college degree in a foreign country, against all odds. Such are the opportunities available to the family or professional historian, drawing upon the method of oral history. The stories family members tell about their past are a valuable source of information in a family's history. A collection of taped interviews is a rich inheritance.⁵

If Somalis living in Somalia fail to collect their family histories then perhaps Somalis residing in the United States can begin to set an example? Short of that would be a cooperative effort between American based historians, curators or researchers and the Somali community of America. Certainly their personal histories will be pertinent to future scholarship on Somalia.

The task of reconstructing a person's lineage traditionally done by genealogists can be carried out through taped interviews. Oral history, has emerged in recent years as a useful method of historical research.

Africans must stop believing that the present is not temporary. The past is still strongly with us even if we do nothing to preserve its records. Africans must keep accounts, record births, marriages and death, protect contracts, and keep photo albums.⁶ Visual information adds validity to oral documentation. Historians have only scratched the surface of the enormous potential of vernacular photographs found in family albums. Photographs are vital to visual historical interpretation. Many of us take for granted the piles of snapshots in our desk drawers or sandwiched between old letters in a box under the bed. These photographs and letters must be salvaged and put to use by the collector and the researcher. Ali Mazrui cites three reasons for the weakness of the African archival tradition. (1) Because most indigenous African cultures have basically refused to regard the past as a bygone or the present as transient. The ancestors are still with us in Africa, and we ourselves are would-be ancestors; (2) The weakness of the calendar and clock tradition (excluding ancient Egypt) and (3) the weakness of the written word except in Ethiopia and parts of North Africa (Muslim Africa has been better endowed with written records in Arabic).⁷ Even though the oral tradition has been the course of preservation of Somali

culture, Islam is rich in written documents, and this tradition must be carried on in Somalia, especially since Somalia chose its alphabet only in the 1970s.

The mission of identifying, acquiring, preserving and making available Somali culture and history is a major task. Problems do arise in the collecting process and more especially for the interviewer in the taping sessions. The mood the interviewer creates during the interview itself and the creativity of questions can effect significantly the candor of the interviewee's recollections. It is important for the interviewer to do background research and interview several family members about family history in order to judge the veracity of any single account. But what is most important is to accept all interviewees' interpretation of their lives as their interpretation.⁸ Language plays a significant role in the interviewing process. If the interviewer and the interviewee speak the same first language, there will be less misinterpretation. When the Somali language is translated into English it diminishes the original context. Careful translation is a crucial skill. This should not negate a non-Somali interviewing a Somali, but rather calls attention to the need for joint projects.

Somali is not well known to the American public; therefore, work remains to be done by those who see a need to include Somalia in the existing school curriculum. If you ask the average or even the above-average student where Somalia is located they do not know; furthermore, the only time they hear about East Africa is in reference to the refugee camps and famine of Ethiopia or travel ads for safaris in Kenya.

Somalia is rich in music, folktales, proverbs, dress, dance, language, food, and religion, to name a few. Best of all it is one of the most monolithic cultures in Africa, making it a lot easier to approach for research. Somalia deserves a place in American and Somali museums, archives, textbooks, and classrooms. However, this will never be a reality without a concerted effort to collect and preserve the culture today. The traveling exhibition, "Somali in Word and Image" was an inspiring project that sets the stage for more exhibitions in the future. The question remains: who will maintain the cultural continuity of Somalia and preserve its legacy for generations to come? "Identity without self-awareness is a contradiction in terms; and self-awareness requires the foundations of a strong archival tradition."⁹

1. Thomas J. Schlereth, Artifacts and the American Past (Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1980), p. 220.

2. Foundation for Cross Cultural Understanding, Somalia in Word and Image (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.27.

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3. Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker, African Art in the Cycle of Life (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), p. 13.
 4. For more information on museum projects in Somalia see Kathryn McMahon, The Hargeisa Provincial Museum, (African Arts, May 1988), Volume XXI, No. 3 UCLA.
 5. Linda Shopes, Using Oral History for a Family History Project (Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, Technical Leaflet 123, 1980), p.1
 6. Ali A. Mazrui, The Africans: A Triple Heritage, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), p. 77.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Linda Shopes, Using Oral History for A Family History Project, (Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local history, Technical Leaflet 123, 1980), p.6, 7.
 9. Mazrui, Ibid., p. 78.