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## ARABIC SCRIPT FOR SOMALI

M. H. I. GALAAL (1954)

THE Somalis, who inhabit the Horn of Africa and speak a language considered to belong to the Cushitic group of the Hamitic family, have been Muslims for several centuries. In all matters connected with Islam they use Arabic: they pray in Arabic and their learned men use Arabic in the study and application of Muslim law and theology. Also in other domains of life Arabic is used in a way reminiscent of the use of Latin in medieval Europe. Yet the majority of the Somali people are only superficially acquainted with this language: to learn Arabic well is a question of a good many years of full-time schooling. In contrast, a Somali can become literate in his own language in a fairly short time and without any great difficulty. With the advent of education on a large scale and with the growing need for responsible literate citizens, the problem of writing Somali has become very important.

Until now there has been no generally accepted script for the Somali language. Several attempts have been made by Somalis and Europeans alike in the past, but none of them has been successful for one reason or other. Sayid Mohamed Abdilla Hassan, and Mohamed Abdi Makahil, also a Somali, have used the Arabic script, and a similar attempt was made by Captain J. S. King in his two articles on 'Somali as a Written Language' in 1887.

The chief technical difficulty met by those early orthographers was the inadequacy of the Arabic vowel letters for writing down Somali. Arabic, owing to its structure, can be written with the omission of all the short vowels represented by the *ḥarakat*, i.e. the vowel points. In Somali if the *ḥarakat* were omitted the reader would have to guess the meaning from the context all the time, and this might not be possible in many cases. To use the *ḥarakat* throughout would be impractical in everyday use, particularly as the Arabic *ḥarakat* would have to be supplemented by at least two additional new signs.

There are two comparatively recent attempts which produced equally satisfactory ways of writing down Somali. These are the Roman transcription on phonetic principles devised by E. L. Armstrong and later modified by B. W. Andrzejewski of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London: the main principles of this transcription have been adopted by C. R. V. Bell, the late Director of Education,

Somaliland Protectorate, in his recent book, *The Somali Language*; and the Somalia writing, previously known as Osmania; a description of this writing has been given by Professor Maino (see Bibliography). In spite of their great merits, neither of these two systems of transcription has much chance of winning great favour with the Somalis, on account of having no connexion with the Muslim world to which the Somalis belong, and neither of them has, in my opinion, the same educational value for the Somalis as the Arabic transcription.

Although the previous attempts to write down the Somali language in Arabic script have failed, the choice of using Arabic script for Somali was, and still is, obvious on practical grounds. A certain knowledge of Arabic is widespread among the Somalis in towns and in the interior alike. The Quranic Schools and the Itinerant Theological Schools (*hher*) have a long tradition in Somaliland, and have penetrated to the most remote parts of the interior. Moreover, the Arabic alphabet, not only the Arabic language, is a link common to many Muslim countries. Arabic printing-presses are easily accessible, and the cost of printing is, therefore, not very great. It is also my own opinion that any other script unfamiliar to the majority of Somalis is likely to create an exclusive class of literate men, in fact a ruling minority, and this might in the long run bring a great deal of unhappiness to Somaliland.

The system which I have presented here disposes of the difficulty in the Arabic vowel system. Here I have modified the Arabic vowel points by converting them into letters. These letters are somewhat reminiscent of the Arabic vowel points. The equivalent of *fatha* has an up-stroke, the equivalent of *kasra* a down-stroke, and the equivalent of *damma* has a rounded top. I have also invented four signs for the four Somali vowel sounds which do not exist in Arabic. I have not made any change in the principle of the use of the three long vowel letters already represented in Arabic by ا, ي, و, nor in the numerals.

This adaptation of the Arabic alphabet for Somali is entirely of my own invention, but the phonetic principles underlying it are based on the Roman transcription already mentioned. My transcription can easily be transliterated into, and from, both the Roman orthography and the Somalia writing. As a Somali who has the affairs of his country deep at heart, I put this adaptation of the Arabic script forward as a proposal, believing that it is suitable for our needs, and I beg my readers to consider it seriously and fairly.

Naturally the ultimate decision will rest with the Somalis themselves, who should give a fair trial to all the three existing systems and choose the best. The decision on the choice of an alphabet for our national orthography, naturally, can only be taken after discussions between the Somali



public and the authorities concerned. In making their decision, however, the Somalis, with the help of their European administrators, should consider Somaliland, its economy, and its present and future position in the world. They should also realize that the Arabic script, already well established in our country, has the greatest chance of becoming a medium of rapid educational progress and the spreading of literacy.

Using the Arabic script for Somali would not mean abandoning the beautiful language of Islam. It would mean, I am sure, strengthening our bonds with Islam and the Muslim world, without causing inconvenience to ourselves by neglecting our own language, and would even help those Somalis who learn Arabic.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## (a) Roman transcription

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## (b) Somalia writing

MARIO MAINO *La Lingua Somala, Strumento d'Insegnamento Professionale*. Alessandria (Italy), 1953 (Tipografia Ferrari, Occella and Co.).

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'L'Alfabeto "Osmania" in Somalia', *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, volume x, Genn.-Dic. 1951, pp. 99-107.

## (c) Arabic transcription:

J. S. KING: 'Somali as a Written Language', *The Indian Antiquary*, August 1887, pp. 242-3, and October 1887, pp. 285-7.

The outline of Arabic Script devised for Somali

Corresponding Arabic characters suggested for Somali

The shape of the new signs in the various positions i.e.:

Finally	Medially	Initially
la = ل	bar = با	ab = با
si = س	hib = هب	ib = هب
ga = ج	tun = تن	ul = تن
se = س	hel = هل	eg = هل
lo = ل	ol = عل	og = عل
gee = ج	eel = عل	eeg = عل
too = ت	gool = تل	oog = تل

This sign is added to any new final sign

Letters already used in Arabic transcription

Roman	Arabic	Somali
aa	آ	آ
cc	ع	ع
dd	د	د
ff	ف	ف
gg	ج	ج
hh	ه	ه
ii	ي	ي
jj	ج	ج
kk	ك	ك
ll	ل	ل
mm	م	م
nn	ن	ن
oo	و	و
pp	پ	پ
qq	ق	ق
rr	ر	ر
ss	س	س
tt	ت	ت
uu	و	و
vv	ف	ف
ww	و	و
xx	خ	خ
yy	ي	ي
zz	ز	ز

Roman	Arabic	Somali
aa	آ	آ
cc	ع	ع
dd	د	د
ff	ف	ف
gg	ج	ج
hh	ه	ه
ii	ي	ي
jj	ج	ج
kk	ك	ك
ll	ل	ل
mm	م	م
nn	ن	ن
oo	و	و
pp	پ	پ
qq	ق	ق
rr	ر	ر
ss	س	س
tt	ت	ت
uu	و	و
vv	ف	ف
ww	و	و
xx	خ	خ
yy	ي	ي
zz	ز	ز



## ماھماھى = Proverbs

۱. ولھان دینتھى لھى داغھ لھینھ دھلدھى کھى ھمان .
۲. ھلھان فھرھن فھرھن فھرھن فھرھن فھرھن .
۳. ھمان کھى یاب یاب یاب یاب یاب یاب .
۴. ولھى ھلھشھ کھى ھلھشھ کھى ھلھشھ کھى ھلھشھ کھى .
۵. وایلل ڈھتھسھ کھتھن کھتھن کھتھن کھتھن کھتھن .
۶. ولھ لھسھ کھتھن ھلھھى ھلھ ھلھ کھتھن .
۷. ھلھشھ ھلھتھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ .
۸. ولھن ھلھ دھھن قى ولھى کھى شھشھھى دھى .
۹. ھلھن ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ ھلھ .
۱۰. وایلل وا ھلھ دھلھ .

## Transliteration

1. Wataa diinla ama da'ad ahayai ,  
dabaday ka kumaan .
2. haddaan fari jirin fahmo ma jiro
3. 'anaa ka yaab neer ma doogo .
4. wata 'alooxa ku jiraa 'arabku kadda .
5. waayee dabtisa kaftan ku laasay .
6. wata laysku ogyahay eed ma keeno .
7. barasho kartaad hay ni'in .
8. watan ka deyin e wata ka shisheeya day .
9. gari ilah bay taqaan .
10. waayee waa nus dambaad .

## Translation

1. What is not godly & honest comes to a bad end .
2. Where there is no writing there is no meaning .
3. Diffidence never succeeds .
4. What is in the heart steals the tongue .
5. Elders often end a serious talk with a jest .
6. When warning has been given there is no room for blame .
7. Don't hate me before you know me .
8. Don't look only at the things in front of you, look beyond them .
9. Justice obeys only God .
10. Elders protect you like an outer fence .



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