

The Education of the Bravanese Community. Key issues of culture and identity

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SUMMARY *Bana M. S. Banafunzi is an Asylum seeker from Somalia, presently living in Ilford, East London. He has a wide administration experience in Somalia. He was awarded a BA in Economics from Somali National University, a post-graduate Diploma in Development Planning at API, Kuwait and an MBA at the UWIST, Cardiff.*

Introduction by Tim Spafford & Bill Bolloten [1]

The British education system was developed by and for the inhabitants of this country. Refugees inhabit by default, because they have been forced by persecution to seek safety. They have been suddenly torn from their own community of learning, with their own developed framework of knowledge. One day they hope to return.

In this paper Bana Banafunzi argues that the Bravanese community in exile needs an education provision that acknowledges the character and contribution of Brava's traditional schools. By describing the development of education in Brava, the character and content of the schools and the successful cohabitation achieved between the state system and the indigenous one, Bana Banafunzi makes a strong case for the funding of community education to the Bravanese in this country. His recommendations concern nursery schooling, the development of learning materials, classes for women and support in further education.

Unless positive steps are taken, Bana Banafunzi fears for the loss of the Bravanese identity.

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An Introduction to Brava

Brava (also known as Baraawe) is a city on the southern Somali seaboard. It was founded before the tenth century AD by traders from Arabia and Persia. To this day Brava has kept much of its historic character. There are also other aspects of the Bravanese heritage that distinguish the inhabitants of the city from their Somali compatriots. Its people are descended from the city's founders and their cousins the Tunnis, and therefore most look lighter skinned. They speak a different language, Bravanese or Af Baraawe. This language is connected to Swahili, though it has its own distinctive features. The Bravanese term for 'Brava' is *Mini*, meaning 'city', and for 'Bravanese' is *Chimini*, meaning 'language of the city'.

Many Bravanese have participated fully in Somali national life, contributing several prominent members of the movement for independence. However, the late dictator, President Siyad Barre, and the current militia warlords, have long stifled democratic regional expression. The fact that Somalia is home to peoples of diverse ethnicity speaking different languages still comes as a surprise to many.

Since the outbreak of civil war in southern Somalia Brava has been devastated. Occupied at least 14 times by either the Hawiye USC or the Darod SPM, Brava was pillaged for its traders' wealth. It was particularly vulnerable as the Bravanese had no strong clan ties, their land was coveted, they were unarmed and the international community, in the form of Unified Task Force (UNITAF) and United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM), offered Brava no protection. Many observers concur that Brava, its men, women and children, were methodically subjected to the worst possible levels of violence with cruel and premeditated regularity. Hordes fled, often by boat. Those who were lucky found their way to Mombasa and then other countries for safety. It is thought that they may never be able to return. However, it is the hope of the Bravanese in exile that they will; and to sustain such hope and purpose they are struggling to maintain their language and identity, educate their young and return to their home equipped to build a new, prosperous and peaceful future.

Should readers wish to learn more about Brava, the Bravanese Community in Waltham Forest or the Refugee Support Teachers of the English Language Service in Newham can be contacted.

Education in Exile

From 1990 many Somalis in the south of Somalia have become refugees. Brawans are no exception. Those inside Brava are destitute and their native society has ceased to function. Those who are in exile find themselves in very different cultures and surroundings. These unforeseen circumstances pose the first real threat to the cultural heritage of Brava and the Brawans since their foundation at least 10 centuries ago.

Although many Brawans who sought refuge in developed countries are now enjoying the privilege of free and advanced education, it is important to recognise that this type of education was developed by and for these developed societies; it does not address the cultural and religious needs of the Bravanese community [2]. Nor does the means of education facilitate the development of initiatives that will help the preservation of their culture. There is a real fear amongst parents that the younger generation will lose its identity. It deepens the very acute fear families have that their children will not manage to settle into Bravanese society on their hoped for return.

The Educational Background of Bravanese Children in the UK

The children from Brawan families who are presently seeking, or have been granted, asylum in the UK, have different experiences of education in Somalia. Firstly there are children who have never been to school before their arrival in the UK. This would largely be because they reached school age after the eruption of civil war in 1990. These may be the most fortunate because, as a rule, they can more easily settle into the British education system. Of the children who were attending school in Somalia before the war, several are still of school age. This second group can have immense difficulty settling in. Reasons for such difficulty include the problem of learning English as the medium of instruction, the lower standard of education in their previous school, and cultural tension. There is also a third group of young people who, though not of school age, can undertake vocational courses in college. Such students, already struggling for the same reasons as their school-age counterparts, may not make the appropriate choice of course. Many, for example, select a course simply because a friend is also on it or there is a material incentive, such as a weekly bus pass.

Possibly the most frustrated group are those Brawans who have qualified either in or outside Somalia, before the outbreak of civil war. Their qualifications are invariably not recognised in the UK. They too need to learn English, as do the final group who, though adult, never went to school in Somalia. They are mainly female and, because of their cultural background, are reluctant or unwilling to attend any kind of educational course.

The Bravanese community in exile needs help and advice. However, the type and quality of assistance on offer is determined by the policies of the authorities that relate to refugees and asylum-seekers. At present these policies appear to conflict. They do not help refugees integrate into British society, nor do they prepare refugees for their return to their native societies. Nor do isolated initiatives help individuals become self-sufficient through employment.

To consider ways of improving the educational opportunities for members of the Bravanese community in exile in the UK, it is important to look at the history of education provision in Brava itself.

An Introduction to Traditional Education

One of the most respected Islamic scholars from Brava, Moallim Nuri, in the introduction to his famous poem *Zubadi* said:

Zubadi ka chimbalazi ni toomu
[*Zubadi* in Bravanese means 'butter cream'] [3]
Huraasho Ltuungo liitu ntana loomu.
[He who follows our path is not to be blamed.]

Huwa na-ngangu khsooma ka-uwaana
[It becomes easier to learn during childhood;]
Muke na muvli, hanti nammungaana.
[For female and male as well as for slave and for free.] [4]

Tumila Aada ikumi ka mooyi
[Follow the tradition one in ten]
Ilmu ni nuuru, Jaahili ni booyi.
[Knowledge is light, ignorance is darkness.]

Zubadi is a very famous Sharia book, written in Arabic and made simple for youngsters. Moallim Nuuri translated the *Zubadi* into Bravanese, as a very sweet and simple poem. Moallim Nuuri's objective was to teach those groups within society who could not gain education outside the home or who had missed learning opportunities when they were young. He wished to encourage all sections of society, female and male, young and old, slave and free, to seek knowledge. He did not wish people blindly to follow tradition; rather he advocated the selection of what was best—'one in ten'.

The role of Islamic scholars or 'sheikhs' in educating Bravanese society must be recognised. The sheikhs led numerous campaigns to educate the people. They used Arabic script to record their work in both Chimbalazi [5] and Somali [6]. Arabic itself remained the dominant language of instruction, of business and of private correspondence. Bravanese did not challenge this dominance. The sheikhs taught religion and the various arts of the Arabic language and wrote it down in poetic form. A handful of Bravanese scholars have mastered this art.

Brava: a historical outlook

From the time of its foundation Brava has been a cosmopolitan centre of trade and commerce [7], looking both seaward to the Indian Ocean and landward to the interior of Somalia and continental Africa beyond. Brava was probably founded 10 centuries ago by the settlement of Arab and Persian sailors and traders. Together with other Banadir [8] coastal towns such as Mogadishu, Merca, Warsheikh and Kismayo, Brava has been subject to the cultural and

linguistic influences of the people living throughout the Indian Ocean and beyond. Most of the famous sheikhs [9] from Brava travelled to Yemen and/or Zanzibar, which was then under the rule of the Omani Sultanate. They went there to acquire further knowledge and meet famous scholars and political dignitaries. They learnt systems of education, as well as books and learning. To the present day the core books of religious teaching used in Brava are either authored by 'Hadrami' writers or those used in Hadramout [10]. Both in Somalia and Yemen the prevalent theology, or *Madh-hab*, is Sunni of the Shafi'ite.

Despite all these influences, Brava has kept a very distinct social and cultural existence. One of the most important features is the language, that is, Chimbalazi.

The Indigenous System of Education

Brava is widely recognised to have had a long tradition of education provision. As with the rest of Somalia, the education provision in Brava was basically religious. It would therefore be accurate to describe such schooling as an indigenous system of education when compared to the secular education introduced later, known as the modern system. The indigenous system is still very popular and widely followed. To gain an understanding of it, it is helpful to recognise the different phases and stages that comprise its extent.

Phase One

Stage 1. All children are sent to the nearest *Chiwo*, that is Quranic school, at the age of 4 or 5 years. They generally accompany their elder brothers, sisters, cousins or neighbours who may attend the same school. This stage lasts between 1 and 2 years. It is a period when children can become acclimatised to schooling. They can learn routines of attendance. They can memorise the Arabic alphabet and some verses of the holy Koran. Children pass on to the next stage when the teacher feels it is appropriate. It does not strictly depend on the age of the child.

Stage 2. Children learn the Arabic alphabet. Firstly they read, then write, according to the *Qa'idah Baghdadiyah*. This is a method developed in Baghdad several centuries ago. It ends with the completion of *Juzu Ammah*, the thirtieth part of the holy Koran. A handful of children may cover this in just 3 months; however, most will take more than a year to complete the study successfully.

Stage 3. Once the important second stage is completed then stage 3 is comparatively easy. It involves the reciting of the remaining 29 *juz*, parts of the holy Koran. Some teachers may confine studies to reading, but most combine the

reading with writing exercises. Very few children succeed in memorising the 30 parts of the holy Koran. This is not the case with children in rural areas.

In the past the pupils would stay with their teachers, assisting them as *wanafunzi*, that is pupil teachers. In this way they can have more practice in reading the holy Koran. Since the introduction of the modern system this stage has ended with a large social and cultural function together with donations for the teacher.

The Distinct Characteristics of Phase One

All of the stages described above characterise Quranic schools throughout the Banadir coast and the inter-riverine regions of Somalia. However, in Brava this phase has further characteristics that distinguish the Bravanese system from the rest of the country. The majority of the schools in Brava had female teachers who would also teach pupils handicraft skills. The sale of their handicraft products would help fund the teachers and the school and, where the teachers were male, the main source of income was provided by other functions they performed in the community.

Teachers and their gender. Elsewhere female teachers were not common, but in Brava they were. Female teachers were evenly distributed throughout the town, by chance rather than planning, and were themselves usually Bravanese. They taught in their own residences. They would accept both boy and girl pupils, sometimes less than 4 years old. Parental consent was the only requirement for admission.

Schools with male teachers, who often came from the inter-riverine regions, were fewer in number but greater in size as they attracted large numbers of boys. These schools were generally located in public premises. The teaching was less diffuse and children under 5 were not admitted.

According to the very few but nevertheless reliable statistics available, among the 21 most famous schools still operating in Brava town in December 1990, seven were located in Mpai (the largest quarter of the town), five each in both Al-bamba and Baghdad and four in Biruni. Fifteen of these had female teachers and only six had male teachers.

Types of learning. The handicrafts taught by female teachers included the making of ropes, baskets, mats and *kofia* (Muslim caps). Whilst learning such skills the female pupils, accompanied by a senior female pupil teacher or the teacher herself, would recite and memorise *Stenzi* (religious poems). Other pupils would be involved in selling the handicrafts.

Male teachers would dedicate the whole time to study. In some schools they would teach Arabic, the Sharia and sometimes English [11].

Cost and duration of schooling. Parents would be influenced in their choice of school by its proximity and the teacher's reputation. Fees would be nominal. As well as admission fees [12], fees would be paid on Thursdays and on the twenty-seventh day of each lunar month. Also they would be paid upon the beginning of each *juz* (part) of the holy Koran and certain *suras* (chapters), and at the completion of all the holy Koran.

Generally speaking, children would take between 3 and 4 years to complete Phase One of the indigenous system of education successfully. The *Damiin*, that is those with learning difficulties, might take longer or learn nothing.

Phase Two

By the time a girl completed Phase One she would be of an age that culture and tradition dictate she should remain in the home. Some might opt to stay with their female teachers, assisting them as pupil teachers until they got married. During this time they would learn some Arabic and the basics of Fiqhi or Sharia law. These would help them to perform the five pillars, or foundations, of Islam and help them manage their daily life.

Stage 1. The male pupils would now begin a new phase and attend the mosque, where a qualified sheikh or *imam* would teach them. The pupils would learn the basic essentials of Fiqhi, Tawheid (the principles of Oneness) and Nawhi (Arabic grammar). Each subject has a well-established syllabus, using a wide range of books covering extensive study. Most of the teaching materials date back to the fourth century of the Hijria (the Islamic calendar), though they are usually updated with recent commentaries and explanations. Traditionally the pupil must repeat the course in each subject three times before gaining his certificate of qualification. After completing the course some children might leave, with their parents' encouragement, to pursue a trade. Such a trade is usually passed from father to son [13].

Stage 2. The subjects studied in stage 1 are continued in greater depth and sophistication. New subjects are added, namely Tafsir (the interpretation of the Holy Koran), Hadieth (the sayings of the Prophet, peace be upon him) and the remaining arts of the Arabic language. This course is rarely completed. A pupil can leave the course at any stage where he feels he has learned enough, or when he decides to look for employment.

In almost every mosque of the 30 mosques in Brava there is a sheikh or *imam* who undertakes to teach entirely free of charge. A limited number of pupils attend studies in religious centres outside the mosque. These venues are called *Darsaani*.

The Effectiveness of the Indigenous System of Education

The traditional education system is well established and deeply rooted in the history of Brava, constituting an integral part of its cultural heritage. The system probably dates from 10 centuries ago when the founders settled in Brava. Its survival gives testimony to its effectiveness and popularity. It provides the basic foundation education, offering pupils opportunities for educational advancement. It provides basic training in handicraft skills and other trades, especially for girls. It guarantees the transmission and preservation of the traditional and cultural values of the society. It is also a very cheap way to educate children. There are, of course, several disadvantages to the system. It has rigid methods of teaching, there is a lack of standardisation, classes are extremely overcrowded and there is corporal punishment.

For parents the success of their children in the indigenous system is the yardstick against which they measure the possible success of their children in later life. For the average Brawan all other education systems are seen as optional as compared to the traditional education system. Any child who does not attend is seen as a *Jahil*, as ignorant. The parents of such a child are judged to have failed in their responsibilities.

The Modern System: the history of public schools in Brava

Public schools appeared in Brava in the 1920s. The first was Scuola Missione (mission school) and was located inside an Italian Roman Catholic church. The teacher was the Italian Padre. As might be expected from a conservative Muslim society, very few of the local community attended. Parents were afraid that their children would be converted to Christianity and the more conservative Muslims were opposed to secular education as a whole. It was the first children enrolled in the mission school who later became interpreters to the colonial rulers, and then senior civil servants in their own right.

In 1937 the Italian colonial administration, at the time under a Fascist government in Italy, established year one of Scuola Elementare, with year two and three following in successive years. However, with the onset of war the school was unable to take its final shape. After occupying the whole of Somalia in 1941, the British Military Administration encouraged the establishment of private schools. Consequently local leaders sponsored the foundation of two schools in the town: Madrasat Makaarim al-akhlaaq, or the school of good manners, and Al-Watanniyah, the National School. Arabic was the language of instruction. Some officers of the British Military Administration volunteered to teach English at these schools. Towards the end of the war the administration started a teachers' training course in Mogadishu. Its purpose was to train local people to teach in local schools. This was an important initiative which made a significant contribution to the education of the rest of society.

In 1950 the Amministrazione Fiduciario Italiano in Somalia (Italian Trusteeship Administration of Somalia) was launched. Universal primary edu-

cation was under way and in Brava this led to the revival of the old Scuola Elementare. This decade was a disaster for education. It can be remembered for failing to produce a single secondary school leaver in the entire southern part of Somalia, including Brava. In 1957 the Egyptian School in Brava opened, under the Arab Education Mission to Somalia. It offered education both at the elementary and intermediate stage and so provided the first complete primary education in the town. After independence in 1960 there existed a disparate provision. There were government schools under the Ministry of Education, Egyptian schools under the Arab Education Mission to Somalia, Italian schools under the Italian Embassy and a number of Islamic or Catholic missionary schools. In October 1972, while launching the national literacy campaign, the late President Siyaad Barre nationalised all foreign schools. The intention was to integrate the systems, and resource quantitative rather than qualitative education.

A Cohabitation of Traditional and Modern Systems of Education

Initially the Brawan community reacted to the provision of secular education with lukewarm enthusiasm. With time the numbers of boys sent to school increased. However, when some parents sent their daughters to the same schools the community was enraged. Even Moallim Nuuri, who was a powerful advocate of a woman's right to knowledge, cautioned against such a development.

La'alla heendra diiniye-kh-taghayarra
[His/her religious belief may change]
Shkasa Kilmaa-mbovu bilaa-kh-tafakarra
[Listening to improper words without deep thinking]

Khaassa manaamke wa miyaaka keendra
[Especially for a nine year-old girl]
ni khatari ogo skolaani keendra;
[It is dangerous to go schooling]

Laakini Ustaadi Chiwa Islaamu
[However if the teacher is a true Muslim]
Aadili, faahimu bilaa kalaamu.
[Just, knowledgeable and trusted, then never mind.] [14]

Therefore between the early 1950s and early 1970s the attitude of Brawans towards female education did not change very much. Only a handful of women completed their higher education. However, once people recognised the benefits of the modern education system, male attendance increased dramatically. Pupils who had been through the traditional, indigenous system of education made quick and remarkable progress and completed their primary education more rapidly than other children.

Soon a new equilibrium between the two systems was established. After a child completed the first two stages of Phase One of the indigenous system then he was sent to the modern school, whilst attending the former system in the afternoons in order to complete stage 3. This arrangement of morning attendance at the modern school and afternoon attendance at the traditional school continued at later stages of attainment. The distinct social and cultural identity of the community was not threatened.

The Impact of Government Policy: lessons to be learnt

Brava is a conservative Muslim society where the Sufi sects are dominant. Brava is generally thought to be the birthplace of one of the most popular of the Sufi sects, namely 'Uwaysia', a derivative of 'Qadiriya' as it is known elsewhere in the Islamic world. Ahmadiya and its main derivative Salihya have a very solid base and a large number of followers. Followers of both major sects compete to seek religious, as well as secular, education.

The gradual introduction of the modern system of education into Brava and its harmonisation with traditional schooling minimised the tension between two different cultures and probably averted any drift towards an extremist tendency. Brava could have been considered to be one of the most well-balanced societies in Somalia where boys and young men had good access to both systems of education.

However, at the beginning of the 1970s public education became influenced by the political and ideological dogma of the Government. Though the national literacy campaign of Siyad Barre's government was a success, it drove Brava children from school. They felt the quality of the system had been detrimentally affected and that the socialist message of the Government's propaganda would turn children away from Islam. At the same time there was unprecedented censorship and restriction of the traditional education system. The 1970s and 1980s became the darkest decades in the history of education in Brava and elsewhere in Somalia. There were times when demoralised teachers outnumbered their pupils in the schools. The tactics of the Government further deterred parents from encouraging the participation of their daughters in school.

Conclusion: recommendations for education provision in the UK

Traditional education preserved and communicated a great deal of Brava's cultural heritage. It was a provision wholly endorsed through the participation of the whole community. There is clearly a need to bridge the gap between our children's educational entitlements in the UK and the traditional education that forms such a central part of the Bravanese inheritance. As happened in Brava before, a new equilibrium needs to be established between the two systems that responds to the needs of the community in exile. The following recommendations may assist the realisation of such an objective.

- The provision of nursery education that draws from the character and content of stage 1 and stage 2 of the traditional system. Teachers would be women from within the Bravanese community trained in modern methods of nursery teaching. Experienced teachers from traditional schools could assist. This would therefore provide both traditional education and prepare the young children for the British education system.
- The development of learning resources that support the identity of Bravanese children. Such resources would include dual language audiotapes of traditional stories, pictures, maps and a colouring book of drawings of traditional objects and famous landmarks in Brava. Life-story work that describes the community's experiences of persecution, flight and exile could be published. Classroom packs on Brava and its heritage could be compiled to inform the National Curriculum and be used in schools.
- The community needs assistance to organise weekend classes for almost all age groups to continue their traditional education. Girls and women need the opportunity to train in traditional handicrafts, sewing and tailoring. Women would therefore be given the opportunity to escape the dreariness of their present lives where they are disadvantaged through language, full-time child care and lack of employment. In Brava such women played an active economic role in the life of the community. They would take the leading part in the production of a great many goods, including *Kofi Brava* (a traditional Bravanese cap), footwear and traditional hand-woven clothes that are known as *alindi*.
- Professionals and other adults should receive advice and support in updating their skills and qualifications. They otherwise face the danger of becoming obsolete in a very technologically advanced and rapidly changing society.

NOTES

- [1] This paper was edited and distributed by Tim Spafford and Bill Bolloten, Newham's Refugee Support Teachers. They wish to take responsibility for any typographical or organisational errors identified by the reader.
- [2] The size of the Bravanese community in the UK is not exactly known. Estimates put the figure at 3000 individuals, concentrated mainly in east and north London, and Manchester.
- [3] *Zubadi* means 'butter' in Arabic.
- [4] Such hierarchies reflected the structure of Bravanese society at the turn of the century.
- [5] Chimbilazi (or Chimini) is the Bravanese language.
- [6] The credit here goes to the late Sheikh Uweys who, on his return from Baghdad, was the first to use the Arabic script to write Chimbilazi and Somali. Sheikh Uweys was impressed by other Islamic nations who were already using Arabic script to write their own languages, such as Urdu and Farsi. His long stay in Baghdad gave him the opportunity to meet scholars from those countries.
- [7] Many Somalis disagree with this concept as they view Brava as a closed society. For those Somalis of a nomadic background it has been difficult for them to understand the urban culture.

- [8] 'Banadir' is an Arabic word; it is the plural of 'Bandar', which means port. It is used to describe the south-eastern seaboard of Somalia, from Mogadishu to Kismayo.
- [9] Teachers. Among the most famous sheikhs who travelled there were Sheikh Uweys Bin Ahmad, Sheikh Noor Chande, Sheikh Nureni B. Ahmad Sabir, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Amawi, Sharif Alawi (Al-Khalifa) and Sheikh Qaasim Al-Baraawi. However, there were many others who sought knowledge throughout Somalia, and Banadir in particular, who did not travel except on a pilgrimage to Mecca.
- [10] Hadramout is an area of South Yemen.
- [11] During the 1940s and 1950s Moallim Bana Sayle was the most famous teacher of all these subjects. Nowadays Ustad Dheera teaches the same.
- [12] In the 1960s admission fees were traditionally 2 Somali shillings (So.shs.). Nowadays it is more, but it does not exceed the equivalent of 10p (UK currency).
- [13] These trades traditionally include fishing, leather tanning, shoe-making, sewing and the making of *kofia* (Islamic caps). The fathers may also train their children in the ways of commerce. In rural areas children learn animal husbandry and farming.
- [14] Moallim Nuuri, *Hawa na Adamu* poem.

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