



**Somali Bilingual Book Project:
Serving Refugee and Immigrant Families**

Carol Hanson Sibley

Curriculum Librarian/Professor/Minnesota State University Moorhead

(sibley@mnstate.edu)

Abstract: The Somali Bilingual Book Project initiated by the Minnesota Humanities Center represents the collaboration of Somali and non-Somali communities in Minnesota to serve the literacy needs of the growing Somali population. This collaboration resulted in the publication of four Somali traditional tales in picture book format, along with a CD of the tales. The Minnesota Humanities Center distributed the bilingual books and CD free to Somali families and literacy and school readiness programs in Minnesota. Included is background about the Somali population in Minnesota, as well as details about the project. A description of each picture book is included along with critical commentary.

Key words: Somali immigrants, bilingual books, folktales, picture books.

Introduction

The Minnesota Humanities Center (previously the Minnesota Humanities Commission) is a nonprofit organization affiliated with the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Center provides professional development in the humanities and produces unique educational resources to serve the needs of the citizens of Minnesota. These unique resources include the picture books published in the Somali Bilingual Book Project.

Background of Somali Immigration to Minnesota

After civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991, over 450,000 Somalis were in refugee camps, mostly in Kenya (Schaid and Grossman, n.d.: 2). Beginning in the mid-1990's, about 29,000 Somalis immigrated to the U.S. with the largest population in Minnesota (Schaid and Grossman, n.d.: 2). Employment possibilities and schools, and service agencies for refugees attracted the Somalis. The existence of an established Somali community meant that health care, education, social services, and other systems were ready to address the needs of the Somali population (Darboe, 2003: 459). There were also unskilled jobs available that did not require English fluency. Minnesota also became a favored destination due to agencies like the Lutheran Social Service and



Catholic Charities, which helped the immigrants to settle (Condon, 2006: par. 4). The metropolitan area of Minneapolis-St. Paul earned the title “Little Mogadishu.” It is estimated that the Somali population in Minnesota is as high as 60,000 to 80,000 (Darboe, 2003: 459; Woessner, 2002: par. 5).

Importance of Storytelling & the Oral Tradition in the Somali Culture

One of the key contributors to this project, Said Salah Ahmed, had four decades of experience in Somalia as an educator and writer before immigrating to Minnesota. For the Minnesota Humanities Center, Ahmed created a pod-cast to explain the importance of storytelling and the oral tradition in the Somali culture. He explains that Somalia is a nation of barbs. The oral tradition and oral literature is highly regarded, as much of the population is illiterate. The oral tradition is the means of handing down history and cultural values to the next generations (Ahmed, 2009a).

Storytelling is important to both children and adults. For children, oral stories are a means of entertainment and education. The stories are important for language development, the growth of the imagination, and for teaching about the environment. Above all, the storytellers communicate the morals of the society (Ahmed, 2009c). After children learn the stories, they begin to tell them to each other; this helps the oral tradition from dying out (Ahmed, 2009c).

After the Somalia Civil War, the people who immigrated brought their stories with them. However, some families do not know many stories from their culture, and thus it is important for the tales to appear in written language as well. Otherwise, the younger generations will lose this important link to their original culture (Ahmed, 2009c).

Somali Bilingual Book Project

The Somali Bilingual Book Project initiated in 2003 by the Minnesota Humanities Center helps Somali parents nurture their children’s linguistic heritage and enhance their literacy skills in both Somali and English. This project represents the collaboration of the Somali and non-Somali communities in Minnesota. Because of the lack of appropriate



children's books, the project partnered with Somali educators to publish four Somali traditional tales never before appearing in individual picture books. These four tales were published in Somali/English bilingual editions from 2007-2008, along with a CD of the four tales read in both Somali and English.

The picture book editions served dual purposes for the Somali families. Some of the Somali refugees came to the United States as preliterate adults. The picture books served these families, as well as the literate families, since the tales in picture book format could be retold based on the illustrations in each of the books (Frederickson, 2006: 48). The Minnesota Humanities Center donated hardcover and soft cover books, as well as copies of the CD, to Somali families and literacy and school readiness programs in Minnesota.

Picture Books Published for the Somalia Bilingual Book Project

For each of the titles discussed below, a team of Somali text reviewers checked each text for accuracy in the story and translations.

The first title published in the series was *Dhegdheer: A Scary Somali Folktale* retold in English & Somali by Marian A. Hassan and illustrated by Betsy Bowen. According to Said Salah Ahmed, the Dhegdheer character is unique to Somalian folklore. She is a well known character who appears in a series of stories (Ahmed, 2009b). The stories are cautionary to warn that running away or traveling alone can be dangerous. Dhegdheer is a cannibal who roams the Hargega Valley in Somalia. Her evil ways have turned the once lush environment into a desert. Dhegdheer has special powers; she can run fast and has keen hearing due to her one long ear.

She roams the land with a hatchet looking for a young woman to put in her empty sack. Frustrated when she returns home with her sack still empty, she builds fake huts to make the area look more inviting. That evening a grieving widow and her child come upon the huts. They are hungry and worn out after their long journey. She asks Dhegdheer's daughter for water. The daughter also offers the pair food, but warns the mother about Dhegdheer. The daughter lies about the presence of the strangers, but



Dhegdheer, with her keen sense of smell, is sure she smells the flesh of a young woman. The daughter warns the woman to run. Overall, the daughter plays a pivotal role in the tale, saving the woman and son from certain death.

The woman prays to Allah to be spared and then has the courage to run, though she knows that Dhegdheer will easily catch up with her. She runs and continues to pray. She finally comes to the edge of the Valley and asks the Valley to help them escape. Because they are innocent, the Valley lets them cross safely. Dhegdheer, who see the woman and her son on the other side, asks the Valley for help crossing. Because Dhegdheer, unlike the mother, is not free of sins, the Valley swallows her up with a flood of her sins. With Dhegdheer's death, the Hargega Valley again prospers and peace returns.

Professor Ali Jimale Ahmed explains that the ending of this story is important as it reflects an important belief of the Somali people. He explains that the theme of innocence at the end of the story “conforms to a strong belief in Somali culture that even a sieve (strainer) will hold water of the innocent and pure” (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 26).

The next book published in the series was *The Lion's Share: A Somali Folktale/Qayb Libaax* retold by Said Salah Ahmed and and illustrated by Kelly Dupre.

According to the author's note, *The Lion's Share* is a widely known animal tale in Somalia. “It is told for entertainment but also for its wisdom about the misuse of power” (Ahmed, 2007). The phrase “lion's share” has both positive and negative connotations. Positively, it can mean that a person has “done more than expected” and negatively it can connote that a person “has taken more than a fair share” (Ahmed, 2007).

The tale begins with animals of prey hunting in the forest of Somalia. They come upon a stocky camel, which they successfully kill. After they drag the camel to a shady spot, they must follow protocol. None can touch the meat until they have the powerful lion's permission. The lion roars and asks the oldest hyena for advice on how to divide the camel. The hyena bravely suggests that the meat be divided in half, half for the king and half for the rest of the animals. This is not what the lion wanted to hear. He attacks, causing the hyena to lose one eye. All of the hyenas slump away in shame. The lion then



calls upon the female fox to come up with a plan. She wisely suggests that half of the meat go to the lion and half to the rest of the animals, but of that half, one-fourth go to the lion and one-fourth to the other animals, etc. The lion is pleased and the other animals feign acceptance of this plan. The powerful lion drags away his large share of the camel leaving the rest of the animals to go hungry. The animals leave chanting “‘The lion’s share is not fair, the lion’s share is not fair’” (Ahmed, 2007).

Ali Jimale Ahmed provides further insight into this tale. He states that this is a “cautionary tale that warns the mighty of the excesses of their unjust practice” (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 12). He also comments that the tale reflects how intelligence is highly valued, symbolized here with the quick-witted fox. Smaller animals, who survive by their wits, are common characters in Somali stories and song. In addition, Professor Ahmed notes that the tale reflects the important role that meat plays in Somali culture. “The Somalis also say that one should not accept a piece of meat given to or thrown at him in humiliation . . . even if you are needy and famished. ‘Meat’... is a metaphor for life, dignity, and for the communal bond” (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 12). Ahmed further explains that the chant of the animals shows their pain and anger. Their anger will eventually mean trouble for the lion “and by extension all those who rule by the precepts of the stick” (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 15).

The third book in the series is *Wiil Waal: A Somali Folktale* retold by Kathleen Moriarty and illustrated by Amin Amir. According to the author’s note, Wiil Waal is a legendary character, a sultan, whose real name was Garad Farah Garad Hirsi. Wiil Waal is considered a great hero of East Africa who could unite people through riddles (Moriarty, 2007).

The picture book opens with Wiil Waal, a clever sultan ruler, calling the men of the region together to solve a riddle. In this way he searches for a man who might be his intellectual match. He offers this riddle: “‘Bring me part of one of your sheep... This sheep’s part should symbolize what can divide people or unite them as one. Whoever can bring me such a part will be honored as a wise man’” (Moriarty, 2007).

Various men in hopes of solving the riddle bring the sultan a sheep’s leg, shoulder,



and liver. A poor man laments the fact that he has to slaughter his finest sheep to take part in the challenge. Unlike the sultan who has not invited women to solve his riddle, the poor man seeks his daughter's advice. When he tells her that he is going to offer the sheep's rib, his daughter suggests giving the sultan the sheep's gullet, a part that is normally discarded. While the father really does not understand his daughter's reasoning, he does what she asks. When Wiil Waal asks the man whose idea this was, he tells him that it was his oldest daughter's.

The daughter then explains that the gullet symbolizes greed or generosity, which can divide people or unite them. Wiil Waal exclaims: "I have found my "wise woman" in the young girl. May she someday rule the land!" (Moriarty, 2007). The final illustration shows Wiil Waal and the young woman presumably united in marriage. His pronouncement has become true.

The final book in the series is *The Travels of Igal Shidad: A Somali Folktale/Safarada Cigaal Shidaad* retold by Kelly Dupre, illustrated by Amin Amir, and translated by Said Salah Ahmed. According to the author's note this story continues to be told to all Somali children. Many humorous stories are told about the nomad Igal, who is wise but also a coward. His groundless fears get him into trouble, but his faith and intelligence help him find his way out of his difficulties (Dupre, 2008).

During a terrible drought Igal sets out across a barren land to find a better place for his family to live. To reassure himself he prays again and again: "May Allah give me swiftness toward fresh water, grass, and trees" (Dupre, 2008). When Igal sees a dark shadow in the distance, he convinces himself that it is a dangerous lion about to attack. He hides behind a rock and waits for the lion to leave. He waits all night and as the sun rises Igal imagines that the lion moves. Finally, when the sun comes up, Igal realizes that the joke is on him –the lion is actually a dead tree stump. Igal vows to never travel in the dark again, but he also realizes that his prayers have been answered. He has found greener grass where he can now bring his family and animals. Igal is depicted as a humorous yet lovable character who has learned his lesson.

Ali Jimale Ahmed, in his critical appraisal of the book, notes that Igal Shidad is a



fictional character who represents the opposite of what the Somalis value. He is a coward, making the listeners laugh at what is in actuality a very real fear of those who travel in this inhospitable environment. This anecdote “teaches us... To expect the unexpected. To beware of the shadow that follows or precedes you in the dark” (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 17).

The Minnesota Humanities Center also published a CD of the four picture books, entitled *Sheekoy, Sheeko, Sheeko Xariira: Four Somali Folktales Read in Somali and English*. Each tale is told by a Somali narrator in both English and Somali. For those following along with the books, a camel bell tells listeners when it is time to turn the page. Each tale is introduced by a different piece of traditional Somali music.

Reactions to the Picture Books

Katie De Kam, who teaches fifth and sixth grade at the Minnesota International Middle School found much to praise about the books. She checked the books out of the library and reported that “the kids were crawling over each other to get closer [to the books]” (DeKam, 2007: par. 1). Her Somali students were excited to see themselves in the books. They “provide a spotlight on their culture that makes them stand proud” (DeKam, 2007: par. 2).

Finally, Ali Jimale Ahmed concludes his article with praise for the picture books: “The stories are also beautiful artifacts that showcase venerable and veritable tradition of Somali storytelling. For a story to be enjoyed, there must be the right balance of instruction and entertainment. Those four stories reflect that venerable tradition (Ahmed, n.d.: par. 32).

Bibliography

AHMED, Ali Jimale (n.d.), “The Somali oral tradition and the role of storytelling in Somalia” [online], *Somaliland cyberspace*, [<http://www.mbali.info/doc255.htm>] Consultation: June 2010.

AHMED, Said Salah (Reteller) (2007), *The Lion’s Share: A Somali folktale/Qayb libaax*, St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission.

— (2009a), “Poetry” [online], *Videos & podcasts*, [<http://minnesotahumanities.org/Videos.aspx>] Consultation: June 2010.

— (2009b), “Dhegdheer: A scary Somali folktale” [online], *Videos & podcasts*,



[[<http://minnesotahumanities.org/Videos.aspx>] Consultation: June 2010.

— (2009c), “Storytelling” [online], *Videos & podcasts*, [<http://minnesotahumanities.org/Videos.aspx>] Consultation: June 2010.

CONDON, Patrick (2006), “Minnesota leads nation in Somali immigrants” [online], *MPR news Q*, [<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2006/02/17/somalipop/>] Consultation: June 2010.

DARBOE, Kebba (2003), “New immigrants in Minnesota: The Somali immigration and assimilation,” in *Journal of developing societies*, December, pp. 458-472.

DEKAM, Katie (2007), Rev. of *The lion’s share: A Somali folktale/Qayb libaax*, retold by Said Salah Ahmed, and *Dhegdheer: A scary Somali folktale*, retold by Marian A. Hassan [online], in *MinneWITESOL* [<http://oxana.prowss.com/minnetesol-2007-journal/2007-journal/the-lion%e2%80%99s-share/>] Consultation: June 2010.

DUPRE, Kelly (Reteller) (2008), *The Travels of Igal Shidad: A Somali falktale/Safarada Cigaal Shidad*, St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Center.

FREDRICKSON, Anne (2006), “Learning Somali in Minnesota,” in *Humanities*, September, p. 48.

HASSAN, Marian A. (Reteller) (2007), *Dhegdheer: A scary Somali folktale*, St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission.

MORIARTY, Kathleen (dir.) (2007a), *Sheekoy, Sheeko, Sheeko Xariira: Four Somali folktales read in Somali and English*, St Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission, 2007. CD.

— (Reteller) (2007b), *Wiil Waal: A Somali folktale*, St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Center.

SCHAID, Jessica and Zoltan Grossman (n.d.), “Somali immigrant settlement in small midwestern communities: The case of Barron, Wis.” [PowerPoint presentation], *University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire*.

WOESSNER, Paula (2002), “Size of Twin Cities Muslim population difficult to determine” [online], *CommunityDividend*, [http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/pub_display.cfm?id=2476] Consultation: June 2010.

