

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susan M. Hassig. *Somalia*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1998. 140 pp. \$35.64 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7614-0288-6.

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The Marshall Cavendish Corporation's "Cultures of the World" book series for (presumably mostly Western) children would on the surface seem to be a great thing. With a list of titles ranging from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, each replete with color photographs, the volumes would apparently comprise a wonderful collection of resources evidencing global diversity and complexity – an excellent means by which to open youthful eyes to the world's historical and cultural richness.

Owing to widely publicized political chaos, violence, famine and the bungled U.N. and U.S. intervention during the early 1990s, Western images of Somalia are dominantly negative, so having a children's volume on that country is to be particularly welcomed. Unfortunately, the Cavendish one under review is so problematic that, despite some good content, children should not be permitted to read it without close guidance. The book is at least as flawed as the other Cavendish texts recently reviewed on H-AfrTeach (e.g. Liberia, Sudan, Zambia), and quite possibly more so.

Despite its many errors and problems, however, it is not entirely without merit. It is nicely written, with colorful adjectives and lively verbs, although some terms may be inappropriate (e.g. tribes) or too difficult for the targeted 9-12 year-old age group (e.g. Socialist, public sector, bigamy, ablutions). Best of all it contains a plethora of beautiful and vivid photographs of people, environment, architecture, animals and myriad human activities. The images generally complement the text and are all succinctly labeled. For me the best part of the book was a picture of an army of men sporting tall shields and long spears, with the caption:

"The picture below was headlined "The Mad Mullah's soldiers: some of the dervishes who have been terrorizing Somaliland" by a British newspaper on August 16, 1913. It subsequently turned out that the report was falsified, as the men in the picture, reported as Somalis attacking the town of Burao, were not Somalis at all but Zulus, who would not have been anywhere near Burao"(pg. 23).

Teachers could do a lot, in a variety of situations, with that photo and humorous caption. I also liked the box-sections on the self-proclaimed independent Republic of Somaliland (pg. 11), the story of "How the Leopard Got Its Spots" (pg. 15) and the section on early (1940s) political groups such as the Somali Youth League (pg. 25). Finally, the sections on famine and war, various photographs of "mercenaries" and the ravages of war, and a statement on daily "killings, kidnap, rape and other atrocities" (pg. 36) show that the author is not attempting to convey a simplistic or romantic vision of a country beset by serious problems.

The book's mistakes and problems, however, are many. On the lighter side, Hassig writes that Arabic "originated in Saudi Arabia during the seventh century, but was not recorded in writing until many centuries later." She adds that "there are three tongues in Arabic; the one known to Somalis is classical Arabic, the language of the Koran"(pg. 80). Of course, (spoken and written) Arabic traces to far earlier than the seventh century and there are far more than three varieties, or "dialects" (if this is what is meant by "tongues") of the language. Better yet, fans of wildlife may be surprised to read that in Somalia's two main rivers Somali swimmers must "watch out for predatory creatures such as crocodiles and alligators," (pg. 95) and that Somalis eat the meat of both these creatures (pg. 119). Alligators in Africa?!

More serious and far less excusable is the author's handling of Islam, the religion of the vast majority of Somalis. Where to begin on this issue? Those who know something about Islam may be startled to hear that, as Muslims, Somalis "believe fate controls their lives" (pg. 57) and that Muslims worship Allah and Muhammad (pg. 70). Believing in God's will is not the same thing as believing one is controlled by fate, and Muslims most certainly do not worship the Prophet.

Similarly, although the majority of Somalis are indeed Sunnis, being Sunni does not mean one follows the "Sufi school of Islam" (pg. 69), whatever that might be. And if the names of Somalia's dominant Sufi orders are to be

mentioned, why must they be stereotyped as well? (e.g. “The Qadiriya are considered highly spiritual people because they remove themselves from modern problems;” “The Salihya are regarded as the most fanatic sect [sic.] of Sunni Muslims;” “The Ahmediyas have rituals of simple prayers and hymns, during which followers fall into a trance” (pg.75)).

The hadith are not “a book of legends about the Prophet Mohammed” (pg. 75). They are a corpus of literature, with carefully detailed and closely examined chains of transmission (to assess their validity and reliability by historically-developed Muslim standards), which record various sayings, sermons, daily practices and behaviors of the Prophet Muhammad. It is true that during the month of Muharram Shiite Muslims look forward to and celebrate Ashura (pp. 105-6). However, the Ashura is celebrated by Sunnis as well. The Ramadan fast is one of the pillars of Islam, incumbent upon all able-bodied Muslims; it is not simply a means to “show devotion to Allah,” and certainly not to Muhammad (pg. 108). That Somalis do not eat pork may be attributed less to the idea that “the eating habits of pigs are regarded as unclean” (pg. 113) than to the fact that the Qur’an forbids it (without providing a specific explanation).

There are ways to make religious practices, beliefs and complexities comprehensible to young people without resorting to facile explanations and summaries, especially when they may create, exacerbate or reinforce misunderstandings about a religion already negatively stereotyped and poorly understood in the West. However, if the odd, decontextualized and uninformative description of the Hajj pilgrimage (pg. 73), in addition to the few selected examples above, is anything to go by, the author just does not know enough about the religion to write more accurately about it.

Hassig does know much more about Somali women and is justifiably not happy with the position of most women in Somali society. But she exerts little effort to contextualize the toughness of their lives within a country where life is not easy for many, regardless of gender, and she tends to emphasize women’s “inferior” social status. In an inset on “Long Mourning Period for Somali Widows,” readers learn that a Somali widow must “adhere to a strict Muslim ritual after [her husband’s] death,” which is to last “for four months and 10 days.” (pg. 77) Whether four months and ten days is a long period to mourn for a spouse may be debatable, but the author does not so much as allude to the reason, prescribed by Islamic law, for this specified amount of time: to determine whether the widow is pregnant or not, and if so to

better ascertain paternity.

And the prohibitions upon widows which are listed are not particularly strict when viewed against a variety of cultures around the world; they are strict only when compared to a secular Western culture generally devoid of defined mourning rituals, which is the background from which many of the book’s readers may hail. If so, there is nothing here to challenge their thought about their own culture or to understand how or why Somali Islamic culture is different from it.

Half of a blocked off section on pg. 61, titled “Still a Long Way to Go for Somali Women,” is devoted to the “cruel tradition” and “barbaric act” of circumcision – which as practiced in Somalia is certainly cruel, and even arguably “barbaric,” to my way of seeing things. Fortunately, no details of the procedure are provided. But nor is there anything in way of explanation, other than it “originated as a way to keep young women pure until marriage,” as if that statement is meaningful to children readers.

The section on “Circumcision Ceremonies” (pg. 111) mentions that both boys and girls are circumcised. Activities surrounding girls’ circumcision are then summarized, but nothing further is said of boys. The caption to that page’s photo, full of smiling girls, states “circumcision is a painful ordeal for the young girls of Somalia.” To be sure, female and male circumcision are often qualitatively different. But why are those differences not mentioned? Perhaps the grisly details are too graphic for young readers. But if we are unwilling to discuss details about circumcision with them, is it appropriate to give the subject prominence and bent (either way) of the sort found here?

On the topic of language, it is wrong to say that Somalia was “a country without a written language until 1972” or that a “written form of the language [was] introduced only since 1972” (pg. 79; also pg. 82). 1972 witnessed the decision to standardize an official writing system for Somali (which was imposed in 1973), but the language had long been penned in the Arabic alphabet, and at least one indigenous writing system had been invented and begun to spread by the early 1920s (and as late as 1969 there were an estimated 40,000 persons and at least one journal that employed it).

Also, Hassig seems to think that knowledge of Arabic is a necessary prerequisite to knowledge of the Qur’an: “Most Somalis know Arabic well enough to recite the Koran from memory.” (pg. 83) First, knowing a language does not equate with the ability to memorize a book, and second there is no country in the world where most peo-

ple can recite the entire Qur'an from memory. Lastly, if "Arabic is difficult to learn," it is not necessarily because "it is very different from most other languages." (pg. 80) And I would suggest that informing an audience of (probably largely monolingual) children that languages "different" from theirs are difficult to learn is to do them a disservice.

The index is fine, but the map is inadequate and the bibliography lists an idiosyncratic selection of books (two of which have been republished in updated/revised form) that is too advanced for children aged 9-12 and probably for older youth as well.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the volume under review is the way it "others" the Somalis, rather than portraying them as fellow human beings with whom young non-Somali readers may have things in common. The overall tone often descends into that of old-fashioned ethnographic generalizations or otherwise reinforces the idea that Somalis are "exotic." On pg. 63 we read that "Somalis are a good-looking people. They are generally tall and slim with attractive features and fine skin." On the same page the return visit to Somalia of a famous fashion model is related under the heading "Iman: the Return of the Native." On pg. 76 there is a section on "Evil Spirits in Folk Beliefs." On pg. 87 Somalis are said to be "natural performers and have produced their own plays" On pg. 99 we learn that Somali "children

always cheer out loud for the Indians in cowboy and Indian movies – because they think that the Indians look a bit like them." On pg. 102 we read that "for centuries Somalis have been intrigued by the stars in the sky and have spent hours gazing at them." And on pg. 121 we get the only recipe in the entire book, for a dish that is likely to sound "gross" to many Western children: "liver and onions" (specifying that the liver may be of "beef, goat, or camel").

Surely members of H-AfrTeach will agree that shaping or changing the ways Western youth think about Africa is best done from an early age. Believing that myself, I find the notion that Western children may be reading books about Africa to be laudable and exciting. But at the same time the idea that they may be reading books like the one under review is frightening. Its tone, stereotypes and errors ensured that I could not read many pages before I pushed it aside in dismay; I just could not shake the idea that young Westerners might be reading it at school, and if so what would they be learning about Somalia, Somalis and Islam? Regrettably, especially despite its many beautiful photographs, this book represents a missed opportunity.

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