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The journey of the Somali language, from orality to literacy, multiple me- dia, international science and IT

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As far as we know, until the 19th century Somali was not used as a written language. If they had to write, the people of the Somali-speaking countries used mainly Arabic, sometimes mixed with a few Somali words like names of places or persons. In the last decades of that century foreign travellers and Christian missionaries started to be interested in the language of those people, and to write it in Roman or Arabic characters. During the same decades some Somalis started to write it either using Ajami, i.e., an adapted Arabic script, or creating new indigenous alphabets; but colonial occupation by the Italians, the British, the French and the Ethiopian empire did not encourage writing and developing the local language. This was something that took place during the process of decolonization, and quickly became a very hot political issue. Yet it was only in 1972 that the new military and civilian government headed by Mohamed Siyad Barre officially declared the choice of the new Roman-based orthography and launched the introduction of written Somali in the state administration, the army, the judiciary, the bank system and public education.

During the ensuing 50 years and even during the long decades of civil war and insecurity, Somali came to be a language used for all the domains of contemporary life, by developing a new lexicon for the domains where it had never been used before, and creating new written language registers beyond the different spoken registers that already existed for everyday life, public speaking, storytelling, oral poetry, and so on. There are now several publishing houses both in the Somali-speaking countries and in the diaspora, which produce a rich written literature of fiction and essays. There also are several movies and entertainment videos, news services etc. Nowadays on the Web Somali is one of the most used languages of Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, even though Somali boasts seven monolingual dictionaries, the wide range of variation in the written language, and what to do about some of the major local varieties or minority languages is still a hotly debated issue.