

Notes and News

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Somalia Introduces a National Orthography

ON 21 October 1972, the third anniversary of the Revolution, Somalia introduced a national orthography in Latin script and made Somali the official language of the state. In less than a year Somali has totally replaced English, Italian, and Arabic (the three languages previously used for written communication) in all public business, government records and correspondence, in street and shop signs, and in elementary education. In intermediate, secondary, and higher education Somali has become an important subject and there are plans to introduce it gradually as the medium of instruction. A mass literacy campaign was begun in April 1973 and, aided by books, radio programmes, and articles in the national daily *Xiddigta Oktobar* (October Star), is now making rapid progress; backed by a vast force of voluntary teachers, the campaign extends even to the nomadic interior of the country and aims at the total eradication of illiteracy within a few years.

The orthography employs only the letters available in the Latin alphabet, without any diacritics, and adapts them to the needs of Somali phonology by the use of digraphs and by attaching new values to the existing letters. Thus *dh*, *kh*, and *sh* represent the sounds [d], [x], and [ʃ]¹ respectively, and the length of vowels is marked by doubling the vowel letters; the letters *ɛ* and *ɛ̄* and the apostrophè represent [ɛ], [h], and [ʔ] respectively. Tone and 'fronting' and 'backing' of vowels, which in some pairs of words and pairs of grammatical forms act as the sole differentiating factors, are left unmarked in the orthography, but special signs are being devised for scholarly use in lexicography and grammatical description of an academic type.

A sizeable number of books in Somali has already been published and many new items are in the press. Extensive research into the Somali language and oral literature is now in progress, particularly at the Academy of Culture in Mogadishu, which is an agency of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and employs some of the leading scholars in the field, including practitioners and collectors with a traditional background. Many of these scholars were also engaged in the twelve years' preparatory work which ensured the remarkable success of the national orthography and its general acceptance by the public. The delay in taking the decision as to the choice of a script (Latin, Arabic, or the invented Somali script called *Osmania*) was caused by the intransigent attitudes of the supporters of each of the competing systems of writing, but the present Government succeeded in breaking the deadlock.

The introduction of the orthography has already set in motion various social changes: one which is clearly observable is that since the script is very easy to learn, it has placed literacy within the reach of people who have never had any formal schooling and has thus enabled them to participate fully in public life, previously dominated by a minority familiar with English, Italian, or Arabic.

(Communicated by Dr. B. W. Andrzejewski)

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem: African Research Unit

THE Africa Research Unit of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute was established recently to co-ordinate the research and documentation activities of the African Studies

¹ The symbols in brackets are those of the International Phonetic Alphabet.