

# *Somali Refugees in London: Oral Culture in a Western Information Environment*

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Political upheaval and civil war led to hundreds of thousands of Somalis fleeing their country in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some made their way to the United Kingdom. This paper gives an overview of the experiences of these people from an oral culture in a Western information environment. Twenty-five Somalis were interviewed in London. The rationale for their selection is discussed. The research found that Somalis communicate by telephone extensively. Adults who can receive it via satellite dish listen to the BBC Somali Service – broadcast to the Horn of Africa – in London. Young Somalis face problems due to their prior lack of

schooling in the rural parts of Somalia and in the refugee camps, and because English is their third or fourth language. Word of mouth is the main way of finding out about study opportunities and jobs. Community associations help single parents with little English. Somali language publications are few. Use of the Internet is common among Somali professionals and university students. Research conducted over a number of years would be of value in assessing adaptation to a new information environment. Research on the information needs and interests of children born to Somali parents in the UK would also be of value.

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## *Introduction*

The world may well be a global village in the media sense, but on the ground the borders of the village are far more rigorously policed than was the case fifty or a hundred years ago. It is hard for refugees to move from one country to another and adjusting successfully to a new environment may be harder still. War has displaced Liberians and Sierra Leoneans in West Africa, Rwandans in the Great Lakes region, and Somalis in the Horn of Africa. Where people go depends on their background, their culture, their contacts, the resources at their disposal, and the options that are open to them, which include the asylum and immigration policies of possible host countries. Many take refuge in neighbouring countries. Some refugees go to the former colonial ruler: some Rwandans went to Belgium, while others went to France, which takes an active interest in the Francophone countries of Africa (Gourevitch 1998). Substantial numbers of Somalis managed to come to the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Somalis speak the same language and share the same religion, thereby ruling out what causes conflict in many other parts of the world. But the state that came into being when the British Somaliland Protectorate joined Italian Somalia to form the Somali Republic in 1960 collapsed within thirty years. One reason for this was the increasingly despotic behaviour of Mohamed Siyad Barre, the president who had seized power in a military coup in 1969. Other reasons include aspects of traditional culture and their transposition from local to national level: the clan system, the concept of group rather than individual culpability, and lineage segmentation, under which individuals, families and clans act in harmony or in opposition to each other according to changing circumstances (Samatar 1991).

Territorial boundaries in Africa often split people up rather than encompassing them. The Somali Republic did not include the people of what was then French Somaliland (now Djibouti) or the Somalis of northeast Kenya and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Siyad Barre went to war with Ethiopia over the Ogaden in 1977. He lost, and

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several hundred thousand Somali refugees left Ethiopia for Somalia (Kibreab 1993). In 1988, as the situation in Somalia deteriorated, Siyad Barre's forces attacked the city of Hargeisa in the north-west of the country. Several hundred thousand Somalis fled to Ethiopia (United Nations 1996). A number of these and others eventually made their way outside Africa, some to the United Kingdom.

Somali men had served on British merchant ships since the nineteenth century. They established small communities in ports such as Cardiff, Liverpool and London's East End. More recent arrivals have been fleeing unrest at home. By the late 1980s many single mothers with school-age children were coming (El-Solh 1991). Today there are fewer immigrants, partly because stability has been restored in northwest Somalia (the former British Somaliland, which broke away as the Republic of Somaliland in 1991), partly because the criteria for immigration into the UK have been tightened. The exact size of the community in the UK is not known, and there are different estimates. One recent estimate is 60,000 (Kahin 1997). Official data on the size and distribution of refugee groups in the country is not publicly available (Robinson 1998), but it is believed that the majority of Somalis live in the Greater London area.

There are a number of reports on the community in London boroughs and other parts of the UK. These were commissioned under local authority and other auspices, and include *Somali community in Tower Hamlets* (CSC 1998); *Feeling exclusion? A survey of the Somali community in Lewisham* (II Ahmed 1998); *Islington Somali community survey report* (1994); *The Somali community in Cardiff* (1994); *Educational and training needs of the Somali community in South Glamorgan* (EA Ahmed no date); and *A survey of the educational backgrounds and needs of Somali families in Bristol* (1995). But the relative paucity of information about the community becomes clear when one consults the subject index of the fourth national survey of ethnic minorities (Modood et al. 1997). *Bangladeshi women* and *Bangladeshis* account for three columns of the survey, while under *Somalis* there is just one reference.

Particular attention is paid to the needs of younger members of the community in this project. Most will spend the rest of their lives in the UK. Older Somalis may well do so also – includ-

ing those who believe their stay here to be temporary, or wish it to be so – but are more likely to be preoccupied with lives left behind and with what is happening to family and friends back home. They also find it harder to adapt. A nurse practising in East London found that elderly Somali women were particularly prone to non-specific physical complaints. In Somalia they would be the focus of the family, to whom others would come for advice. As refugees in a foreign culture they no longer have status (Wiggs 1994). Life is not easy for younger refugees either, but at least they have better opportunities and prospects. As one interviewee put it, "the younger generations are more integrated, they ... belong here [more] ... But the older ones, we belong to the other side .... It's painful to be here".

### *Research methods*

A survey was carried out, although those surveyed were not selected scientifically. The rationale was that the depth and quality of the data collected would compensate for the limitations of the selection (Mcharazo and Olden 1999). A precedent is the large-scale countrywide survey (Carey-Wood et al. 1995) of how asylum-seekers to the UK had fared in terms of settling into the community. It found it impossible to identify an adequate sampling frame. For reasons of confidentiality, direct access to the records of the Immigration and Nationality Division of the Home Office was not possible. Although the Home Office was willing to assist, Carey-Wood and her colleagues felt that the addresses in files might not be up-to-date and that "official" involvement might alarm potential respondents. Most refugees leave their country of origin because of trouble from the authorities. Most go through anxious periods awaiting decisions on their immigration status from the authorities in their host country. A letter in the mail, a telephone call, or a knock on the door from a researcher saying that he or she had been told about them by a government department would not be likely to evoke the most positive response.

The Carey-Wood survey distributed leaflets to community groups, each leaflet containing a form that could be returned by anyone willing to be interviewed. To identify appropriate community groups in London this Somali project used the

Refugee Council's directory *Refugee resources in the UK*. It gives contact names as well as providing addresses and telephone numbers. Sixteen Somali associations were written to, and a contact telephone number provided to enable the recipient to respond without the bother of writing a letter. But there was little response, and the letters were followed up by telephone calls to speed matters up. It was then that one point about refugee associations became obvious: most operate on a shoestring. They have very little money (sources include local councils, the London Boroughs Grants Unit and the Home Office), and in the main most of those who work for them do so on a voluntary basis. As a result, personnel changes, premises change and telephone numbers change – or telephones get disconnected when money is not available to pay the bill. Research on Kurdish associations in London found that new ones were continually being started while the old ones were disappearing (Wahlbeck 1998). But some contacts were established, and these contacts led to others. This is the snowball effect, which has also been used in other surveys of the Somali community (El-Solh 1991 and 1993, Griffiths 1997). Other contacts were suggested by some of the researcher's students, in particular by the Somali undergraduate who arranged and assisted with the pilot interviews.

Ethnographic methods are often used to investigate oral cultures (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), and the interview was the main tool that gathered data for this research. The pilot interviews were opportunities to try out different approaches, and resulted in the original list of questions being whittled down to the following list of issues for discussion:

- Your personal background
- The issues and problems of most concern to younger members of the community
- Your feelings about Somalis and education in the UK
- How Somalis find information about study opportunities
- How Somalis find information about other matters (for example jobs)
- Additional information that would be helpful
- Any other points/advice?

The rationale for starting on a personal level was that most interviewees would find it easier

to start talking about themselves and their background. The aim in ethnographic interviewing is to facilitate a conversation, giving the interviewee plenty of leeway (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). "Ask them about their job, their work and best of all the problems they experience when doing it" is one recommendation (Nicholas 1997, 346). "The golden rule is not to box people in with a rigid set of questions, but to be flexible within an overall plan" is another (Slim and Thompson [1994?], 76). A further point is that to start off by asking people what information they need may bring the puzzled response that they do not need any, as a study of rural dwellers in Southern Africa discovered. It was only when the researcher went on to ask about their farms or their businesses that they mentioned items of information that would be an asset to them (Mchombu 1995).

Following on the pilot phase twenty-five Somalis were interviewed in the interviewee's workplace, place of study, or home. The locations were the London boroughs of Camden, Croydon, Ealing, Greenwich, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Islington and Tower Hamlets. Although originally concentrated in the East End, Somalis can now be found in all parts of Greater London. One interviewee said that in spite of the civil war and other difficulties at home, Somalis liked to settle where other Somalis were. Availability of local authority housing and quality of education are other factors, as is the absence of problems such as racism: one person mentioned moving from a part of London where she had been spat upon several times.

Seven of the twenty-five interviewees were women. It proved more difficult to find women, but the first female interviewees helped by suggesting contacts and by telephoning them in advance, which meant that the researcher did not have to write or "cold-call". One male interviewee expressed initial reservations. He suggested that the reason for the poor response to this researcher's letters to community associations was the previous experience of Somalis with projects that never brought results. In his opinion many research projects were of more importance to the researchers than to those under research. The researcher acknowledged that there was some truth in this but pointed out that he had given advice to a number of interviewees who had questions

about education. He had also accepted an invitation from another interviewee to join SOMAID, a new charity working towards establishing a university in Hargeisa.

Most interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Exceptions to this included two teachers who shared an office and were interviewed jointly. Their dialogue added an additional dimension. Interviews were in English, and their length depended on how much the interviewee had to say and the time at his or her disposal. They ranged from ten minutes to well over an hour. They were taped with the interviewee's permission and the tapes were later transcribed. Points of interest made before or after the taping were written down. After the tape recorder had been switched off one interviewee thought for a moment and then summed up the situation of many in her community as follows: "Our problem is poverty".

### *Personal background of the interviewees*

Many of the interviewees were teachers or social workers. Others were journalists. There was also a translator, a police interpreter and a minicab driver. Some were graduates of the Somali National University. A few had master's degrees from British, Canadian or American universities. Others had studied in the Netherlands and India. One held a doctorate from the United States; another was registered for one in the UK. Some had held senior positions before changed circumstances had brought them to the UK. One had spent twelve years in the Somali diplomatic service, serving in the Soviet Union, the United States and the German Democratic Republic. Another had worked for the World Bank for a period. A third had worked for the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences, managing a group of thirty scholars compiling a dictionary of the Somali language.

The youngest interviewees were students in further education colleges. These had arrived as children or teenagers. One eighteen-year-old explained how he had arrived at the age of sixteen with his seven brothers and sisters and their mother. None spoke English. They came after a period in a refugee camp in Kenya, and the father managed to join them later. A twenty-five-year-old final-year engineering undergraduate told how government forces had killed his father and

uncle as the family fled from Hargeisa in 1988. After two years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia he managed to leave for Europe.

Not all the interviewees had come to the UK as refugees. For example, the BBC Somali Service had recruited two as radio journalists, one as far back as the 1970s. The interviewee who had most recently arrived had been here just a year, managing to join his wife and children who had arrived several years earlier. Since arriving his application for refugee status had been lost by his solicitor:

So I became very devastated, and then they tried to help me out and I re-applied again and now I'm waiting to hear from the Home Office and I try to keep myself busy. I don't get even any support, I don't have the status, I can't go to work, I can't go for further studies. So I work for the community as a volunteer, that's my background.

### *An oral society*

Until recent times most of Africa was very largely an oral society (Sturges and Neill 1998), and news by word of mouth still has an enormous significance for refugees. In 1992 there were over a million Mozambican refugees in Malawi and up to another million spread between Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland and South Africa. They developed their own information systems, getting news from cross-border traders for example. Personal contacts were considered trustworthier than institutional sources such as the opposing political parties back home (Koser 1997).

The Somali situation is further complicated by the fact that the language was only written down in the early 1970s. Burton, a British traveller in Somaliland in the 1850s, thought it strange that a language "which has no written character should so abound in poetry and eloquence":

There are thousands of songs, some local, others general, upon all conceivable subjects, such as camel loading, drawing water, and elephant hunting; every man of education knows a variety of them ... The country teems with poets ... Every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines (Burton 1987 [1856], 1: 81-82).

Referring to traditional nomadic life, one interviewee explained that when "people talk to each other, it's in poetry, if they fight, it's through poetry, poetry is very, very important in the life of the Somali". Burton noted that children learned by

conversation, not books, and that Somalis picked up both Western and Eastern languages by ear and memory.

Historically Somalis had used the Arabic language for correspondence. During the colonial era English was introduced to the north and Italian to the south. In 1972 the government decided to adopt the Roman script for the language (Kahin 1997). According to the interviewee who had worked on the Somali dictionary project, one reason for this was financial: typewriters in government offices would not need to be replaced. This led to certain problems:

I can read English very fluently, I can read Somali very fluently, but though Somali is my first language I can read English better than Somali. Every person who is reading Somali sometimes has got some hiccups ... and that indicates that the Latin script is not the proper script for the language.

Another interviewee explained that word-of-mouth is the most successful way to communicate with Somalis: if you want people to pay attention to leaflets containing useful information, you need to hand these out to them in person, not distribute them through the mail. Much information is exchanged in social contact over the chewing of *Khat* (*qat*), the leaves of *Catha edulis*, a shrub grown in parts of East Africa and Yemen (Bali 1997). It is a narcotic stimulant, illegal in some countries but not in the UK. Fresh leaves are imported on a regular basis, and there are *Khat* houses in various parts of London. *Khat* chewing is a form of relaxation mainly indulged in by men. One interviewee stated that visiting a *Khat* house and telling the men there about your plans or the project that you have in mind is a much better way of disseminating information than putting up posters. Somali language newspapers are on sale, but the patrons of the *Khat* house prefer to listen – “Read for us please what’s in there” – than to buy and read for themselves.

When receiving travel directions over the telephone before appointments the researcher noticed that not once did anyone suggest looking at the widely available street guide, the London A to Z. Obviously such printed sources are rarely consulted. An interviewee pointed out that, when necessary and possible, one Somali takes another to a destination in person:

What the Somalis are good at is – if someone comes to the office and he himself has an errand and when that’s finished he sees a Somali there who can’t speak English well and if you ask him, “Please, can you take this lady to the DSS [Department of Social Security]? ... Can you show her that place?” ... There’s no problem, they just go along and help. Even if it’s someone she meets in the street – just meets in the street and says, “Please can you help me? I need that place” – no problem there.

Another interviewee remembered how, as a child in Somalia, a walk down a street with her grandmother could take a long time because of all the stopping to ask neighbours and friends how they were and to exchange news. Too much talk now makes her impatient, because she sees it as a hindrance in the modern world, but in a pastoral society it was different: “If two strangers meet ... in the middle of nowhere they would stop and talk and ask each other what is happening, and that was the way of exchanging information”. “Is it peace?”, traditionally called out when approaching someone, has been described as, literally, a request for information (Lewis 1993).

### *Oral culture and modern telecommunications*

The Somali have adopted modern telecommunications with enthusiasm. There may be no postal communication between Somalia and the outside world, but the telephone provides an instant link. Barakaat, a company based in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, had 5,700 mobile telephone customers in early 1999 (Hannan 1999). Such Somalis are an elite, but privately run centres are available for the public in the major centres of population and in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. Many Somalis in London have mobile telephones, and telephone centres have been springing up here also.

One can telephone the camps from Europe. The local operator will arrange for the person one wants to contact to be present to take the call at a certain time on the following day. There is a charge for this service, but it works well. No address is necessary, just the person’s name (made up of first name, father’s name and grandfather’s name) and clan details. Somali clans have sub-clans, and these sub-clans have sub-clans again. These details perform the same function as a street address in the West. If necessary someone well known from the same clan background will

be contacted to assist. Several interviewees attested to the success of these arrangements for tracking people down.

Money is transferred without reference to banks. One hands over Western currency to an agency here, a fax is sent to the office there, and the money is passed to the recipient. There is a charge for the service (5% was the figure mentioned), but the money gets into the hands of the recipient very fast, "faster than the Western Union, faster than the banks, faster than the world's fastest money transfer". "People can live without governments", one interviewee remarked of Somaliland:

There's no bank, there's no post, there's no social services, there's nothing working and everything's booming again! The business is booming, they're dealing with different countries, and there's money – wire transfers – by fax, by fax – because the telephone's working and the fax is working.

One drawback is the pressure that telephone calls for assistance can place on Somalis overseas. Extended families are the norm in Africa, and it is difficult to turn down a request for help. In a life or death situation it is impossible. A former teacher now working with a voluntary agency explained why a student might fail to succeed:

He is on a full-time course and then he gets a call one evening – his mother or his brother or his sister – "I'm desperately needing money, we haven't eaten for three days" ... And then the boy ... gets confused and says "What can I do? I can't stay here, I have to be looking for work". And then he leaves the college, tries to look for a job for three or four months, probably can't get any ... and then his study has gone. He keeps on being in that cycle for many, many years.

### *The BBC Somali Service*

The BBC was mentioned by many interviewees as the most important source of unbiased information for Somalis in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere. By way of contrast, in the build-up to the Rwandan massacres of 1994 Radio Rwanda spread misinformation and Radio Television Libres des Mille Collines spread propaganda, encouraging its Hutu listeners to kill their Tutsi compatriots (Gourevitch 1998).

BBC Broadcasts in Somali started in 1957, around the same time as broadcasts in Kiswahili and Hausa. Backing came from the Colonial

Office and later the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. There are short broadcasts three times a day, totalling ten hours a week. The emphasis is on news and current affairs, but there is also a "missing persons" slot co-funded by the British Red Cross, Oxfam and Concern (*Forty years of the Somali Service* 1997).

An attempt by the BBC to conduct audience research based on random sampling in a rural part of Somalia was unsuccessful. The researchers were mistaken for aid personnel and asked to help with water supplies (Kennedy 1997). But there is no doubt about the overwhelming popularity of the service in the Horn of Africa. The flagship transmission is at 1530 Greenwich Mean Time, and interviewees pointed out that all Somalis who possess transistor radios listen. Others will congregate around a radio in a teashop or elsewhere. On contacting the BBC Somali Service in London for more details, the researcher was told by one of its staff that "a man will tolerate no interruption from his wife or his children when listening to a broadcast". For him Somalis are the most information-oriented people in the world. Burton made a similar point in the nineteenth century:

The Somal Badawin have a passion for knowing how the world wags ... . No traveller ever passes a kraal without planting spear in the ground, and demanding answers to a lengthened string of queries ... Thus it is that news flies through the country. Among the wild Gudabirsi the Russian war was a topic of interest, and at Harar I heard of a violent storm which had damaged the shipping in Bombay Harbour, but a few weeks after the event (Burton 1987 [1856] 1:131)

The broadcaster believes that 99% of Somali women in the UK listen to the service, but another interviewee maintained that men listen more than women, because women are less political and because household chores prevent them from spending as much time listening to the radio. Although directed at the Horn of Africa, broadcasts can now be picked up via satellite dish in Europe. Someone else said that people take basic jobs such as cleaning in order to buy the dish. At one time men listened to the broadcasts in *khat* houses, but now many homes have the connection. Another interviewee – a former radio journalist herself – felt that listening to Somali political news could have a negative effect. Yet another pointed out that in the UK only

the adults listen. Her children say “Oh mum, you’re getting Somali news hour”. Then they turn their attention to other things.

### *Education and literacy*

#### *Background before arrival in the UK*

Literacy has been described as the most important single innovation of foreign rule for the non-Muslim parts of Africa (Afigbo 1985). But for some Muslim and non-Muslim Africans Western education was suspect in the early days of colonialism. When the French established a school for the sons of chiefs the Tuareg of the Sahara handed over the children of their slaves instead. They feared that if their own sons were taken they might never see them again (Shortland 1999). One Somali interviewee mentioned the fear that the colonial authorities would turn their children into Christians. Her father and a friend countered this when they founded the first elementary school in the British Somaliland Protectorate in the 1920s. For Somali nomads, however, a knowledge of the traditional skills necessary for survival obviously came first, together with *Qur’anic* education.

The adoption of the Roman script for the Somali language in 1972 was followed by a literacy campaign. After progress had been made in urban areas the government turned its attention to the rest of the country. The slogan was: “If you know, teach. If you don’t, learn” (Kahin 1997). Schools were closed, and older children and their teachers were sent to the rural areas to teach. The country’s literacy statistics showed much improvement, and Unesco and other organisations were appreciative. But the advances in literacy outside the urban areas were not sustained: “It was deceit! How could it be good? Taught by children for one year only! ... We got awards, but it was chaos, it was crazy.” Another interviewee pointed out that the idea was a good one, but what was lacking was a strategy to sustain the development.

The women interviewed in this research were either highly educated already or in the process of advancing their level of education. But they and the male interviewees pointed out that this does not hold for many of the Somali women in this country, or for many men either. According

to estimates from the early 1990s, 96 per cent of women in Somalia cannot read. Early marriage is the norm for settled rural women (nomadic women marry later), usually between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. Children follow, making moving elsewhere for further education unlikely (Women in Somalia 1994). There are numerous single-parent Somali families in the UK, and in most cases the single parent is the mother. If she lacks education she is unable to give the children the support they need at home. One interviewee said that children sometimes arrive in the UK with relatives who have no schooling at all, and are thus unable to advise them. Another summed up the problem as follows: “Most of the fathers, the mums, the women are not educated. They cannot help them with their homework, with the system, with the school. They don’t even understand, they can’t read their work.” A third pointed out that when a child fails to attend school and the school writes to the parents, the parents may be unable to read the letter so that they do not know whether their child goes to school or not.

Somali children come from a wide range of educational backgrounds. In some cases the father will have worked in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States, and the children will have attended school there. These will have written and spoken Arabic, but not necessarily written Somali. Children coming direct from Somalia or from refugee camps in the neighbouring countries will have little education. This is due to the disruption caused by war and the limitations of life in rural areas and in refugee camps. One interviewee stated that a child coming to the UK from a rural area is unlikely ever to have been to school in his life. Another said that people were “just running around the camp all day long either looking for the dry food or looking for the water and all that. Kids are playing – there’s no proper education there.” A third comment was that people saw that education was not always necessary to get ahead in life. Some had amassed money and done well without going to school, and others thought “OK, maybe corruption and stealing was the better way”.

#### *Experience in the UK*

One interviewee said he realised that “this country if you stay no way you can live without informa-

tion". But there are obstacles, in particular language. English is not a first or a second language but a third or even a fourth after Somali, Arabic and in some instances Italian. Children are slotted into classes on the basis of their age, and this can cause serious problems for those with little English and little experience of attending school:

Some child from a rural area, who knows only how to look after livestock – ruminants, small livestock – doesn't know anything else and you put him in school, what do you expect of that?

[When] a child of that age [fifteen] is taken to the class which suits his age he finds it difficult to adjust because he was either illiterate or unable to speak English ... and when he's asked a question the children laugh at him and therefore he becomes violent or disorderly in his behaviour and soon he's excluded from school. So we find that many young people are facing this problem – exclusion from schools, or they start being truant.

A study of immigrants from Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union attending an Israeli high school showed the majority felt that other pupils laughed at them. Most of their friendships were with their fellow immigrants. But there the similarities end, because their average educational level was high relative to that of the rest of the Israeli population. Also school-age immigrants to Israel receive intense grounding in Hebrew for a number of months before being slotted into classes according to their age and level (Shainer 1998). Section 11 of the UK Local Government Act 1966 made available grants to local authorities to provide services to immigrants from Commonwealth countries whose language or customs differed from those of the community. Most of the money was devoted to education, but libraries were supported also. In 1993 the scope of Section 11 was widened to benefit refugee students from non-Commonwealth countries (Jones and Rutter 1998). Money is spent on assistance with English and on the employment of refugee support teachers. The importance of both is obvious: as one interviewee said, "all the people in that younger age they trying to learn and educate themselves but the very difficult hurdle for them is the language barrier". Support teachers can be liaisons between school and home. They also serve as role models, professionals drawn from their own community to whom young Somalis can look up. But the feeling in the community is

that not enough language help and support teachers are provided.

Educational methods in Africa are traditional, and different approaches such as group work in class may puzzle some students. They believe the teacher's job is to instruct them (Suleiman 1991). Library development in Somalia was virtually non-existent outside the capital (Abdulla 1996 and 1998), which means that experience of working with learning resources is very limited. One interviewee said that children never use the library because they are not trained to make use of the resources: "they're from a system where they're spoon-fed". A former teacher explained why worksheets handed out to children are not always taken seriously. Somalis are used to learning from the *Qu'ran*,

the Holy Book, and they treat that with respect. And once you give them a book which contains all the information ... including the exercises and the drilling and everything that you want them to learn then it becomes easier for them and that's something that they take away with them and bring it with them ... on day to day basis.

Mathematics was mentioned as a strength by one interviewee, who said that it was better taught in Somalia than in the UK. Reservations about the level of mathematics teaching can be found in the literature (McDonald 1998).

### *Finding out about further and higher education*

The large-scale countrywide survey of refugees by Carey-Wood and others includes the following quotation from a Kurdish man:

English was my problem, trying to study language, and to find out the best place to study – college or language centre. It was very difficult in the beginning with me. It would have been better if someone advised me the best place to study language ... . After one year I found the best place... . I couldn't get good information (Carey-Wood and others 1995, 27).

Information about further and higher education is obtained by visiting colleges, but one interviewee complained that "if I go to colleges I don't find people whom I can understand". Other sources of information are local newspapers, leaflets, prospectuses, careers advisors, and – more than anything else – other Somalis. In the words of one interviewee "Somalis are basically copy-



cats and they talk quite a lot and the word gets around very quickly". If someone is succeeding on a particular programme of study, others will follow suit. One Somali community centre organised a gathering of around a hundred young men and women, and got Somali university students and graduates earning good salaries to talk to them and tell them about their experiences.

An engineer who has since switched to social work explained that he found out about degree programmes in engineering through going through as many brochures as possible. Already qualified and experienced when he arrived in the UK as a refugee, he found an institution that admitted him with advanced standing, so that he was able to get a British qualification in less than the standard time. An engineering undergraduate mentioned that he obtained a lot of information through searching the Internet. His friends contact him to search out appropriate programmes of study for them. But a social worker pointed out that those who drop out of school do not know where to go for advice or information.

The Africa Education Trust and the Refugee Education Training and Advisory Service of the World University Service (UK) were mentioned by one interviewee. Both are based in London. The former has been providing free educational advice since 1958. The latter assists in helping professionally qualified refugees to practice their professions in the UK. Another interviewee teaches Information Technology at the Refugee Training and Employment Centre, which is part of the Refugee Council, an organisation that looks after the interests of refugees and provides a range of services for them at the start of their stay in the UK. The Centre runs free training courses.

### *Cultural changes*

Children exchange information with each other, and one thing they quickly learn from classmates and friends is that there are limits to the amount of chastisement that parents can inflict in the UK. One eighteen-year-old said that when he and his family arrived "a lot of children said your father can't shout at you ... and if your father shouts at you, you could go away to Council to complain and then your father will get locked up". Another interviewee recalled that the police had asked him for his opinion about an instance in

which a recently arrived father was taken in for questioning after beating his son. The man was puzzled, saying "this is my child, and I need to give him anything that would make him a proper child, and what is the fuss all about?" He was let go with a caution. Someone else said that "every Somali parent is now trying to concentrate to make sure that his child is brought up in a proper way so that he can lead a better life". But the proper way must not infringe the laws of the host country. Female circumcision (female genital mutilation), prohibited in the UK, is a health issue discussed in the literature (El-Sohl 1993, Rutter 1994, Kahin 1997). A topic of such sensitivity is unlikely to be raised in a single interview with someone from outside the community, especially when the researcher is male.

Women may find that they now control the family finances because social welfare payments and so on will be channelled through them. This alters the relationship between them and their partners, particularly if the man is out of work. But other relationships are altered also. One interviewee referred to the old days when boys got the Islamic education and travelled in search of knowledge. Girls on the other hand "were just told they were here on this earth to get married and have children and then perish." This has long gone, but women with little English will find themselves dependent on their children for routine things such as consulting a doctor. The child has to leave school to accompany its mother and interpret. At least one London clinic, however, employs a Somali interpreter (Wiggs 1994). This problem is by no means confined to the Somali community. A survey of 1000 non-white patients attending Bradford hospitals revealed that 58.8 per cent were illiterate with regard to their first or any language. The hospitals' solution is to employ interpreters and produce audio and videotapes in appropriate languages (Tufnell et al. 1994).

Pressures that all teenagers face are exacerbated by conflicting cultures. At school someone may ask a girl "Do you have a boyfriend? ... What's wrong with you? You're not normal!" At home the mother will say: "What are you doing? You're putting on lipstick! Are you going crazy! You're not religious any more." Boys may find themselves under pressure to join gangs and get involved in drugs.

## *Employment*

In most countries, immigrants, if they manage to find employment, tend to get the jobs that others do not want. Unemployment levels are very high among Somali men in London, and those who are employed may find themselves working as casual labourers, night watchmen or minicab drivers. This is particularly painful for those with good qualifications. One interviewee mentioned people with Ph.D.s who worked in warehouses. They knew Somali, Arabic and Italian but their limited knowledge of English blocked their path. Another explained that, although he had a British qualification in engineering, his accent might have posed a problem if he had technicians who spoke English colloquially working under him. He turned to social work instead. Someone else said that "it's not easy to get jobs in this country ... whether you have ten Ph.D.s or not, it's not easy for refugees." She mentioned Somali medical doctors who were out of work, and how useful they could be at interpreting for patients who lacked English if only provision could be made for this. A study of Latin American women working illegally in Brussels said they often remarked that they "came there to get a Ph.D. in cleaning" (Leman 1997).

Information about employment is obtained from the Department for Education and Employment's Job Centres. But an interviewee pointed out that language barriers and the strangeness of the British system – "this is not the way we work back home" – limits access to such mainstream services. Somali community associations provide some information about jobs, and he believed it would be useful if they had career advisors. As usual, much information is communicated orally:

Normally when one Somali gets a job ... a friend will come to him and ask him, "Oh, is there a vacancy there? OK, I'm going to talk to the manager, and I'll ask him when there will be a vacancy." That's how they get there. So you find a lot of Somalis working in one place and no Somalis working in the other place.

Not recognising qualifications from elsewhere, or not making special provision to enable those who hold them to acquire equivalent local qualifications in the shortest time possible, is a waste of resources for the host country as well as a frustration for the immigrant (Stalker 1994). As-

sistance in preparing for employment goes some way towards ameliorating this. For example, Refugee Employment Advice in the London Borough of Hounslow and Ealing Tertiary College in the London Borough of Ealing provide advice on job applications, interview techniques and so on.

## *Community advice*

A study of the information needs of refugee groups found little evidence that statutory services in the UK felt this area important enough to involve specialist staff or services (Raddon and Smith 1998). Research into public libraries, ethnic diversity and citizenship concluded that the main information provider for many people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds is the community organisation or the religious group, not the library (Roach and Morrison 1998). There are Somali community associations in many parts of London. Staffing is mainly on a voluntary basis. One interviewee said she was a single parent with four children, some of them teenagers, so she had problems of her own. But as she was educated and spoke English she felt it was important to spend time helping women who had neither of these advantages. Some of the women who came to her could not read the letters they received from the local authority or deal with their gas or telephone bills. Another interviewee said that his and similar associations were in between the service providers and the community. They provide a service for those with limited English in particular. Criticisms of community associations were that some became too involved in administration or caught up in internal struggles.

Advice is provided on a full-time professional basis also. One location is Oxford House, a multi-purpose community centre in Bethnal Green, East London, originally established in 1884 by Oxford University staff and students "to provide a centre for social, educational and religious work amongst the poor of East London". It employs six Somali staff, with others working as volunteers, and is visited by up to one hundred Somalis a day. Its two full-time immigration workers provide free advice and representation for asylum seekers from Somalia and other parts of the Horn of Africa (Oxford House 1999). The backlog of applicants is such that years can elapse between an original application for refugee status and a

final decision by the Home Office. Uncertainty as to what will happen casts a shadow over everything else, and sympathetic and informed professional legal advice is essential. One immigration advisor said that solicitors know the law but not necessarily the background of their clients. This limits their effectiveness. As an example of background knowledge he instanced a short report he had compiled on the Midgan, Yibir and Tumaal clans, a small minority who had faced discrimination in Somalia and would do so again if forced to return.

Mainstream help can be obtained from the Citizens' Advice Bureaux. The immigration advisor described these as good organisations that support people. Another interviewee recalled that when he worked as a volunteer with a Citizens' Advice Bureau in a particular part of London people came from a wide area to consult him:

They believe that if there's no Somali person there then they are not represented... Normally when you're going to somebody at least you will want him to know of your background and where you come from and if somebody just says "Where's Somalia?" it just shows that he knows nothing.

### *Somali language publications and local radio*

Little is published in Somalia itself because of the unsettled situation there. In London there is Haan Books, a small firm that publishes books in Somali and books about Somalia written in English. Occasionally a Somali newspaper or magazine "pops up, but again it disappears". Sales are poor. One interviewee said that there was a lack of trained personnel to produce such material. Another felt that the content of these newspapers was not sufficiently interesting, and went on to add "generally Somalis are not good readers". A third mentioned that his young daughter enjoyed looking at the pictures and being told the story in Somali books, but was not keen on reading the text. Experience shows that young immigrants often lose some of their facility in reading in their mother tongue, while children born to immigrant parents may never learn to read in it in the first place, or at any rate to read well. Mother tongue classes are arranged to try to keep children in touch with their language and culture.

A number of interviewees mentioned the local radio station broadcasting in Somali in Sheffield.

The feeling was that a similar service for the community in London would be appreciated. A radio journalist said that such a service would have to be a professional operation, because "the Somali community in London is highly politicised".

### *Conclusion*

Over the last fifty years the UK has provided a home for both economic migrants and political refugees. Hostility is sometimes expressed, for example in tabloid newspaper headings: "Scroungers now pouring in on the Eurostar train have come from Somalia" (Troup and Bentham 1997). Economic migrants are frowned upon nowadays, although the British who emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in the nineteenth century are praised in retrospect for their initiative (except perhaps by the descendants of the indigenous people whose lands they acquired). Chinese economic migrants to the UK in the 1950s and early 1960s also showed initiative and did well. East African Asians who were thrown out of Uganda and took refuge in the UK in the early 1970s have prospered also. Many minority groups are now better represented than whites in higher education (Modood et al. 1997). But because most of the Somali immigrants have come here relatively recently, and earlier arrivals were few and did not see themselves as being here permanently, they have no representation in government. This is in contrast to the Asian community. Also, as one interviewee pointed out, Somalis are outside the mainstream of society because "they don't socialise with them, they don't go to church, they don't go to parties".

A Western information environment is a new experience for the majority of Somalis. Apart from those attending college they do not make use of libraries: "they are not reading a lot – but they're talking a lot". One drawback to oral communication is that the person passing on information might not be sufficiently well informed and might mislead without intending to do so. One Somali may advise another to go to a particular college to learn English, when another college might be more appropriate. In the words of one interviewee, "what you might call adaptation to the society is controlled by a few facts or non-facts which they get from their relatives or friends – So-

mali friends". Statutory providers of information such as public libraries need to do more to link with the community and find out how to help.

Generalisation has its limitations. One interviewee pointed out that, as a member of the Internet network Somaliland Forum, he receives ten to twenty messages a day. There is always a debate going on. Most Somali professionals and students are likely to have email addresses, and if one groups Somalis according to their educational background and compares them with similar groups from other communities "you will find them just as eager to use written forms of communication".

There is plenty of scope for research. One commentator has stressed the importance of longitudinal studies of refugee settlement (Robinson 1993 and 1998). These would provide a picture of how panels of immigrants adapt to a new society over ten or twenty years. A study of how a panel with an oral culture adapts to a new information environment over a period of time would be of much interest. Research on what the second generation in particular wants and needs was recommended in a review of the literature on black and ethnic minority/multicultural provision by public libraries (Olden et al. 1996). Children born to Somali parents in Britain will grow up in this country with their own information needs and interests. These will require attention.

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