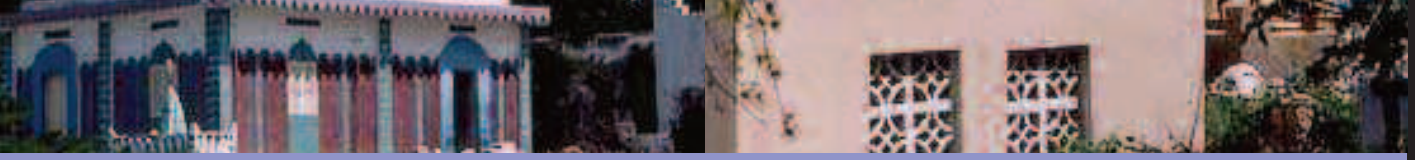

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Somali is one of the Cushitic languages, which form a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. Related languages include Afar and Oromo. Although linguistic descriptions of Somali can be found as early as 1844, it wasn't until 1973 that the government decreed that Somali would be written in the Latin alphabet. Today, Somali is broadcast around the world by the BBC, Radio Moscow, and Radio Cairo, to name a few. Local radio and television stations in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya also broadcast programs in the language.

The Somali language has two distinct regional varieties: *Af Maay* (pronounced "af my") and *Al Maxaa* (pronounced "af mahah"). *Af Maay* is also known as *Maay Maay* and serves as the lingua franca of the country. Both varieties of the language were official until 1973, when *Af Maxaa* became the official written variety. Although in their written forms, *Af Maay* and *Af Maxaa* share a lot of similarities, it's in their spoken forms that there are differences, enough, in fact, that they sometimes can be mutually unintelligible.

The sounds of the Somali alphabet are each represented by specific letters. Although Somali shares many of the same sounds used by English and other Western languages, some of the letters represent sounds unique to Somali. The Somali language is rich in oral tradition, with a spoken literature of proverbs, folk tales, and epic poems about heroes and important events in the country. As with the oral literature of other great nations, these stories have been passed down from generation to generation. Proverbs especially play a very important role in the everyday speech of the Somali people. Some examples are: *aqoon la'aani waa iftiin la'aan* (to be without knowledge is to be without light) and *intaadan falin ka fiirso* (look before you leap). Some common food terms are *soor* (porridge), *subag* (butter), *canjeelo* (bread), and *rooti* (bread rolls). The Somali people love to eat meat, but it must be halaal, that is, prepared by a Muslim. The majority of Somalis who are Muslims belong to the Suni sect.

With the adoption of a writing system, much of the Somali oral literature is now in print and available to students studying the language. Most of the material available to students who are interest in studying Somali is in English. A bibliography of these materials can be accessed at: http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Louvre/2521/edu_mat.html

STUDYING SOMALI IN THE U.S.

Below is a partial list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Somali. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center or visit the NALRA website at: http://lang.nalrc.wisc.edu/nalrc

Cameron University

Michigan State University

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

4231 Humanities Building, 455 N. Park Street
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706
Phone: (608) 265-7905 Fax: (608) 265-7904
Email: nalrc@mhub.facstaff.wisc.edu
Web site: http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc

SOMALI

SOMALI WOMAN

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY SOMALI

The Somali language is spoken by over 20 million people world-wide. In Africa, it is the national language of Somalia and is the second language of large segments of the population in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya. With the recent immigration of Somalis to other continents, the language is now spoken widely in the Middle-East, Western Europe, and North America.

As more and more Somali speakers settle in the United States, there has been a surge of interest in studying the language, not only so people can communicate more easily with their new neighbors, but also so they can learn about the rich Somali culture.

Somali boy with camel.

Knowledge of the Somali language is crucial to anyone in linguistics, anthropology, history, and folklore who wants to study in East Africa. Individuals working for international organizations, such as the Peace Corps, will also find that they can accomplish their day-to-day tasks more easily if they can speak Somali. Tourists, too, will soon discover that knowledge of the Somali language will allow them to communicate with the local residents and enjoy their holiday more.

WHO SPEAKS SOMALI?

Woman with 'heena' on hands.

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Archaeological evidence indicates that the people who live in present day Somalia had occupied the Horn of Africa by 100 A.D.—possibly even earlier. These early nomads showed signs of a highly developed pastoral culture. They were also followers of *Islam.* Their first contact with this religion probably occurred when a group of persecuted Muslims sought refugee in the region at the time of the prophet Muhammad in the eighth century. Eventually, the original inhabitants divided into two distinct groups: the pastoral people who lived in the interior, with informal and varying political structures; and the trading communities of the coast, with administrative and legal systems based on the Muslim *sharia.*

Today, the Somalis *(Samaal)* are divided into six major clan-families. Four of these are still predominantly nomadic—the *Dir, Darood, Isaaq,* and *Hawiye.* Together, these four groups represent 70 percent of Somalia's population. The two remaining clan-families are agricultural, the *Digil* and the *Rahanwayn.* They constitute about 20 percent of the country's population. The rest of Somalia's inhabitants are comprised of urban dwellers and marginal non-Samaal groups. Most of these groups engage in trade or crafts and have historically not played a political role in the country or been a part of the Samaal warrior tradition. Over the centuries, Somalia and the rest of the East African coast have been subject to various rulers, including the Omanis, the Zanzibaris, the Sharifs of Mukha in present-day Yemen, and the Ottoman Turks.

Exhibiting handicrafts at a Somaliland trade fair.

Mosque in Mogadishu.

Somali nomads.