

## “FOR THE SAKE OF LANGUAGE”: NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH SOMALI WOMEN IN LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND

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### 1. Introduction

This paper is based on the life histories, as told to interviewers, of four Somali-speaking women living in Liverpool, England. The interviews took place in the early stages of a broader project which investigates language values and changing patterns of language use, relating these to identity formation in this minority community. The following diagrammatic overview of the project seeks to highlight the focus of the project on trajectories –across time and geographical space– and on the transformations of identities that these entail.

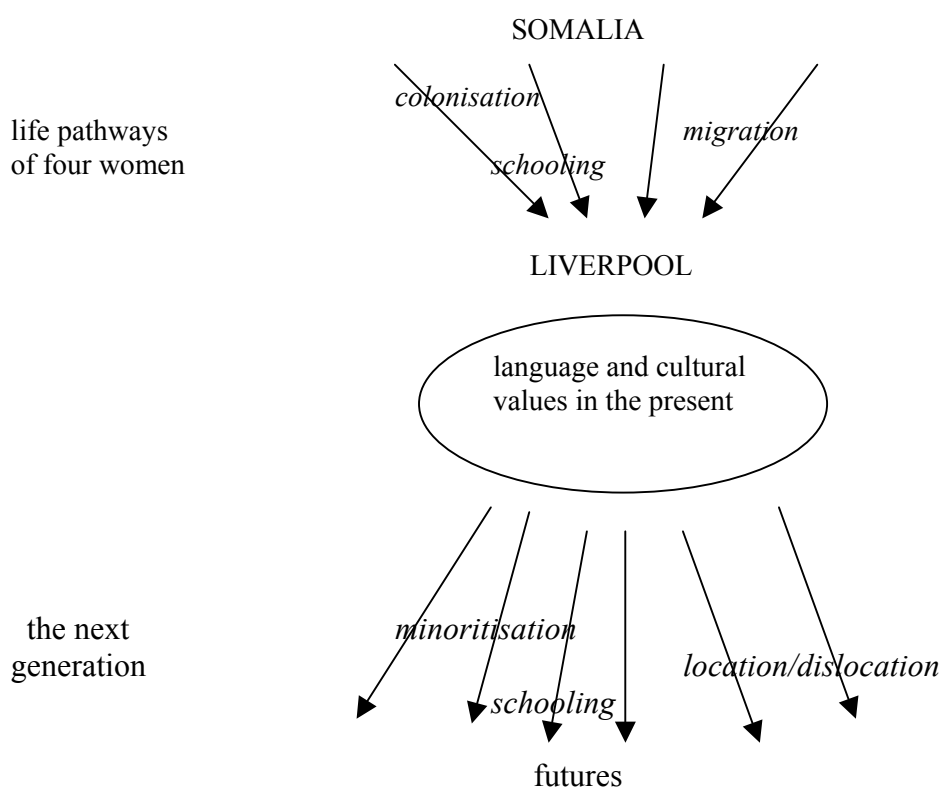


Figure 1. Research project on language and identity among Somali speakers in Liverpool.

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One aim of the interviews was to obtain data which would contribute to the historical contextualisation necessary to an ethnographic research approach. The assumption here is of history not merely as a ‘backdrop’ to contemporary phenomena but acknowledged as having explanatory force (Gal, 1992). Furthermore, the emic perspectives of the interviewees on the history of Somalia and its peoples –their personal experience of the micro-level impact of macro-level events and forces– afford what has been termed a “fissured account” (Opie, 1992, cited in Bowes *et al.*, 1997: 113) in contrast to the broad homogenising sweep of history as national or international narrative. For example, changes in educational language policy –from use of the languages of former colonial powers to use of Somali– feature in the “cultural story” (Richardson, 1990, cited in Miller & Glassner, 1997) of the Somali nation. By relating their personal experience at that period of learning successively through different languages, two of the interviewees offer insights into classroom teaching and learning practices, their own strategies, and consequences for their subsequent careers.

## **2. The interviewees**

All four interviewees were women. When the interviews were first being planned, the names of many men were proposed by both men and women in the community as suitable interviewees on the basis of their education, knowledge or positions as representatives of community organisations. However, one aim of ethnography, it has been said, is that it “makes visible the lives of people whose lives are not normally told” (Erikson, 1999, cited in Gregory & Williams, 2000: 16), and women as interviewees thus seemed appropriate. Moreover, by focusing on women’s experience in this way culturally marginalised and therefore untapped ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992) might be acknowledged and given due value.

The four women interviewed were not selected as ‘representative’, in the sense of embodying characteristics shared across the Liverpool Somali community, or among women in that community, other than the use of Somali as their primary language in the home. However, the clan affiliation which is the traditional basis of Somali social organisation retains importance in the Liverpool context. Somali-speaking research associates therefore advised that the project should be seen to be inclusive of a range of clan backgrounds, and decisions as to who to interview took account of this. However,

as will be further discussed below, the four women's identities are complex in ways that go beyond either a singular conceptualisation of community –or indeed nation– on the one hand, or the plurality of clan affiliations. Both commonality and difference among the women emerge from the stories they told. Moreover, inherent in the migratory experience related by each woman is a concept of identities not as fixed states but “in a constant, reflexive process of ‘becoming’” (Rassool, 2000: 392).

A brief biographical sketch of each of the interviewees now follows. As will be seen, the age range was wide, from Faynuus, the oldest at over 60 years old, to Siraad, in her late twenties. The women's names have been changed to help protect their privacy.

*Faynuus* is probably in her 60s. She came to the UK from north eastern Somalia in the early 1970s to join her husband, a seaman who had settled here. She now lives with her daughter and grandchildren. Like the other interviewees Faynuus is able to read Qur'anic Arabic, but she has had no formal secular schooling. Nor has she experience of paid employment outside the home. Faynuus longs to return to Somalia and to the rural way of life she remembers from her childhood.

*Farxiya* is in her early 40s. Born to Somali economic migrants in Yemen, she returned with the family to Somalia in 1974, just after the introduction there of Somali as the language of instruction in schools. Sent to Liverpool for a university education in the 1980s, she was unable to return to Somalia when the civil war broke out. She married another Somali and now has four children aged between 4 and 12. Farxiya works as a community social worker.

*Amran* is in her 30s. She was born in the city of Brava, where a minority language, Chimini, is spoken. (Amran is the only known speaker of this language in Liverpool, although there are communities of speakers in other parts of Britain). Amran's mother was, however, a Somali speaker, as is her husband. They have three children. Amran is a qualified doctor, who used Somali, Italian and English during her training and who has also used Arabic as a working language of medical practice.

*Siraad* is in her late 20s and grew up in northern Somalia. After her schooling, in which Somali was used, she went on to train as a nurse, which meant adjusting to learning through English. After working in a refugee camp, Siraad join her sisters in London but she left the nursing course she enrolled on there because she was not

allowed to wear Islamic dress. Since moving to Liverpool Siraad has worked as a classroom assistant and an interpreter. She is now pursuing academic studies. She is divorced and has two pre-school children.

### **3. Conducting the interviews**

Following the language preference expressed by each interviewee, three of the four interviews, those with Farxiya, Amran and Siraad, were conducted in English. All of the women interviewed in English have a high degree of understanding and fluency in that language, which they put to use in their daily professional lives. The interviews in English were conducted by a white British woman academic. The fourth interview, with Faynuus, was conducted in Somali, by a Somali-speaking research associate, a woman community worker.

Gender was thus a shared aspect of the identities of both interviewer and interviewee in all cases, and this meant that they had certain life experiences in common. However, the intention was not a ‘matching’ of interviewer and interviewee: transparency and reflexivity on the part of the researchers were more important to both the planning and interpretation of these interviews than a more positivist concern with ‘uncontaminated’ or ‘authentic’ data. This approach acknowledges the interview as a social encounter in which the participants are positioned in various ways. For example, where there is social or cultural distance between interviewer and interviewee this may create the rationale for fuller explanation by the interviewee –from an insider to an outsider– of cultural practices otherwise taken for granted. Equally, however, the degree of disclosure on the part of the interviewee may be inhibited by identity of the interviewer as a member of the socially dominant group. This is especially so where the interviewee is, as in the case of these women, a member of a vulnerable minority social group with a high proportion of asylum seekers.

Holstein & Gubrium (1997: 114) point out that interview data are “unavoidably collaborative”. Acknowledging this as a potential strength, rather than a defect, a semi-structured format was adopted which allowed for some flexibility –a conversational give and take– as the interviews unfolded. The women were invited to tell their life stories with the research interest in language explained from the outset. Even taking into account this explicit focus and interviewer guidance, the salience in the women’s stories

of language –as both a tool and an obstacle– is remarkable. Relating her time as a doctor in Yemen, for example, Amran revealed the role of language in an important life decision when she explained that “for the sake of language I left that job”. Thus there emerged a high degree of congruence between the research assumption of the importance of language in the women’s life histories and the actual stories they told.

This paper now goes on to focus on the language and literacy repertoires of the four women, highlighting both commonality and difference in these. From a perspective of language as a social tool (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) the women’s repertoires are related to their educational opportunities and to the experiences of migration they describe. Then in the following section the women’s views on the symbolic values of their languages and literacies are explored, particularly in regard to the oral tradition which is central to Somali cultural heritage and to its survival –or transformation– in new post-migratory contexts. The final section of the paper considers how insights from these women’s stories relate to broad questions of identity formation in diasporic communities. This discussion gives prominence to the agendas which the women themselves brought to the interviews. These relate to the next generation –their children and grandchildren– and include concerns not only about linguistic and cultural continuity but also about the effects on the children’s developing sense of identity of racial discrimination in the British context.

#### **4. The language and literacy repertoires of the four women**

##### **4.1. Four literate women**

From the brief biographical sketches given above it is clear that all four women interviewed are literate: they have shared experience of learning, early in life, to read the Qur’an and all four are practising moslems for whom Qur’anic literacy practices are part of the daily fabric of life. Faynuus, however, grew up in rural Somalia at a time when westernised schooling was not available. She therefore has not been exposed to the western secular schooled literacy which alone is regarded as legitimate in what Street (1984, 1995) has termed an ‘autonomous’ view of literacy. This view focuses exclusively on those reading and writing practices, and indeed those text types and literary genres which are reproduced within the tradition of western schooling. Furthermore, acquisition of this form of literacy is associated with development of the

intellect and the ability to think rationally (see, for example, Ong, 1982). From this perspective, Faynuus might be said to be literate in the wrong language for the wrong purposes: her literacy is so marginal in British society as to be invisible from a dominant perspective. In that respect, her position is similar to that of the Bangladeshi women in Birmingham interviewed by Blackledge (1999). Regarded as ‘illiterate’ by their children’s teachers, these women were disempowered in relation to their children’s education by the failure of such school representatives to value their community language and literacy. Blackledge points out that Street’s alternative ideological model of literacy –or rather of literacies, in the plural– draws attention to the socially constructed nature of literacy practices as well as the value placed upon them. This allows cultural difference to be acknowledged and validated. Interestingly, it is an ideological model which –in striking contrast to the English-only school experience of their children– can be seen to underpin the inclusive nature of literacy learning provision for Somali women in Liverpool. As described by Farxiya, a community social worker, this provision is premised on access to a repertoire of literacies:

- Farxiya: Even now till now you can see some of the women who cannot read the Qur’an or who cannot read in Somali. That’s why we set up classes right, to help that kind of woman.
- Interviewer: Here in Liverpool? You mean to help them with the Qur’an or with Somali?
- Farxiya: Both of them, because we are trying to give them the opportunity maybe to try to catch up with the, you know, what they (need). But there is a lot of - not a lot of classes but a few classes like teaching them Somali, how to read and write, and also apart from that they are also trying to learn English, how to speak, how to write also. And in the afternoon we also have some classes at the Mosque. They go to the Mosque or right now we just got another place, a new place. And there they go there in the afternoon from 5 o’clock till 8 or 9 so they can...
- Interviewer: Oh, they work hard! [laughter]
- Farxiya: I know. Yea, really they’re trying to learn.

These Somali women in Liverpool clearly see roles in their lives for a range of literacies and display a considerable commitment to learning which extends across this range. The values which motivate them are further discussed below. Firstly, however,

the language and literacy learning experiences of the four interviewees are examined, with particular focus on their encounters with English and other foreign languages.

#### 4.2. Learning experiences –English and other foreign languages

Access to different languages and literacies, and ease or difficulties in acquiring them, were commented on by all four interviewees. For Faynuus there was a sharp contrast between her experience of Qur’anic learning and her attempts to learn English:

Faynuus: Aniga quranka dhibato iima keniiin, aniga dhibaato waxa ii kenay afingiriisiga.  
The Qur’an did not give me any problem, what gave me a problem is the English language.

Faynuus’s circumstances after her arrival in England in the 1960s –initially an illness and then caring for young children– had prevented her attending English language classes. Even now she depends on her daughter to accompany her as an interpreter when, for example, she goes to consult a doctor. Although Faynuus at no point commented explicitly or indeed complained about her linguistic dependence for her dealings with English speakers, it is interesting that, in describing two such occasions she emphasised the benefits her daughter derives from bilinguality. That is to say that Faynuus takes an explicitly inclusive view of her daughter’s linguistic competence –Somali placed alongside English, the language of wider use in British society. Faynuus cites an English-speaking doctor as lending authority to her view:

Faynuus: Aniga gabadhayda maalin bay ii kaxaysay dhakhtara halkana I geeysay markay af-soomaali igu la hadashay markaasay isagana af-ingiriisi kula hadashay markaasuu yidhi “ma halkan baad ku dhalatay ?” “Haa.” “Marka side af-soomali iyo afingiriisi labadaba ugu hadlaysaa sidaas ha kuu ahaato”.  
*My daughter one day took me to the doctor and she spoke to me in Somali and she spoke to the doctor in English and then the doctor said “Was she born here?” “Yes” “So how can she speak both Somali and English let her be always like that”.*

The present-day language repertoires of the interviewees reflect the different educational opportunities which were open to them. While Faynuus attended only Qur’an school, and that in her early years, the three younger women have all accomplished learning through the medium of languages first acquired in the context of

schooling at different levels or further education. In their interviews they offer insights into the difficulties this posed for them –languages as barriers to understanding.

In the post-independence educational language policies of many poorer countries throughout the world the more powerful ‘cosmopolitan’ language of the former colonising state retains a prestigious role. In the case of Somalia there is a dual colonial linguistic legacy, since the republic was formed, in 1960, from two colonial territories governed by Britain and Italy respectively. (In the post-colonial period this division has been further reflected and reinforced through the 1991 secession of the region formerly known as British Somaliland). One part of the explanation for such educational language policies lies in economic dependence on international aid. Such aid often includes provision of teaching and learning materials in a non-local language or the posting of teaching personnel who are not fluent in a local language.

It is Amran among the interviewees who most amply substantiates though her own experience the linguistic hurdles which young people in such contexts may face as they move from stage to stage of their education. Beginning with elementary school in Arabic, where the staff were Egyptians, Amran moved on to intermediate school and was taught by English-speaking Christian missionaries (one alternative she mentions being a school staffed by Italian-speaking Catholic nuns). She continued her studies at a Nursing College supported by UNICEF, where tutors were drawn from a number of European countries and again taught in English. The language-learning task she next faced was considerable. As she described it, her ‘good fortune’ in being accepted at university in Mogadishu was a mixed blessing.

Amran: Unfortunately I got medical –the faculty of medicine. So my other difficulty –big big difficulty– was the Italian, to learn Italian language, because the medicine was –to do medicine was only in Italian language. So (that’s) what I faced and up to now I can’t understand, even I can’t speak even good Italian language.

Both Amran’s and Siraad’s experience of studying through foreign languages in post-independence Somalia –English and Italian, in Amran’s case and English in Siraad’s– placed demands on themselves and their families. There were financial costs, for example in the expense of private English lessons which Siraad’s family paid for in order to help prepare her for nursing college and in the medical books Amran obtained

from friends in Saudi Arabia. These were books in English, since she was unable to understand the Italian books supplied by her university. There was also a time investment for both women: Amran was obliged to take a six-month preparatory English course before entry to nursing college, while Siraad recalls classes in English grammar and speaking running alongside her nursing studies.

In the interviews both women spoke candidly about the problems they had had in understanding the study material that was presented to them. However, a sense of their resourcefulness in dealing with these difficulties also clearly emerges. Siraad worked her way through textbooks with a dictionary by her side, while Amran, faced with deciphering Italian medical texts at university, drew on the knowledge of medical terminology she had acquired through English in nursing college. Both women admit that they resorted to memorising chunks of text –whole books according to Siraad– and this was a strategy they used with success to pass their examinations. As Siraad describes her exam technique (in biology), it relied on responding to cue words she recognised, such as ‘heart’:

Siraad:           Actually sometimes I used to remember the whole of the heart, really all about the heart, and whenever I go to exams then if that question comes –if I have seen a question it comes up the chance is that it was in my head and then I used to easily I eh answered, but sometimes I could not even understand but read it and I could remember it by heart all of (a) chapter. I was a very good memoriser.

While the written texts they encountered were monolingual in the foreign language, both women describe support given to them in accessing these texts by Somali-speaking teachers and tutors. That is to say that the texts were bilingually mediated in the classroom, the talk around them taking place mainly in Somali. This echoes the interactional order described in research studies in classrooms in a geographically wide range of post-colonial settings where a foreign language continues to be the official medium, such as Brunei (Martin, 1999) in Asia or Tanzania (Rubagumya, 1993) in Africa. These examples and others show that in such classrooms “the use of more than one language in the joint construction of knowledge contributes at the same time to the affirmation of the legitimacy of the dominant language” (Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996: 9).

Bilingual strategies on the parts of teachers and learners are often necessary in order to negotiate the meaning of subject-matter in monolingual written texts, and these strategies can be very effective. Quite different skills are required, however, for communicative oral use of the foreign language. Amran describes, in her own phrase, “open discussion” as an area of very great difficulty in her (Italian-medium) medical studies –and the one in which she got her worst grade.

Amran: I was only reading and giving them the terminology so they understood... the professor he needed from me that I could explain everything in common language... I wanted to explain I was understanding what he was saying but I can't really express (myself). So I felt really really under pressure.

Throughout the interview Amran showed a high degree of awareness of how educational language policy was shaped by political and economic considerations. Siraad, on the other hand, had been successively exposed to fewer languages as the media of her learning, having moved from schooling in Somali to further education in English. The normality of this pattern –and its consequent naturalisation in the minds of many people as ‘the way things are’ came across where Siraad reflected during the interview on the use of English as the medium for her nursing studies.

Siraad: Yah but nursing it was English I never had Somali in my nursing course

Interviewer: Now why was it English?

Siraad: eh I don't know why [laughs] I have to be honest with you I have no idea, but the only thing that I can remember was that... the Red Cross used to take all – oh yes I know the reason. Because when you do the nursing... because uh because it was written Somali very late –1972– so they never had that expense of writing the health books in Somali, so everything was based on textbooks. Yea and because the northern part was eh was a British was (governed) by the British that's why they had English English... in the various parts.

Interviewer: Right, but the teachers at the nursing school they were not English speakers?

Siraad: Exac- no. Some of them actually, but we had a few English speakers from the Red Cross, or from different organisations like WHO.

In reporting on experiences of learning languages and literacies in this section, an apparently instrumental view of language has been the focus: language as a tool or

obstacle. The following section acts as a complement and corrective to that view by exploring the social values, for the women interviewees, of their languages and literacies.

### **5. Languages and cultural values: continuity and change**

The changing nature of language and literacy repertoires was illustrated in the previous section: the women's histories of language accretion belie any notion that language competence is static, at any stage in any of our lives. This applies equally to Faynuus, an apparently 'monolingual' speaker of Somali, who fluently incorporated numerous English borrowings into her speech throughout her interview, in Somali. However, languages and their uses are not neutral but imbued with cultural meanings and values. The following sections explore the meanings and values of languages and literacies for the four interviewees. Key questions are those which Chris Kearney (undated) asks in his research on identity maintenance and transformation within diaspora: "What changes? What remains the same?" Discussion will focus in turn on three themes which emerged for the interviews. The first of these concerns the value of Somali itself, within the context of British society. The second and third themes - the centrality of oral traditions to Somali culture and the prestige of literacy - reveal an area of some tension in the cultural values held by these women.

#### **5.1. The recontextualisation of Somali: A peripheral language**

The value the women place on Somali is a theme in all four interviews, and its perceived role in cultural continuity is apparent in the concern they expressed for its transmission to the younger generation. Siraad expressed this most forcefully:

Siraad: We have a very very very very good culture. I mean we have... some of it is bad, like the women the way that they're treated. But we don't want to lose that culture. If they lose the language it's almost 90 percent of their culture is gone, because there will be no way of communication.

Amran, a speaker of a minority language of Somalia, in fact expressed a dual loyalty, to Somali and Chimini: although the language of her home is Somali and she has no opportunities other than occasional telephone calls with relatives to use Chimini, she was aware and supportive of language and culture maintenance efforts by Bravanese

communities elsewhere in Britain. Talking about her own young son she described the effect on his Somali of beginning to attend nursery school:

Amran:           The problem is he started already to forget some of the words and he started to talk with us in English. We are thinking that he's going to be lost in Somali. ... English is very easy for him to say, to ask us... and we say no don't say in English, say this in Somali. Oh mum, it's difficult he's telling me.

That Amran nevertheless clearly subscribes to the importance of Somali reflects not only its role in her family life but also its high symbolic value as cultural capital in the relatively unified linguistic market-place of the newly independent Somalia in which she grew up. If we pursue Bourdieu's (1977) linguistic market metaphor further we can see that the recontextualisation of Somali as a language of British society involves its revaluation –devaluation, in fact– as linguistic and cultural currency. Somali is the language of one of the peripheral peoples of Europe (see Forment, 1996, who also uses the term “neonomads”), whereas the hegemony of English is everywhere evident in British public life. This is clearly reflected in the monolingually English school experience of Somali and other minority heritage young people, and is institutionalised through the National Curriculum for England and Wales. The value which the four women continue to attach to Somali is thus at odds with the wider social environment in which they find themselves. It should not, however, be misconstrued as resistance to English itself. As Faynuus acknowledges, ‘af-ingiriisi waayo majooratiga’ (English is in the majority), and the educational success of all children growing up in Liverpool depends on their access to English. The two interviewees who are mothers of school-going children were particularly aware of this: worry over this aspect of their children's education had led Amran to move her two daughters to a new school and Farxiya to pay for private lessons she could ill afford. However, as Li Wei (e.g. 1993) has argued in his study of Chinese heritage children in Tyneside, the school experience of bilingual children in Britain is not merely monolingual but “monolingualising”: its outcomes are likely to be shift towards dominant language use. This runs counter to the aspirations of Faynuus, as discussed above, for the stable Somali-English bilingualism of her daughter and, indeed, to the inclusive values embodied in the literacy curriculum Farxiya and her colleagues provide for Somali women in Liverpool. Faynuus, indeed, while lamenting that Somali as spoken today has been ‘diluted’ –af-soomaliga kaani waa labeeb–

nevertheless expresses tolerance when asked for her view on children's switching between Somali and English:

Faynuus: Waxa dhibata ah waxa ilamaha kaljarkiisa luuso aanu afkiisa waxba ka garanayn, taasa dhibaato ah.

*The problem is for the child who is going to lose its culture and does not speak its language, that's the real problem.*

Interviewer: Lakiin ilmihi hadii isku darsado?

*But if the child mixes?*

Faynuus: Hadii isku darsado way iska fican yahay.

*If they mix, they are alright.*

Interviewer: Weli wa iska fican yihiin, weli kama tegin?

*They are still alright, they have not left the culture?*

Faynuus: Weli kama tegin.

*They have not left yet.*

Diasporic experiences are often described as characterised by identity transformation and the development of cultural hybridity –“a postmodern flux of nomadic subjectivities”, as Ang (1994: 5) puts it. While this may be taken to imply an evolutionary process –a progression from ‘simpler’ to more complex states, the case of Amran, a bilingual from earliest childhood in ‘monolingual’ Somalia should remind us that linguistic –and cultural– diversity exist in all societies, although the hegemony of one particular language may obscure this fact. In speaking about their fears for the next generation, and specifically about the risk of their losing Somali, these interviewees foresaw a prospect of their children and grandchildren becoming monolingual in English. This further post-diasporic development would therefore seem potentially to involve a more complex state being replaced by a simpler one.

Bakhtinian cultural theory offers us a framework which is particularly helpful when considering the effects of diaspora since it accounts for the dynamic yet non-linear nature of identity formation. In this analysis, a historical tension exists between sociocultural forces which are, on the one hand, centripetal and on the other centrifugal. Centripetal forces are those which tend towards conformity and unification, supporting for example the development and promotion of standard languages; centrifugal forces pull outwards, towards the creation and valorisation of plurality and difference. The monologism and dialogism which can be seen as the twin poles exerting these competing forces are not, however, absolute but relative states, one of which is

ascendant in a particular context at any given moment in history. In the postcolonial context of Somalia, Somali represented centripetal forces, in Bakhtinian terms, providing a symbolic focus for the nation-building project. Its marginal status in Britain casts it in a centrifugal role, as a marker of difference. From a dominant perspective, minority languages such as Somali imply dissent from a national culture of which English –or rather standard English is “the cornerstone”, as asserted in the Kingman Report (DES, 1988). This report laid the foundations for the approach to the teaching of English in a national curriculum which has been described as “resolutely monolingual” (Kenner, 2000: 14). There is resistance to such cultural conformity premised on English monolingualism in Farxiya’s assertion: “I want my children to learn that it’s not just the English people who are on this earth”.

## 5.2. Oral traditions

Central to the prestige of Somali among its speakers are its oral traditions, which include both stories and poems. All four interviewees showed a high level of awareness of these traditions. Examples of positive continuing roles for Somali poetry in contemporary life were offered by Farxiya, who had recently attended a wedding which included recital of a praise poem for the newly weds and who described a fund-raising video sent from Somalia in which young children pleaded, in poetic form, for the end of conflict and the rebuilding of their school. Stories were identified by Faynuus as important for their didactic content, which she describes as:

Faynuus: Lagu barbaariyo.

*Teaching something.*

Interviewer: Haa.

*Yes.*

Faynuus: Haa, wa lagu barbarinjirayn waxaqabadka, lagu barbarinjiray shekeeda lagu barbarinjiray.

*Yes, teaching how to do things, teaching how to tell stories or how to talk.*

Interviewer: Haye

*Yeah.*

Faynuus: Edaabtaa lagu barbaarin jiray.

*Teaching how to behave or how to be polite.*

This role for stories of cultural transmission seems to underlie Farxiya’s experience of their reception in a Liverpool primary school, where she and a group of

other volunteers had worked on a project to make traditional Somali stories available for classroom use.

- Interviewer: So you began translating the stories?
- Farxiya: Yes, and each story was translated into English. We used to give the headmaster and the teacher and then we used to go maybe (to) the assembly hall or each class... and tell the children the story.
- Interviewer: That sounds excellent.
- Farxiya: Yea. And also it takes time, because there was some stories that we do find interesting in our culture, but the English they say oh no no no, we don't want to tell that story to the children you know.

Farxiya then went on to relate the example of a story about a coward –who is also a fool– who meets a violent end. The moral of the story is clearly that this character deserved his fate, but Farxiya stresses that it is intended to be humorous. As was argued above in relation to the valuation of Somali itself, transposition to a different cultural context alters the meaning which is attached to such stories. Translated into English the story of the foolish coward was no longer taken as funny (at least by the teachers –the children did not get to hear the story and so we don't have their judgement on this); instead it becomes unacceptable.

Farxiya's efforts, and those of the other women she describes working with, were directed towards making Somali stories available to children –both Somali and non-Somali speaking– in the formal setting of primary school. During the interviews the women commented on other roles they might, or might not, play in transmitting the oral tradition. In relation to poetry, varying individual talent was quite reasonably mentioned by Farxiya as a constraint when she pointed out:

- Interviewer: [Somali people] can recite poetry ?
- Farxiya: Not every Somali person but some of them, yea, they've got that gift from God. They can, you know, say like straight away... if they are like here they can just do the poetry just like that.

The audiotape of Faynuus's interview is delightfully enhanced by her rendition of lullabies she has sung for her children and grandchildren. The explicit link she makes between these lullabies and her rural nomadic farming childhood is reinforced when she ends the interview by singing a 'song of the herd' –'adhiga heestiisa', remembered from her early days of minding sheep and goats. This was a very different environment from

inner-city Liverpool. For Farxiya lullabies for children are associated with a rural lifestyle which belongs to the past: she agrees with Faynuus that nowadays mothers (and this is assumed by all four interviewees to be a role of mothers or grandmothers rather than any other family members) lead lives which do not allow them time for the singing of lullabies. Farxiya added that she tries to make time for the stories her children ask her to tell. However, Farxiya explained that the stories her children want to hear concern their mother's childhood and the Somalia which she knows but they do not: their interest lies in a relatively personal sense of continuity at the level of the family. Siraad's children are too young to express their interests and wishes in this way. Their mother is very keen that they should know the stories she herself grew up with but claims, laughingly, that she herself is not a good storyteller. Thus one reason she gave for a trip she took to Somalia with her children was so that they could hear their grandmother, Siraad's mother, tell stories.

Siraad: I chose to take them because I wanted them to... see where I was born, although they are very young –one of them is only one year and two months, the other one is two years and seven months. But I wanted them to learn some Somali and I wanted them to... have heard all these stories that I heard when I was young and... to feel the sand and play in the sand, really. And that's why the two of them they really enjoyed it, especially for the older one because the younger one... she doesn't know what she wants. But the older one really enjoyed and she remembers some of the stories that my mother told her when she was there, and she always talks about it.

Interviewer: Does she? Are they traditional stories?

Siraad: It's traditional, it's the same stories that my mother used to tell me when I was young.

It is interesting that Siraad explicitly links traditional storytelling with the environment – material as well as cultural – that she wishes her children to experience. And the only way for that to happen was through the journey back which is not merely geographical but is a journey back in time. Again, the recontextualisation –in British society– of a valued tradition does not appear to be possible.

### 5.3. The prestige of literacy

Since reading the Qur'an is central to Islamic religious practice, it is perhaps not surprising that these four practising Moslem interviewees stressed the importance of literacy, for themselves and others. Farxiya invokes the Qur'an itself as her authority:

- Interviewer: Do you think being able to read write is important for Somali people?
- Farxiya: It is very important and in Qur'an, even the Qur'an (is) encouraging us.
- Interviewer: Does it?
- Farxiya: Yes, to learn... something. To learn reading, writing, to learn more.

The interviewees were asked for their views on translations of the Qur'an into other languages and all preferred the original Arabic, seeing this as the authentic text. Siraad in particular expressed her aesthetic appreciation of the Qur'an:

- Siraad: When you read it and write it it makes you cry, it makes you understand the world and it makes you to understand the creatures, God in heaven, the different religions around you and all these things... It's just like a way of saying that I love you... Yea, it's like a novel.

As we have seen above, the instrumental importance of literacy for the three interviewees who have undergone secular schooling is clear, since written texts were often central to their learning and written examinations were the criteria for success. They are of the first generation of Somali women who have had access to education previously available only to men and to only a few of those. Farxiya describes this situation:

- Farxiya: but I think it has just the luck of the women here was ... no access for the women to learn before but all the men can read and write easily if you compare how many men can read and write...
- Interviewer: Even the older men?
- Farxiya: Yes, even to the older men because if you compare to the women who can read and write it's always the men are much more... educated than the women. But from the 70's the women start to learn, from let's say 1974, 73. Yes even to the older men because if you compare to the women who can read and write it's always the men are much more um educated than the women. But from the 70's the women start to learn from let's say 1974, 73.

In their present-day lives in England, all of the women are now on a position to observe the centrality of English literacy –and indeed canonical English literature– in the educational experience of their children and grandchildren in English schools. The question perhaps is why, alongside their awareness and pride in the Somali oral tradition, as discussed above, they also are unanimous in stressing the importance of literacy in Somali. Given the lack of Somali reading material in Liverpool, and the rarity of occasions for writing, this importance does not appear to be related to instrumental motivation. However, the interviewees do make associations with Somali literacy which are both instrumental and symbolic.

It is Faynuus who states:

Faynuus:        Dadka wawayni waa fiican yihiin hadana waxa ka si  
fiican soomaaliga hadii loo dhigo, like that bay u  
baranayaan.  
The adults are all right but it will be even better if  
[the children] are taught the[written] Somali  
language, they will learn like that.

So for Faynuus, herself unable to read and write Somali, the passing on of the language to the next generation is bound up with its fixing in written form. Interestingly, Amran also speaks with regret about not having had the opportunity to acquire literacy in her first language, Chimini.

Amran:            So we tried to write (but) we were a minority, no one  
was giving any consideration. Even when it was invented  
Somali language was our we took and wrote by our own  
Chimini with the letters of Latin letters which started to write  
letters ( ) but no one was giving consideration about Chimini  
so that was our difficulty

The time Amran is referring to here is the early 1970s. Following the adoption of an adapted Latin alphabet for writing Somali, a national literacy teaching campaign took place in 1973. All secondary school pupils, with the exception of those in examination years, such as Amran herself, were enlisted as tutors across the country. Only one of the interviewees, Faynuus, is old enough to have been a possible tutee but she was already in the UK at this time. The campaign certainly identified and highlighted illiteracy as a national problem, and its eradication as necessary to the ‘modernisation’ of Somalia. These associations remain with Somali speakers of older generations and can be seen as reinforced when, through migration, they find themselves in a literate English-dominated culture. As Blackledge (1999) has pointed out, in such contexts minority

groups, particularly those who are historically non-literate, may internalise feelings of ambivalence towards their cultural identity and of powerlessness visavis the dominant group. However, members of such minority groups may also resist being positioned in this way, asserting rather than denying the value of their language and culture. In this way the promotion of Somali literacy –and Somali as a language of literacy– can be seen as an attempt to claim greater equality for the language and its speakers in the UK context.

A further role for Somali literacy emerged from the interviews with the three younger women. All expressed concern over what they saw as the precariousness of Somali oral traditions and linked their survival to the creation or preservation of written texts. For example, Farxiya described as a setback the destruction during the civil conflict of archives which had been collected in Mogadishu. Siraad, looking to the future, was hoping that she and her brother would be able to publish a book of their late father's audio-recorded poetry.

The heritage of Somali poetry includes highly developed genres, both lyrical and epic. Exemplars of these have been not only written down but also translated into English. The transformation of such texts from oral to written form involves change on a number of levels. Firstly, the text is no longer itself a performance, though, a play script, it may be performed: the performer (or, indeed, the reader) has the task of inventing or reinventing those non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of the performance which were previously traditional in the sense of being passed on through observation and practice. The social functions of such texts also change. On the one hand, they are no longer part of social events which bring people together and thus reinforce their group membership. On the other hand, they become less open to the adaptation over time, to the continual construction –termed re-articulation by Clifford (1997, cited in Kearney undated: xx) which is inherent in memorised oral traditions.

In the Somali case, there is a particular disjunction between the social worlds of the past, as constructed in orally transmitted clan genealogies, and of the present in which inter-clan conflict and diasporic migration reposition Somalis, from a dominant social perspective, as members a minoritised community marked by their national origin. It is however appropriate, in conclusion, to return to the perspectives of the four

women interviewees and to the diversity of identities and aspirations which they represent.

## 6. Conclusion

The report and discussion of the stories told by these four women in Liverpool is necessarily partial. Riessman (1993) points out that political conditions impose constraints on the narration of certain events by interviewees, and this is certainly the case where lives and families have been disrupted by violent conflict such as that which has overtaken Somalia since the 1980s. Moreover, the researcher is herself engaged in a process of meaning construction, selecting, editing and interpreting so that the stories told to her are interwoven into yet another ‘story’. The concern here has, however, been to foreground diversity as well as commonality in the linguistic and cultural identities of these women. Such emic perspectives challenge commonplace stereotypes and are a valuable counterweight to the labelling –and often mislabelling– of minority communities from the etic perspective of the dominant social group. By their nature plural, they reflect the potential of diasporas “to unsettle essentialist and totalising conceptions of ‘national culture’ or ‘national identity’” (Ang, 1994: 16). The experiences of the four women perform this “unsettling” in relation to both the Somalia of their origins and childhoods and the England of their adult lives in the present. They are also a corrective to an oversimplified, dichotomous view of power as operating wholly or primarily at societal level, illustrating instead the diffusion of power, on a Foucaultian model throughout social life (Pennycook, 1998).

Interviews are dialogues, and as such are inevitably sites of *joint* knowledge construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Faynuus, Amran, Farxiya and Siraad each brought ‘agendas’ to the interview situation and it was an aim of the interviewers to allow space for these both as each interviews unfolded and through an explicit invitation to talk about any issue before its close. Two of the interviewees talked vividly about their hopes of returning to Somalia in the future. The eldest, Faynuus, so long in exile, wished to end her days there:

Faynuus:       Maye, ee hadeer baan still now waxaan idhaahda,  
                     ilaahoow waxaan kaa baryay inaanad igu dilin yaa.  
                     *No, even now I still say, please God don't let me die  
                     here.*

Siraad, the youngest of the interviewees, was waiting only to be sure of stability and peace in the city of Hargeisa in order to return there for good: “if it settles down the next day Siraad’s gone”. Siraad talked of positive attractions of life in Somalia for herself and her children –greater personal independence and a cleaner environment– but she also wished to leave behind the discrimination she had experienced in England. Here she cited her experience of trying for jobs in the health service:

Siraad:           Some of them were very open with me, they said do you want to leave your hijab behind?... that’s the only way that you will get a job. And then you say to them it is my identity it is my religion. So that’s the reasons that I want to go back home.

For the other two women, the future did not appear to lie in return to Somalia. Both talked eloquently and at length about concern they feel about their children’s internalisation of racist stereotypes as they grow up in Britain. This has resulted in Farxiya’s son querying “Why have I got this skin? I don’t want this skin, I want to have a white skin”. Amran laughed ruefully as she related her son’s view that “if I had a mother who has soft hair I could have soft hair”.

Amran:           As an African or maybe as black people I think to me that’s the difficulty, because... you are trying to convince your children they should be proud of who they are, no matter what they are, you know, hearing from somebody else or what they heard from school, you can just be proud of it.

These issues raised by the interviewees complement the agenda of the interviewers, namely discussion of the roles of languages and literacies in the past and present life experiences of each woman, reminding us that identities, both assumed and ascribed, are complex. When Amran said “it’s not only about language” she echoes Savva’s argument that, in the British context “bilingualism isn’t only a language issue; it’s also a race issue” (1990, cited in Blackledge, 1993: 135). Here, as throughout the interviews, the seldom heard voices of these minority women convey a challenge to hegemonic values in British society and a sense of their active agency in the construction of their own identities and those of their children.

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