

Somali writings

Mauro Tosco* (University of Turin)

L'article propose un aperçu sur les différentes écritures employées pour le Somali avant l'introduction en 1972 de l'alphabet latin. Avant une présentation sur le rôle de l'Islam et la littérature somalie en arabe, l'article discute les orthographes basés sur un'élaboration de l'écriture arabe, pour se concentrer ensuite sur les alphabets « autochtones », et en particulier sur l'Osmania. L'article se concentre sur le climat culturel qui en conditionna la naissance et la (relative) diffusion, mais aussi, plus tard, sa décadence et abandon. Le développement de l'alphabet Osmania et ses caractéristiques sont également détaillés. La dernière section présente brièvement deux autres orthographes « autochtones », l'écriture Gadabuursi et l'alphabet Keddaria.

Der Artikel berichtet über die verschiedenen Schriften, in denen Somali vor der Einführung der lateinischen Schrift im Jahre 1972 geschrieben wurde.

Introduction

<1>

Islam reached what we now call the Somali coast very early. Consequently, exposure to the Arabic and writing must be equally ancient in the area. Actually, as stressed by Zaborski (1967: 125), contact with the Arabian peninsula and its inhabitants must have been going on since times immemorial and well predated Islam.

<2>

To Arab (or Arabic-writing) geographers from the 10th century (cf. Esser and Esser 1982) we owe also the first descriptions of the East African coast (cf. Esser and Esser 1982). Equally to 'the beginnings of the 10th century' (*i primordii del 900 d.Cr.*) Cerulli (1926: 20) ascribes the foundation of Mogadishu by Arab refugees from al-Aḥsā (on the Persian Gulf), and the development in the following centuries of a mixed Arab-Somali population. Cerulli himself (1927) reports evidence pointing to a much earlier date (the middle of the 2nd century A.H.¹ – the second half of the 8th century) for the documented arrival of Arab individuals or groups in what was to become Mogadishu.

<3>

A striking fact is that such an early (and continued) presence and contact did not result in any tradition of writing down the local language. Perhaps the very geographical proximity with the Arab world and the close and frequent contacts with Arabs made the independent development of an Arabic-based script inconvenient.

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I think nevertheless that the real reason lies in the sociology of the Somali population, mainly semi-nomadic and living in the interior, no doubt accounts for this lack of any "ajami of Somalia". Written Somali – in any form – is a much more recent development, dating as far as we know not earlier than the end of the 19th century. This article deals therefore with a comparatively short history. Yet, such a rich and inspiring history!

Somali in Arabic script

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Arabic Somali literature is very rich, encompassing for the most part religious literature; in the 20th century political, journalistic, and scientific publications have been added (including proposals to use the Arabic script to write down Somali, as detailed further below).²

<6>

By 'Arabic Somali literature' is meant here written material produced by Somali using the Arabic language. It is not the aim of this work to present or discuss it here, or, even less, to give an aesthetic appreciation of it. This must rather be done under the heading of Arabic (and, beyond,

* <mailto:mauro.tosco@unito.it>

¹ A.H. = Anno Hegirae, i.e. Islamic Year

² Gori (2003) provides an interesting classification of written productions in Arabic from Somalia.

Islamic) literature. The interested reader is referred to many works by the late Andrzejewski (e.g., Andrzejewski 1983, and Andrzejewski and Lewis 1998), and the recent book in Italian by Gori (2003).

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The following notes are limited to a brief discussion of the main problems faced when writing Somali in the Arabic script, and a few of the solutions proposed or actually put into practice.

In the case of Somali, the problems lie, as is so often the case with the Arabic script, in the rendering of five vocalic qualities, both short and long, yielding a number of 10 vocalic phonemes.³

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Further, Somali needs a sign for the postalveolar /d/ and for the voiced velar plosive /g/ – both missing in Arabic. The proposals and uses differ mainly in their treatment of these points.

<9>

Little is known on the unplanned use of Arabic mixed with Somali in Arabic script. In his article on the so-called Gadabuursi script, Lewis (1958: 135-138) discusses the phenomenon, called “wadaad’s writing” or “wadaad’s Arabic” (a wadaad being a learned religious man with some knowledge of Arabic). Such a writing generally consists of broken Arabic with Somali words, and is (or was) used in business, private correspondence, the writing of petitions, and the like. The following specimen is reproduced here from Lewis:

Table 1: Arabic with Somali words (“wadaad’s script”) (Lewis 1958: 138)

من اعينايو
 السرم طلع احمد خير جعله
 وصلنا قريبيك عند
 محمد موسى ودين تريد هناك
 اشرك حقك في حقل
 وقبحة الرانين
 وامنوك تابع احمد
 يحتاج خبر الحاس
 حقل الذي ذهب
 الى مدين
 والسلام
 صبري
 جعلك علي

³ Actually, each Somali vowel has both a closed and an open variant, yielding in North-Central Somali 20 distinct vocalic phonemes. This opposition, of limited functional load, is not marked in Osmania (nor in other Somali scripts), nor in the Latin modern orthography.

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Nothing being known of earlier adaptations of the Arabic script to Somali, any account of Somali language written consistently using the Arabic script starts as late as the end of the 19th century, with Sheekh Awees.

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Sheekh Aweys (or Awees) Maxamed Baraawii⁴ (Arabic: *Šayḥ Uways b. Muḥammad al-Barâwī*)⁵ was an important religious leader of the Qâdiriyya brotherhood. He was born in 1847 in the Southern town of Brava among the Tunni clan; after having studied in Baghdad, he came back to Brava in 1880. Until his death he lived in different locations in Southern Somalia and promoted the Qâdiriyya brotherhood all over East Africa. He was killed, together with all his disciples except one, on April 19, 1909 by the rival clan of the Jidle.

Sheekh Awees is linguistically different from all other sources, as he writes in a mixture of Southern Somali dialects, a fact which is reflected in his writing choices, which are studied in detail by Cerulli (1964).

<12>

Two manuscripts are discussed by Cerulli: one is a song of political polemic character (against the “Mad Mullah” Maxamed Cabdille Xasan and his guerrilla war against the British). The second is a manuscript of religious poetry.

In the first, in order to write /g/ Sheekh Awees uses the Arabic sign for <k> with three dots above. I do not know how Sheekh Awees devised this solution, if by himself or via a knowledge with non-Arab Arabic scripts: this particular combination of <k> and three dots is (or was) used in order to write a velar nasal (IPA /ŋ/) in the Arabic-based alphabets of Turkish (Ottoman), Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uyghur. The value /g/ seems restricted to Sheekh Awees.

This is also the only graphic innovation introduced in respect to the alphabet as used in Arabic. In a single case, /g/ is written with the same Arab sign for /k/ but with a line above (as in Persian, Urdu, Kurdish, and other languages). In still other cases, for unknown reasons, it is transcribed with the Arabic sign for a uvular fricative, usually transcribed <ġ> and employed for the transcription of intervocalic /q/.

<13>

The Arabic sign ‘*jîm*’ (variously realized in the Arabic dialects as affricate /ǧ/ - mainly in bedouin dialects – or as fricative /ʒ/ - mainly in urban dialects – and as occlusive /g/ in Cairo and Aden) is used for marking in Somali the affricate /ǧ/ (also realized as voiceless /tʃ/). The postalveolar plosive /d/ (<dh> in the modern Roman orthography) is written with the sign for the “emphatic” (pharyngealized) Arabic phoneme usually transliterated <ṭ> in the Orientalist tradition. In one case (reported herebelow in Table 3), it is instead written with the sign for pharyngealized <ḍ>.

<14>

(Southern) Somali /y/ is written with the corresponding Arabic sign usually transcribed <ġ>.

Another Southern Somali pronunciation is found in the transcription of intervocalic /b/ – often realised fricative (/β/) – with the Arabic sign for /w/. Arabic words retain their Arabic writing even when they contain phonemes unknown in Somali.

/e/ and /o/ are written as /ay/, /aw/; vowel length remains unmarked, although often a short Somali vowel is written long – possibly, as Cerulli remarks, when it bears stress.

As in the modern Latin orthography, many clitics are written together with the word they cliticize to.

<15>

The excerpt of the song in Table 2 (from Cerulli 1964: 118) shows a few peculiarities of his writing of Somali, and not a few irregularities.

⁴ Somali nouns are written consistently in the modern Latin orthography.

⁵ These short biographical notes are taken from the much richer account by Gori (2003: 31-32).

Table 2: A page of Sheekh'Awes Somali poetry in Arabic script

أَحَدُ شَيْكَ وَاصْحَا طَلِيَانِي أَيُو مَالِن لَيْكَ حَمِيْسُ حَرْبِيِيْنُ
 مَهْمَاهِي دَغَالِكِي اِنْتُو حَرْبِيِيْنُ اِنْتُو فَيْرِيِيْنَا فِضَاْحِي مُدِيْنُ
 اِنْتُو اَيِيْمَالُ بِنْدُوْفَايِيْهَلِيْنُ دَوَاي دَالِيِيْنُ كَدَالَا طِيْعِيْنُ
 بَصْرِكِي قُرَانِكُ مَرِيْكَانُ كُفِيْنُ اَفْرَتِي عَمِيْدُ دُذْنُ سَارْدِيْنُ
 5 تَلِيُو اَغَاسُكَ فَنِيْنُ اَيُ تُسِيْنُ اِنْتُو تَلْطِيْنُ خَلَالُ اَيُ رِحِيْنُ
 ثَمَّ بَعْدُ غَيْسِ جَلِبُ جَلِيِيْنُ هَزْهَارِكِي كُحِيْنُ طَنَانُ اَيُ مَرِيْنُ
 جَلُوْلِكِي طَلِيَانِ جَوْنُ اَيُ مُدِيْنُ اَلْمُ رِيْرُ جَمَالُو جِنْفَايِ كِلْكَلِيِيْنُ
 حُرُوْبِكِي حَرَرِي حَوَالُ اَيُ فُدِيِيْنُ حُجُوْبِكِي دَغَالُو هِرَاوُ اَيُ كَلِيْنُ
 خَلْكَي طَلِيَانِي اَيُو كَلْدِي مَرِيْرِي شُوْبِيْنُ هَوَاسُ اَيُ طَقِيْنُ
 10 دُوْلُنُ دَالِيِيْنُ حَرَرُ بَايُ تَكِيْنُ دُنُوْبِكِي دَبُوْرُ اَرْلَادِي كُوْبِيْنُ
 رُوْبِيْسَارُ عَنِيْنُ اَفْكُوِي بَامُ سِيِيْنُ وَبُو رَارْدِيِيْنُ مُكَاسُ اَيُ شِيْرِيِيْنُ
 زَنْبِيْلُ بُوْحِيِيْنُ سَبُ وَا كُرْدِيِيْنُ سِرُو مَالِنُ لَيْتُ لَمَادِي حَرِيْنُ
 سَوِيْدُ اَيُ كُوْبِيْنَا اَقْلُ دَلْدَلِيْنُ حَلَالُ دُوْرِيِيْنُ قُسْلُ رُبْسِيِيْنُ
 شَمِيْرُكُو كُوْبِيْنَا بَرْدَالُو بَرِيِيْنُ وَرَنُ بَمُ سِيْدِيْنُ وَاوُ لَالِيِيْنُ
 15 سُرْتِي كُنْتَا اَيُو شَنْعُوَا شَمَالْكَاي طُوِيْنُ وَاوُ فِرَارِيِيْنُ
 ضَلَاشِي مَرْسَدُ اِنْتِي قَرْمَرِيْنُ دَرَاوِيْشُ كُوْبِيْنَا هَوْبَنُكَ كَدِيْنُ
 طَجَلْنُحُ جَنْبُلُوْلُ رِسُ قَارِيِيْنُ كُرَارُ اَيْتِرَادِي اَدْرُكَاي طُوِيْنُ
 ظَلْمُ لُو كَلْدِي سَلَاْحُ اَيُ طُوِيْنُ اَمْنِكِي بِنْدُوْقُ كُ كَادُكَادِيِيْنُ
 عَلَانْلُو اَيُو سَكُرُو كِيِيْنُ لَمَادِي دَدُوْنُكَ وَاَدَادَاْدِيِيْنُ

<16>

A few words are typically Southern: e.g., in line 2 and 3, *intoo* for 'where' (instead, e.g., of Standard Somali *xaggee*).

<17>

In line 3 again, the word *dab* 'fire' is written by Sheekh Awes with <w>, reflecting, as noted above, a Southern pronunciation with /β/.

<18>

In line 16, /d/ is not written – as expected – with the Arabic sign for the pharyngealized <ṭ> but exceptionally with the sign for pharyngealized <ḍ>: *dhalashii* 'the offspring'.

/g/ is marked very irregularly:

- with the Arabic sign for <ġ> in line 2 (*dagaalkii* 'the fight');
- with <k> with a line above (as, in line 3, *gadaal* 'behind, back');
- with <k> and three dots above (as, in line 9, *Galadii* 'the Galadi' and *gubeen* 'they burned').

<19>

As to what concerns vowels, inconsistencies (or mistakes) are seen in the unexpected lengthening of Somali short vowels, e.g., in line 3 *bunduūq* for *bunduq* 'gun', and in line 9 *guubeen* for *gubeen* 'they burned', as well as, in line 16, *dhalaashii* for *dhalashii* 'the offspring'.

Arabic words are retained in their original form, as, in line 6, *tumma ba'di* 'and after that'.

<20>

A different system is used by Sheekh Awees in his religious poetry, apparently predating the political song discussed above: here /g/ is either transcribed <ġ> or simply <k>, with no special diacritics. Quite strangely, /d/ is often not transcribed with the Arabic sign for /d/ but with the sign for the interdental (<ḍ>).

<21>

Other proposals for writing Somali using the Arabic script were advanced in the 20th century. Lewis (1958) and Cerulli (1964: 138-151) discuss at length the project by Sheekh Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil, who in A.H. 1354 (1935-36) published in Bombay (Mumbai) a book under the title *Inṣā' al-makâtibât al-'asriyya fî l-luġa al-ṣûmâliyya* ('The institution of modern correspondence in the Somali language'; cf. also Gori (2003: 14). Cerulli (1964: 140-148) further reproduces, transcribes, and translates letters and proverbs published by the author in his orthography.

<22>

The main originality of Sheekh Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil's proposal lies in the writing of postalveolar /ḍ/ with the Arabic sign for <d> with three dots above. As for the writing of /g/, he proposes to use the sign for <k> with a line above.

Somali /d/ is not transcribed with the corresponding Arabic sign, but with the sign for the pharyngealized voiceless (<ṭ>).

In order to write /e/ the author proposes to use both the signs used in Arabic for /a/ (Arabic *fatha*) and /i/ (*kasra*), while for noting /o/ he proposes to use the Arabic sign for /u/ (*damma*) but inverted.

Showing great spirit of independence and innovation, the author transcribes the Arabic loans according to their Somali pronunciation.

Finally, neither Sheekh Awees nor Sheekh Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil mark in any way the gemination of a consonant.

<23>

In 1954, Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, better known for his collection of Somali lore (*Xikmad Soomaali*) (Galaal 1956) published with linguistic notes by Andrzejewski, put forward the most advanced and coherent proposal to write down Somali in the Arabic script (Galaal 1954). As summarized by Lewis (1958), Muuse followed Sheekh Maxamed in using the sign for <d> with three dots above in order to represent the postalveolar /ḍ/; he departed instead from all his predecessors in marking /g/ with the *jīm* sign (usually reserved for /ġ/) with three dots below.

His most revolutionary step was nevertheless the invention of seven completely new signs in order to mark the vowels (all the short ones, as well as /ee/ and /oo/).

<24>

Labahn (1982) further mentions a proposal by Ibrahim Hashi Mahamud (Ibraahiim Xaashi Maxamud). From Labahn's (1982: 296-297) comparative table (reproduced here further below as Table 17), Ibraahiim's proposal involved the use of the Arabic sign <ṭ> for postalveolar /d/, of <ġ> for /g/, and a combination of the Arabic signs for the long vowels and the sign for the glottal stop (*hamza*) in order to mark all the vowels of Somali.

Table 3 lists the correspondences between Arabic signs, the present-day Latin signs and the phonemes of Somali.

Table 3: Main regular correspondences for Somali in Arabic script

Arabic	source	Latin	IPA
ق	Sheekh Awees	g	g
ج	Sheekh Awees	j	ɟ
ط	Sheekh Awees	dh	ɗ
غ	Sheekh Awees	— (allophone of /q/)	ɣ
و	Sheekh Awees	— (allophone of /b/)	β
ذ	Sheekh Awees (earlier work)	d	d
ڏ	Sheekh Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil, Muuse Xaaji Ismaacill Galaad	dh	ɗ
گ	Sheekh Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil	g	g
چ	Muuse Xaaji Ismaacill Galaad	g	g

The Osmania⁶ alphabet

History

<25>

The best source for the early history of the script is probably Maino (1953: 23-26).⁷ Maino (1951) and Ricci (1959) provide interesting informations on later developments and its political fortunes. The following notes are mostly derived from these works.

<26>

The indigenous Osmania writing is the invention of a single man: Cusmaan Yuusuf Keenadiid, who devised it around 1920-1922.

Cusmaan Yuusuf had been born in Hobyo around the turn of the 20th century (thus Maino 1951: 108: *circa cinquant'anni fa*, "approximately fifty years ago"). He was, as Cerulli (1932) informs us, a Majarteen of the Cusmaan Maxmuud clan, Bah Yaquub subclan. Most of all, he was the member of a very prominent family: Cusmaan (or Cismaan, both being accepted Somali renderings of the

⁶ I choose to use this – maybe Italianizing, but certainly widespread - transcription. Other denominations include "Osmanya" (thus Michael Everson; see below) and "Osmania" (the latter in Italian publications predating the Second World War, where a larger use of stress marks was common).

⁷ Maino was a great supporter of the Osmania script, as evidenced in Maino (1953: 35-37). On the other hand, on page 38-39 of the same work, Maino also admits the costs and technical difficulties of its implementation.

Arab name ‘Uṭmān) Yuusuf was a younger brother of the Sultan of Hobyo, ‘Alī Yūsuf (Cali Yuusuf in the modern Somali orthography) Keenadiid.

<27>

His father, Yuusuf Cali, had conquered Hobyo (traditionally belonging to the Habargidir clan) and established a separate Majarteen Sultanate, receiving the nickname Keenadiid ("the one who refuses restraints") for his fierce character. In order to gain Italian support against his rivals, Yuusuf Cali accepted the Italian protectorate in December 1918. Although the Sultanate was finally annexed by the Italians on July 10, 1925, the Keenadiid family and, in general, the Majarteen continued to be very prominent in administration and politics.

<28>

It is apparent that, enjoying no political power, Cusmaan soon became the “intellectual” in his clan: he learned Arabic in Hobyo and in Mogadishu, and he also had some knowledge of Italian (*ha qualche nozione dell’italiano*; Cerulli 1932: 177). In Arabic he wrote also all the correspondence of his family. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that Cusmaan had no knowledge of the Ethiopic script, nor this played any role in the elaboration and development of the Osmania script.

<29>

Cusmaan Yuusuf devised his script in the period between 1920 and 1922. The local Italian Commissioner was probably among the first to hear about Cusmaan’s script. He was soon followed by Marcello Orano, who went to Hobyo as 'Resident, and had Cusmaan as his private teacher of Somali. Orano later published a Somali grammar in Italian in 1931. Soon afterwards, in 1932, Enrico Cerulli got in contact with Cusmaan’s nephew, Yaasiin, and obtained from him the material for his 1932 article (Cerulli 1932).

Foto 1: Cusmaan Yuusuf (left) with his nephew Yaasiin (date and place unknown; from Maino 1953: 24)



<30>

A few people among Cusmaan’s friends and relatives started soon to use the newly-devised script for private correspondence, but in general the new script did not meet with much impact until the end of the Second World War. Ricci (1959: 110-111) summarizes well the local and clanic nature of the script, as well as its flourishing after the war:

... la scrittura osmania conservò a lungo il carattere di un fatto strettamente etnico, gentilizio anzi, legato all’ambiente in cui si formò. La sua deprovincializzazione avvenne in concomitanza con l’affermazione dell’idea di unità nazionale, allorchè il movimento che questa idea sosteneva la riconobbe formalmente come il mezzo grafico di espressione della lingua somala.

"... the Osmania script retained for a long time the characteristics of a strictly ethnic – even clanic – phenomenon, and it was closely linked to the milieu in which it developed. It lost its provincialism with the rise of the idea of national unity, and when the movement which expressed it recognized it as the graphic means of expression of the Somali language."

<31>

Inadvertently, Cerulli confirms the clanic nature of the script in the final remarks of his 1932 short article, when he writes:

È da augurare, per molte ragioni, che questo tentativo dei Migiurtini di dare un alfabeto al Somalo riesca (Cerulli 1959 [1932]: 179)

"It is to be wished, for several reasons, that this Majarteen attempt at providing an alphabet for the Somali language be successful."

The Osmania was therefore for Cerulli a 'Majarteen alphabet' – and this opinion was certainly shared by many Somali.

<32>

The end of the Second World War and of the Italian colonial rule marked the greatest opportunity for Cusmaan's alphabet. In 1945 the Italian colonial power had crumbled, Somalia was under British occupation, and talks about independence were rampant. From an early *Somali Youth Club* founded in Mogadishu on May 15, 1943, a real national party was born in 1945: the *Somali Youth League*. The *League* espoused in article 5(d) of its statute the cause of the Somali language as the future language of the country, and of a Somali script – the Osmania. The *League* started disseminating Osmania in Mogadishu, and Cusmaan's nephew Yaasiin (the single most fervent propagandist of the script) was invited to teach there already in 1945 (Maino 1951: 109). Other schools were opened by the *League* in the major towns of Somalia and abroad (in Addis Ababa, in Kenya, Zanzibar, Yemen). It is unknown how many people got in touch with the script; many of them were young people, and very often women (Ricci 1959: 110); it is in this time that the script came to be called *far soomaali* ('Somali script'), or, in its articulated form, *farta soomaalida*, a denomination which replaced the earlier designation of Osmania (or, in Arabic, *al-kitâba al-ʿuṭmâniyya* 'the *ʿuṭmâniyya* script').

<33>

Such a political support for Osmania met fierce resistance: both the idea of Somali (rather than Arabic) as the future language of the country, and, most of all, the adoption of an indigenous script were not widely popular. Ten years later the Somali Youth league decided to expunge from its statute the article which called for Osmania as the script of Somali, and even declared Arabic the official language of Somalia.

<34>

Support for Osmania continued through the activities of the *Somali Language and Literature Society*, established among others by Cusmaan's nephew Yaasiin on October 5, 1949. The *Society* was originally a branch of the *League* but became independent and continued propagating the Osmania alphabet well after the *League* has ceased its political support. In 1957 the *Society* started publishing *Sahan* 'Explorer', a three-pages journal in Osmania under the direction of Xirsi Magan. All these notes are due to Ricci (1959), and I was unable to trace any information on the activities concerning Osmania after the independence of Somali (July 1st, 1960). Ricci informs us that in 1957 the Italian-language daily *Corriere della Somalia* published a whole page in Somali in Latin alphabet, under the initiative, others, of Prof. Bruno Panza.⁸ As Ricci informs us, the experiment was brought to an end by the fierce opposition which it met.

<35>

Discussions on the language of the country and its script continued. The Somali linguistic paradox consisted in a largely linguistically homogeneous country, the existence of an old poetic koiné (based upon the Central varieties of Central-Northern Somali), and – at the same time – the absence of even a single foreigner written medium, not to mention a written form of Somali: English was used in the Northern parts of the country (formerly the British Somaliland), Italian in the rest, and Arabic was known and, most of all, respected everywhere.

⁸ Much later, Panza wrote the first pedagogical grammar of Somali in the Latin alphabet for foreigners (Panza 1974). I had the honour of meeting him in Mogadishu shortly before his death in 1986.

<36>

As is well-known, the military coup d'état on October 21, 1969 put an end to the long discussions on the 'official' Somali writing. Already in 1961, a Somali Language Commission had been established in order to study the matter; Labahn (1982: 137) not less than 18 writing systems (between indigenous, Arabic-based, and Latin-based) were proposed.

<37>

In 1966, a Unesco commission made up by linguists Bogumil Andzejewski, Stefan Strelcyn and Joseph Tubiana produced a report in which the use of a Latin script was advocated (Andzejewski, Strelcyn and Tubiana 1966). Even in this recommendation, however, the most ingenious solutions of the Latin Somali alphabet – namely, the writing of the pharyngeals /h/ and /ʕ/ as, respectively, <x> and <c> – were still absent. A few Latin-based orthographies are presented in the final comparative table by Labahn (1982: 296-297; cf. Table 17 below). They vary in the proposed representation of the pharyngeals /ʕ/ and /h/, the postalveolar /d/, and the long vowels.

<38>

The Latin Somali alphabet was officialized on the occasion of the third anniversary of the "revolution" (as the coup d'état had been restyled), and became effective on January 1st, 1973. Labahn (1982: 172-173) reproduces here the whole passage of Siyaad Barre's speech in which the orthography of Somali was proclaimed. Suffice here to quote from Labahn the very first lines of the English translation:

"I also want to impress on the Somali people today that a unanimous decision has been reached to write the Somali script [...]. A modified Latin script has been chosen for economic reasons as well as convenience. The resources of this nation cannot shoulder the burden of innovating a new alphabet (for matters of printing etc.) and there is also the inconvenience of having to wait for a long time before we realize this goal. [...] Most of the world uses the Latin alphabet. [...] If we use a totally new script, it would have become an isolated one."

<39>

The rest of the story has been told many times (Labahn 1982 being probably the most accurate account): the rapid spread of the new script (a spread facilitated by the offhand treatment of any opposition by the military government), the growing wealth of publications in it, the terminological enrichment of Somali (cf. in particular Caney 1984).

<40>

There is a distinct flavor of benign autocracy in much talk on language policies, and the Somali experience is no exception and has too often been told in apologetic terms: a good example here is Laitin (1977, and even more 1992). About Siyaad Barre's régime in Somalia and its language policy, Laitin affirms that the Somali experience demonstrates 'an association between language policies in which the lower strata's voices can be officially heard in their own language and a government that is *attentive to the needs* of those strata' (Laitin 1992: 59; emphasis mine).⁹

<41>

Nevertheless, Osmania had not passed away: as late as 1971 a whole book had been published in Osmania, with the title *Afkeenna iyo fartiisa* ("Our language and its script"). It is a primer consisting of 72 pages (the last one containing a picture of Cusmaan Yuusuf with the English caption: 'Founder of Osmania Script / Osman Yusuf Keenadiid').

<42>

It has been recently rediscovered by Michael Everson, a linguist, typesetter and font designer (<http://www.evertype.com/misc/bio.html>, accessed 30.10.2009). In an undated interview

⁹ Laitin is a firm believer in state 'rationalization' (Weber's 'iron cage', as Laitin remembers) applied to language. Laitin refers to this process as 'linguistic rationalization'. Given the derivation of 'rationalization' from 'rational', the term acquires an obvious positive connotation (certainly voluntary on the part of Weber, one of the greatest apologists of the modern state). As a part of this rationalization process, e.g., "writers *would be asked* to develop material in a language in everyday use" (Laitin 1992: 155; emphasis mine) and citizens must be *required* to know the national language (Laitin 1992: 158) and *zoned* according to their vernaculars (Laitin 1992: 135; emphasis mine). Obviously, the "high linguistic barriers [which] separate the citizen from the state" (Laitin 1992: 149) are for Laitin an obstacle to development.

The script

The Osmania is a left-to-right alphabet of 22 consonants and, in its developed form, 8 vocalic signs.¹² Signs are written separate from each other. All the phonemic consonants of Northern Somali are represented (although the sign for the glottal stop is omitted word-initially – as it is in the present Latin orthography), and 8 of the 10 phonemic vowels of Somali have separate signs. Not represented in the alphabet (as well as in the present Latin orthography) are the tonal accent and the [±ATR] value of the vowels.

Cerulli (1932) puts forward the curious opinion that the author found inspiration in both the Arab and the Latin script in devising his alphabet – actually, the Latin inspiration is limited to the direction of writing (from left to right), while the influence of Arabic – equally limited – is obvious in:

- the order of the signs – which follows as close the possible the Semitic (and Arab) order. Signs for Arabic phonemes absent in Somali (interdentals, 'emphatics', etc.) are obviously absent in Osmania. The position of the postalveolar /d/ (<dh>) is the same of Arabic <d>;
- the absence of signs for capital letters;
- the absence of signs for long vowels (see below);
- the use of the signs for the semivowels /w/ and /y/ in order to express long /uu/ and /ii/, respectively (but see below).

Although aiming at phonological transparency, the script was characterized by few etymological or pseudoetymological choices which enhanced the morphological distinctiveness of morphemes and contrasted with their phonological realization. In particular, certain regular assimilations were not taken into account. Moreno (1955: 292) recapitulates:

- the article and the other determiners, which are affixed to the noun, are written separate from it. Thus, in the first line of the last section of the text in Table 15, *dalka* 'the country' is written <dal ka>. From this choice a number of consequences arise:
- the quality of the final vowel in a vowel-ending noun is preserved and its assimilation to the quality of a following affix is not considered. Thus, *hooyada* 'the mother', from *hooyo* 'mother' and the feminine article *-ta*, is written as <hooyo da>;
- as the preceding example shows, the voicing of the article (there, *-ta* yielding *-da*) and other changes in the form of the determiner are instead marked in the orthography;
- one of the most peculiar assimilation rules of Somali causes a word-final /l/ and an affix-initial /t/ (the marker of the feminine gender and of certain verbal affixes) to combine yielding /ʃ/. The solution of Osmania is, as usual, to preserve the identity of the noun and to mark the result of the assimilation on the affix. For example, the affixation of *hal* 'she-camel' and the article, yielding *hasha* (/hafa/), is written <hal sha>;
- the complete assimilation of the marker of the masculine gender *-k-* after certain word-final phonemes is marked with an apostrophe (borrowed from the Latin script). Thus, *dhinaca* (/dinaʃa/) 'the side', from *dhinac* and *ka*, is written in Osmania <dhina'a>;
- equally unmarked is the assimilation of a final /d/ before an affix-initial /t/, as common in verbal conjugation (especially but not only in the Reflexive-Middle, which is marked by the extension *-ad-*): <qaadtay> stands for the morphological sequence /qaad- + -tay/ 'you/she took'; its realization is /qa:tæj/ and is written in the modern Latin orthography as *qaatay*.

<44>

Italian scholars were the first to give notice of Cismaan Keenadiid's script. Among them, Cerulli (1932 [1959]: 178) published a short notice already in 1932, with the following Table 5.

¹² Unicode codes for Osmania may be found at: <http://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U10480.pdf>, 30.10.2009). The font is available at the price of US\$ 19 at: www.xenotypetech.com/osxOsmanya.html, 30.10.2009).

Table 5: An early version of the Osmania alphabet

5	4	2	1	H	h	0	7	8	9	6	8	7	E
'	b	t	g	h	h	d	r	s	š	ḍ	g	'	f
2	9	0	5	2	4	2	9	9	7	5	L		
q	k	l	m	n	w	h	y	i	u	o	a	e	

In Cerulli's table the Latin correspondences are shown with the signs of the Orientalist tradition. The fourth sign should be transliterated with <ğ> (the diacritic caron being invisible in my copy).

Equivalences using the modern Latin Somali alphabet are shown in Table 6:

Table 6: The Osmania alphabet and the modern Latin Somali alphabet

5	4	2	1	H	h	0	7	8	9	6	8	7	E
'	b	t	j	x	kh	d	r	s	sh	dh	g	c	f
2	9	0	5	2	4	2	9	9	7	5	L		
q	k	l	m	n	w/uu	h	y/ii	i	u	o	a	e	

<45>





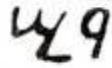
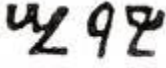
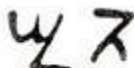

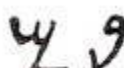
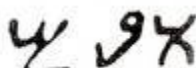
This earlier version of the Osmania script did not have special signs for the long vowels. Their writing is described by Cerulli (1932: 178): V



- for long /e/ and /o/ the vocalic sign is repeated;
- alternatively, in order to write /ee/ the sign for /e/ is followed by the sign for /y/, and to write /oo/ the sign for /o/ is followed by the sign for /w/.
- for long /i/ and /uu/ the vocalic sign is followed by the sign for the semivowels /y/ and /w/, respectively;
- for long /a/ the vocalic sign is followed by the sign for the glottal stop ('alif in Arabic).

<46>

In this way, each long vowel is represented by a double sign. The influence of Arabic is evident in the use of the *matres lectionis* (<'>, <w>, <y>) in order to express vowel length, as recapitulated by Cerulli (1932: 178):

Table 7: Marking of the long vowels in the early Osmania alphabet

				
<i>ba</i>	<i>bā</i>	<i>be</i>	<i>bē</i>	<i>bi</i>
				
<i>bī</i>	<i>bo</i>	<i>bō</i>	<i>bu</i>	<i>bū</i>

Per *bē* si può, dunque, scrivere anche  e per *bō* anche 

The Italian text means: ‘For *bē*, therefore, one can also write <*bee*>, and for *bō* also <*boo*>’.

Later developments in Osmania writing seem to involve the following points:

- irregular use of 'taller' signs for capital letters;
- introduction of Western punctuation marks;
- appearance of a few ligatures (in hand-written texts);
- decrease in the use of the sign for the glottal stop. This is not even represented in later alphabetic tables;
- partially connected with the preceding point, three special signs are developed for marking three long vowels, /aa/, /ee/, /oo/.
- /ii/ and /uu/ come to be marked with the same signs for the semivowels /y/ and /u/.

<47>

These developments seem to contradict each other in terms of graphic influence: the efforts at creating capital letters and the introduction of punctuation marks are obviously due to contact with modern European languages (most probably Italian); on the contrary, the use of the signs for the semivowels for marking the long vowels is in accordance with the Arabic (and Semitic) tradition. The "crisis of the glottal stop" is simply a reflex of the limited phonological load and auditory quality of this phoneme: in Somali (as in many other Cushitic languages) any phonological word begins with a consonant (i.e., #VX is not an admissible word onset). An initial glottal stop is omitted in the modern Latin orthography, while a glottal stop is retained in the other positions (but optionally word-finally). Thus, the orthographic string af 'mouth; language' stands for /ʔaf/ , alongside lo' 'cattle' (/loʔ/) and la'aan 'without; lacking' (/laʔaan/). In casual writing the sign for the glottal stop is often dropped altogether. Table 8 summarizes the marking of vowels along the history of Osmania:

Table 8: Expression of the long vowels in Osmania		
	early Osmania	late Osmania
/aa/	<a>	<ā>
/ee/	<ey>, <ee>	<ē>
/ii/	<iy>	<y>
/oo/	<ow>, <oo>	<ō>
/uu/	<uw>	<w>

<48>

The main difference between earlier and later reproductions of the alphabet chart lies in the presence of a special sign for the glottal stop (the first sign): (Maino (1951), Lewis (1958), as well as the chart in *Afkeenna iyo fartiisa* (1971) omit the sign for the glottal stop altogether. Table 9 here-below reproduces Maino (1951: 116), reproduced also in Maino (1953: 29) and Moreno (1955: 291). As Moreno informs us, it was originally hand-written by the inventor's son Yaasiin.

Table 9: Later version of the Osmania alphabet and Osmania digits

۞	۟	۠	ۡ	ۢ
b	t	g	h	h
ۣ	ۤ	ۥ	ۦ	ۧ
d	z	s	š	g
ۨ	۩	۪	۫	۬
d	c	f	q	k
ۮ	ۯ	۰	۱	
l	m	n	h	
۳	۴	۵	۶	۷
i	u	o	a	e
۹	۱۰	۱۱	۱۲	۱۳
y, z	w, u	ē	ā	ē
۱۴	۱۵	۱۶	۱۷	۱۸
۱	۲	۳	۴	۵
۱۹	۲۰	۲۱	۲۲	۲۳
۶	۷	۸	۹	۰

<49>

Special signs for the digits are here included. They too are originals; an obvious reflex of the Arabic digits, the signs for '7' and '8', which are specular to each other (the Arabic digits are <V> and <Λ>, respectively).

<49>

As anticipated, this later version of Osmania does not include the glottal stop. The order of the signs follows that of the Arabic alphabet as close as possible, but the order of <dh> and <g> is reversed: for /d/ (modern <dh>) the position of the Arabic sign <d> is used, and the sign for <g> is inserted immediately before. The signs <w> and <y> are listed among those for the vowels.

<50>

Lewis (1958) includes instead the signs for the semivowels after all the other consonants, and repeat the signs among the vowels. Again, no glottal stop is found. For unknown reasons, the last sign in the Arabic alphabet is shifted well before, after the signs (using the modern Somali signs) for <x> and <kh>. Either the author of the table wanted to put three acoustically similar phonemes (/h/, /ħ/, /χ/) alongside, or, maybe, he wanted to list together phonemes having similar English transcriptions: <h>, <ħ>, <kh> (the latter, in the Orientalist tradition represented here by Cerulli and Maino, <h>). Finally, shifting <h> has the effect of letting the signs for /w/ and /y/ directly precede the vocalic signs.

The alphabet charts in Lewis (1958: 141) and the one in *Afkeenna iyo Fartiisa* (p. 21) are reproduced herebelow as Tables 10, 11, and 12.

Table 10: The Osmania alphabet

ⵓ	ⵔ	ⵉ	ⵓ	ⵔ	ⵎ	ⵏ
b	t	j	d	g	ħ	kh
ⵇ	ⵈ	ⵊ	ⵋ	ⵌ	ⵍ	ⵎ
h	d	r	s	sh	•	f
ⵑ	ⵒ	ⵓ	ⵔ	ⵕ	ⵖ	ⵗ
q	k	l	m	n	w	y
ⵙ	ⵚ	ⵛ	ⵜ	ⵝ	ⵞ	ⵟ
a	i	u	o	e	aa	ii
	ⵠ	ⵡ	ⵢ			
	uu	oo	ee			

Table 11: Osmania numerals

ⵀ	ⵁ	ⵂ	ⵃ	ⵄ
1	2	3	4	5
ⵅ	ⵆ	ⵇ	ⵈ	ⵉ
6	7	8	9	0

Table 12: The Osmania alphabet

- 85 - (21)

S R 9 4 W S 8 m b 9 R 9 O S
alifka soomaalida 'Somali alphabet'
furayaaashii 'vowels'

4 7 8 9 8 8

i	g-----9	.....	8-----8	(ii)
e	l-----l	.....	u-----u	ee
a	s-----s	.....	q-----q	aa
o	h-----h	.....	m-----m	oo
u	d-----d	.....	yo-----yo	(uu)

8 9 4 W S 2 S 8 9 8 8
shibbarayaaashii 'consonants'

h	p	k	r	7	
'	o	h	g	l	R
x	R	l	j	m	b
c	y	8	y	n	2
q	W	3	e	dh	z
kh	R	q	sh	t	d

A note on the Gadabuursi and the Kaddaria scripts

<56>

The only informations on this writing are contained in an article by Lewis (1958). The script, Lewis informs us, was devised in about 1933 by Sheekh Cabduraxmaan Sheekh Nuur, of the Gadabuursi clan. He was the qaadhi at Borama, near the Ethiopian border. And in Borama only and among ‘a small circle of the Sheikh’s associates’ was the script used; the author himself did not ‘regard his invention as a contribution to the problem of finding a national orthography for Somali’ (Lewis 1958: 142).

<57>

This script too is written from left to right. It is aesthetically very elegant, although a few signs look too much alike: e.g., the sign for /a/-/aa/ and the sign for /d/ are easily confused. If Osmania resembles a little bit Armenian, the script by Sheekh Cabduraxmaan is instead reminiscent of Georgian.

<58>

As in late versions of Osmania, no sign for the glottal stop is present. But different from Osmania, the signs for /ii/ and /uu/ are distinct from those for /y/ and /w/. Short /o/ and /u/ share a single sign. Vowel length is not distinguished for /a/ and /aa/ and /e/ and /ee/.

The order of signs follows *grosso modo* the Arabic ordering, but with many exceptions. In Lewis’ table, reproduced herebelow, /d/ and /q/ are barely distinguishable, but from an analysis of the accompanying texts it becomes evident that the fourth sign stands for the postalveolar /q/, while the postalveolar /d/ is inserted between <h> and <r>.

<59>

Lewis (1958) reproduces, with transcription, translation and notes, various specimen of Somali poetry written in this script (two *gabay*, a *geeraar*, a *qasiida* in praise of the Prophet and two specimens of private correspondence).

Table 16: The Gadabuursi alphabet (Lewis 1958: 142-143)

ƒ	J	P	O	Ɔ	ɥ
b	t	j	ɔ	g	h
ɥ	ɥ	T	S	3	6
kh	h	d	r	s	sh
ɣ	ʃ	J	I	Γ	∩
c	f	q	κ	l	m
	U	Q	ɣ		
	n	w	y		
T	H	I	⊥	C	CC
a	e	i	ii	u	uu
	∪				
	oo				

Konsonanten

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(b)	ب	ب	ب	b	b	ب	b	ب	ب
(d)	د	د	د	d	d	د	d	د	د
(t)	ت	ت	ت	t	t	ت	t	ت	ت
(d)	ذ	ذ	ذ	d	dh	ذ	dh	ذ	ذ
(g)	ج	ج	ج	g	g	ج	g	ج	ج
(k)	ك	ك	ك	k	k	ك	k	ك	ك
(q)	ق	ق	ق	q	q	ق	q	ق	ق
(ʔ)	ء		ء	ʔ		ء	ʔ	ء	ء
(f)	ف	ف	ف	f	f	ف	f	ف	ف
(s)	س	س	س	s	s	س	s	س	س
(ʃ)	ش	ش	ش	sh	sh	ش	sh	ش	ش
(x)	خ	خ	خ	kh	kh	خ	kh	خ	خ
(ʕ)	ع	ع	ع	c	c	ع	c	ع	ع
(h)	ح	ح	ح	h	hh	ح	ch	ح	ح
(j)	ج	ج	ج	j	j	ج	j	ج	ج
(m)	م	م	م	m	m	م	m	م	م
(n)	ن	ن	ن	n	n	ن	n	ن	ن
(r)	ر	ر	ر	r	r	ر	r	ر	ر
(l)	ل	ل	ل	l	l	ل	l	ل	ل
(w)	و	و	و	w	w	و	w	و	و
(j)	ي	ي	ي	j	j	ي	j	ي	ي

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Book in Osmania script:

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