

Introduction

Somalia has a profoundly rich oral literature stretching back thousands of years. One part of this heritage includes lullabies for young children. Since 1972 a written language has also been created. This booklet draws on both these strands. It contains lullabies originally sung by pastoral communities but which, these days, are also known in urban areas, all over Somalia and in Ogaden.

Our aim is to preserve part of this wonderful cultural heritage, not only for future generations of parents and children of Somali descent, but also for anyone interested in children's literature, or who simply enjoys singing to their children. So this booklet is both an act of conservation and an act of sharing. As far as we know, no other publication of its kind exists at the time of writing.

One of our editors, Maryan Anshur, works with families and children in Leicester (UK). Over the past thirty years, on her travels in both Somalia and Europe, Maryan has gathered a large archive of Somali children's songs and stories. In this booklet she has selected fourteen lullabies from different clans and regions in Somalia and Ogaden. They show the uniqueness of each of these regions. Sometimes, however, the same lullaby will be sung in more than one region with small variations. Our only omission, as far as we know, has been a lullaby from the Somali Bantu people. We would be very interested to hear from anyone who has songs from these people.

As you will see, the lullabies appear in both Somali and English. To begin with we tried to produce English versions which could be sung. It soon became clear, however, that this was not possible as the rhythms of most of the lullabies didn't lend themselves to the rhythms of English. So we decided it was more important to convey, as accurately as possible, the meaning of the lullabies. You can listen to the lullabies sung in Somali on SoundCloud where all 14 lullabies sung by Maryan Anshur are publicly available.

We have worked hard to translate them in as lyrical a language as possible, to read like English spoken poems. In one or two lullabies the line lengths of each version don't match exactly. This is where we've found it difficult to accurately translate cultural imagery, or where the English fares better when compressed or expanded. We hope you enjoy both versions.

Traditionally, the lullabies have been sung by mothers to their children, rather than the children singing them. The songs show the mother's admiration for her child, her desire to compliment them, to give good advice and heartfelt wishes for their future. There's also the inevitable worries parents have for their children.

Somalia often gets a negative press in the West. We tend to see endless images and words around the long civil war, pirates, chaos and distress. There is far more to Somalia and the Somali people than this. There is no doubt, however, that the civil war, which began in 1991, has sent many thousands fleeing for their lives and has led to a global diaspora. This makes it even more vital that Somalia's rich literature is not lost, but continues to thrive and be cherished. We hope this booklet will be one small step in that direction. These lullabies may be specific to a particular part of the world, but they also convey the universal human desire to protect and communicate with our children, however young, and in whatever circumstances.

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