



# SOMALIA'S CULTURAL RIGHTS LANDSCAPE:

AN ENABLER FOR  
PEACE AND INCLUSION

—  
DECEMBER 2025



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER







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# Executive Summary

This report, prepared by the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), provides an overview of the implementation of cultural rights in Somalia. It underscores Somalia's rich and diverse cultural heritage and its linguistic diversity, oral traditions, poetry, music, cuisine, traditional arts and historical sites, all of which are integral to the identity of its people and central to the social fabric.

Cultural rights are enshrined in various national, regional and international legal instruments to which Somalia is a party, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>1</sup> and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia and other relevant legal frameworks provide the foundation for the protection and promotion of cultural rights. The full realisation of these rights faces challenges, including prolonged armed conflict, recurrent climate-related disasters, protracted internal displacement and limited state authority in some parts of the country.

Despite the challenges, the cultural sector has seen a revival, and the Federal Government of Somalia has rebuilt some of the national institutions destroyed during the civil war and worked to enhance the less developed legal and policy frameworks for cultural preservation. Concerted efforts and strengthened collaboration among federal and state governments, local communities, civil society organisations, community-based organisations and international partners are essential to advance the promotion and protection of cultural rights. Additionally, efforts to foster inclusivity and raise awareness about the importance of cultural diversity and cultural rights in Somalia will play a pivotal role in the context of the peace and state-building process that Somalia is undergoing.

The report provides recommendations to the Federal Government of Somalia, the Federal Member States and international partners, including strengthening the capacity of national cultural institutions to rebuild, revive and strengthen Somalia's built and living heritage, develop and strengthen legal frameworks, institutions and policies and protect and restore cultural property, such as architecture, artworks, museum collections, and archaeological sites; and ensuring the Somali public is able to contribute, access, and participate in cultural life in Somalia.

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1. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, acceded to by Somalia on 24 January 1990. Freedom of artistic expression is enshrined in Article 19, and the rights of minorities to enjoy their own cultures, both in private and public, are outlined in Article 27, among others. See also United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, 2023, A/HRC/53/25, para. 3 <<https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/25>> [accessed 16 July 2025].

# Report on Cultural Rights in Somalia

## I. Introduction

1. This report, prepared by the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), aims to provide an overview of the state of cultural rights in Somalia.

2. Cultural rights protect the development and expression of cultural identities. At their core, they empower individuals and groups to express their humanity, worldviews and the meanings they attribute to their existence and development through various forms of human expression. This can include the arts, cultural heritage or languages, as well as sciences, knowledge, convictions, religions and beliefs, sports and games, rites and ceremonies, production methods, technology, institutions and livelihoods, connections with nature and the environment, food and dress. They also encompass the rights to access and participate in heritage and resources that facilitate the processes of identification and development<sup>2</sup>. As noted in the 2018 Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, "the exercise of cultural rights is fundamental to creating and maintaining peaceful and just societies and to promoting enjoyment of other universal human rights."<sup>3</sup>

3. The following sections will examine the international and national legal frameworks governing cultural rights, the impact of armed conflict on cultural heritage, and the role of cultural rights in conflict prevention and peace-building. The report also highlights the contributions of the Somali people, including minority groups, and the challenges they face, as well as the efforts made by the Federal Government of Somalia and civil society to preserve and promote cultural heritage. By providing a detailed analysis of the current state of cultural rights in Somalia, this report seeks to inform and guide policymakers, civil society, and international partners in their efforts to protect and promote cultural rights for a more inclusive and peaceful society.

## II. Methodology

4. The information contained in this report has been collected by UNTMIS, mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2753 (2024), in collaboration with OHCHR, to support the Federal Government of Somalia in the promotion and protection of human rights, including through institutional capacity-building, technical assistance, and policy guidance in Somalia<sup>4</sup>. The report uses the OHCHR human rights monitoring methodology, which requires independent and reliable sources, which consists of regular engagement with key stakeholders, field visits, and interviews, including with members of the Federal Government of Somalia, Federal Member States, civil society, human rights defenders, community leaders, and the affected communities, humanitarian actors, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), among others.

2. United Nations Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, International Standards <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-cultural-rights/international-standards>> [accessed 29 June 2025]. See also, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General comment No. 21: Right of everyone to take part in cultural life (Article 15, para. 16), 2009, paras. 10-13.

3. United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, 2018, para. 2. <<https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/55>> [accessed 29 June 2025]. Moreover, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights lays the foundation for understanding cultural rights as part of the broader human rights framework, in para. 2. It closely links the right to take part in cultural life to the rights to education (Articles 13 and 14 of the Covenant), self-determination (Article 1), an adequate standard of living (Article 11) and enjoyment of the benefits of scientific progress (Article 15(1)(b)) among others.

4. United Nations, Security Council Resolution 2753 (2024), adopted by the Security Council at its 9764th meeting on 30 October 2024 <<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/323/40/pdf/n2432340.pdf>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

5. During the preparatory work for this report, UNTMIS/OHCHR also conducted a desk review of relevant documentation and domestic and international legal frameworks, including the review of reports submitted by the Federal Government of Somalia to the United Nations human rights treaty bodies. The report also applies an inclusive approach that aims to capture the different needs and perspectives of the diverse groups in Somalia, including women, men, children, internally displaced persons (IDPs), minorities, and persons with disabilities.

## III. Legal Framework of Cultural Rights in Somalia

### 3.1 International Legal Framework

6. Cultural rights are reflected in multiple international human rights treaties and declarations<sup>5</sup>. Somalia must respect, protect and fulfil cultural rights, according to its obligations under international legal instruments to which it is a state party<sup>6</sup>, including the ICESCR. The latter affirms cultural rights, which comprise the right of everyone to participate in, access, and contribute to cultural life<sup>7</sup>. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights considers that availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability and appropriateness are necessary conditions that have to be met for the full realisation of the right of everyone to take part in cultural life on the basis of equality and non-discrimination<sup>8</sup>.

7. Additionally, several UNESCO conventions further elaborate on the protection of cultural rights<sup>9</sup>. Since 2020, Somalia has been a state party to the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The first aims to identify and safeguard the world's most outstanding natural and cultural heritage, while the latter focuses on safeguarding the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage. As one of the initial steps under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Somalia is required, with full participation and consent of the affected communities, to elaborate a list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding, which remains pending<sup>10</sup>.

5. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 5 (e) (vi) (ratified by Somalia on 26 August 1975) which refers to the right to equal participation in cultural activities; the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, para.2, which includes the right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life (ratified by Somalia on 1 October 2015); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (acceded to by Somalia on 24 January 1990); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 30, para. 1 (ratified by Somalia on 6 August 2019). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (acceded to by Somalia on 24 January 1990), which among other cultural-related rights, include the rights of persons belonging to minorities to enjoy their own culture, to process and practice their religion and to participate in cultural rights; the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, Article 2, paras.1 and 2.

6. Somalia is a state party to six of the nine core human rights treaties. See United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Treaty Body Database – Somalia <[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/\\_countries.aspx?CountryCode=SOM&Lang=EN](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/_countries.aspx?CountryCode=SOM&Lang=EN)> [accessed 11 May 2025].

7. The ICESCR obligates states to uphold cultural rights, including self-determination (Article 1); protection against discrimination (Article 2); gender equality (Article 3); participation in cultural life (Article 15(1)(a)); access to the benefits of scientific progress and its applications (Article 15(1)(b)); and safeguarding of creative expression (Article 15(1)(c)). Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates states to respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity (Article 31.2). Additionally, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates states to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport on an equal basis with others (Article 30).

8. ICCPR also contains robust provisions for cultural rights. It not only safeguards the rights of individuals belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture, profess and practise their own religion, or use their own language (Article 27), but it also recognises that the ideal of free human beings

8. On the other hand, Somalia has begun to engage with UNESCO on the implementation of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and submitted its first Tentative List of natural sites to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in February 2024, to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List<sup>11</sup>.

9. Although Somalia has not ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, it remains bound by customary international humanitarian law (IHL), which applies to all parties to an armed conflict regardless of treaty ratification status. The general provisions of IHL protecting civilian property apply to cultural property. For instance, IHL requires all parties to an armed conflict, including non-state organised armed groups in non-international armed conflicts, to adhere to the principles of distinction, proportionality, necessity, and precaution.

10. IHL also contains specific provisions on the protection of cultural property. Under customary IHL, each party to the conflict must respect cultural property and take special care in military operations to avoid damage to buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education or charitable purposes and historic monuments unless they are military objectives. Property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people must not be the object of attack unless imperatively required by military necessity<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, it is prohibited to use property of significant cultural heritage for purposes that may lead to its destruction or damage, unless such use is strictly required by military necessity<sup>13</sup>. Finally, customary IHL requires each party to the conflict to protect cultural property and prohibits all seizure of or destruction or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity, education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science; and any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people<sup>14</sup>.

11. At the regional level, African instruments play a crucial role in the protection of cultural rights, such as the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the Banjul Charter), which recognises the right of every individual to freely take part in the cultural life of their community<sup>15</sup>.

9. The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), and the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972): These conventions seek to identify, protect, and preserve cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. Additionally, the following instruments are important in protection and preservation of the cultural and natural heritage: The 1968 Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works, the 1972 Recommendation concerning the Protection, at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage, the 1976 Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas (Section IV), the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the 2003 UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (stresses the responsibility of States to take all appropriate measures to protect cultural heritage in conformity with the principles and objectives of, *inter alia*, the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage).

10. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 17. Paris, 2003. Also see UNESCO, List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

11. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention, Somalia submits its first Tentative List for natural sites, 2024 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2707/>> [accessed 13 May 2025].

12. International Committee of the Red Cross, International Humanitarian Law Databases, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules, Rule 38, 2005 <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1>> [accessed 22 July 2025].

13. *Ibid*, Rule 39.

14. *Ibid*, Rule 40.

15. See Article 17: 1. Every individual shall have the right to education. 2. Every individual may freely take part in the cultural life of his community. 3. The promotion and protection of morals and traditional values recognised by the community shall be the duty of the State, <[https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011\\_african\\_charter\\_on\\_human\\_and\\_peoples\\_rights\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdf)> [accessed 9 July 2025].

## 3.2 National Legal, Policy and Institutional Frameworks

### The legal framework for promoting cultural rights at the federal level

12. The national legal and policy framework governing cultural rights in Somalia includes constitutional provisions, legislative measures, and policy initiatives aimed at promoting and protecting cultural rights within the country. Challenges persist in the effective development and implementation of these frameworks<sup>16</sup>. For example, the Provisional Constitution of Somalia, adopted in 2012, provided the foundation for the protection of cultural rights in Article 31 (language and culture), Article 32 (right to freedom of expression, and freedom to seek, receive, and share information and ideas, including cultural expressions) and Article 27 (right to education, which includes promotion of cultural awareness and respect for cultural diversity).

13. In March 2024, as part of the Constitutional Review Process, the Somali Parliament approved the new constitutional provisions related to chapters 1 to 4, which guarantee cultural rights in Article 30 (Culture and Language) and encourage the Federal Government to establish a dedicated agency to develop and enhance Somali heritage, culture, language, and history<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, Article 11 (Equality) prohibits discrimination based on culture, and Article 29(5) (Education) requires national educational institutions to promote heritage and culture among their responsibilities.

14. The implementation of the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Sustainable Development of the Culture Sector in Somalia (2024–2028) is ongoing and outlines the commitment of the Federal Government of Somalia to preserving and promoting cultural diversity, heritage, and expression<sup>18</sup>. The Education Sector Strategic Plan (2018–2022) also includes provisions for integrating cultural education into the national curriculum<sup>19</sup>.

16. Challenges, such as limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and ongoing security concerns. For more information about the country's background on cultural issues before the reporting period, see the report: UNESCO library, Scoping Study on the Culture Sector in Somalia: A Research Study, 2013 <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000229187>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

17. Article 30: Culture and Language 1) Government institutions at all levels shall promote the language, heritage, and noble culture of the Somali people, striving to eradicate harmful traditional practices, both ancient and emerging, that negatively impact religion, unity, and public health. (2) Government institutions responsible for this area must collect, protect, and preserve the national heritage, such as historical sites within the Federal Republic of Somalia, while also advancing knowledge, skills, technology, and techniques that enable these institutions to discharge these duties. (3) Government institutions responsible for this area must develop and preserve the cultural norms and dialects of all Somali people. (4) The Federal Government shall establish a dedicated agency to develop and enhance Somali heritage, culture, language, and history. See the Somali version of the amended chapters: Federal Republic of Somalia. Amendments to Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the Provisional Constitution of Somalia. Office of the President, Official Bulletin, April 2024 <[https://www.osagsomalia.com/media/documents/bulletins-contents/legislation/2024/WAXKA\\_BEDDELKA\\_CUTUBYADA\\_JAAD\\_2AAD3AAD\\_IYO\\_4AAD\\_EE\\_DASTUURKA.pdf](https://www.osagsomalia.com/media/documents/bulletins-contents/legislation/2024/WAXKA_BEDDELKA_CUTUBYADA_JAAD_2AAD3AAD_IYO_4AAD_EE_DASTUURKA.pdf)> [accessed 2 August 2025].

18. On 23 and 24 November 2020, a national consultation meeting was organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and SOMASA to develop a National Strategic Plan for the safeguarding and promotion of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Somalia. <<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/somali-youth-guide-development-national-culture-strategy-somalia>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

19. The Education Sector Strategic Plan (2022–2026) on 48.2 Program Improving the quality and relevance of higher education includes the renovation of the Somali National Library to have access to historical and cultural archives. See the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, the Federal Government of Somalia, National Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022–2026, 2022 at page 64 <<https://moe.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ESSP-2022-2026.pdf>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

15. The institutional framework in Somalia includes several key bodies with competencies for the promotion and protection of cultures. The federal Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MoICT) is the primary government agency responsible for formulating and implementing cultural policies and programmes. Within the MoICT, the Department of Culture focuses on areas such as cultural preservation, safeguarding traditional practices, and promoting Somali languages, among others<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education (MoECHE) also has a role in the promotion and preservation of culture, coordinating activities with MoICT. The Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts (SOMASA) promotes research on culture, language, and education.

16. The UNESCO-affiliated Somali National Commission for Education, Science, and Culture plays a role in promoting cultural rights and engagement in international forums and cultural centres<sup>21</sup>. Other cultural institutions such as the National Museum, the National Theatre, the National Library, the Somali National TV, and Radio Muqdisho play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting the nation's rich heritage. The reopened National Theatre of Somalia serves as a central venue for performing arts, showcasing plays, poetry, music, and traditional dances, thereby fostering cultural expression and community engagement. Collectively, these institutions are meant to ensure that Somalia's cultural legacy remains vibrant and accessible to future generations.

17. While the Provisional Constitution of Somalia and the constitutions of federal member states recognise cultural rights, yet, Somalia does not have dedicated national legislation that specifically governs cultural rights or establishes mechanisms for their promotion and protection. Institutionally, at the federal level, the responsibility for the culture sector is divided between the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education and the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, each operating under a separate mandate and within its own agencies. This would support a cohesive national legal framework and provide approaches to clear legal protections for cultural rights across all regions and social groups in Somalia, aligning with both Somalia's national obligations and its international human rights commitments.

## The legal framework for promoting cultural rights at the Federal Member

18. The constitutions of Puntland and "Somaliland" include explicit provisions dedicated to the promotion and protection of cultural rights<sup>22</sup>. The Puntland Constitution incorporates several articles that emphasise the importance of Somali cultures and traditions. For example, Article 3(3)(e) highlights the promotion of positive Somali cultures and traditions as a guiding principle. However, the constitution does not define what constitutes "positive Somali culture and traditions" and who determines them. Article 32(10) tasks the government with the responsibility of promoting culture and heritage through education. Additionally, Article 15 protects the right to form, join, and participate in cultural organisations. Similarly, the "Somaliland" Constitution<sup>23</sup>, under Article 16, emphasises the promotion of knowledge, literature, arts, and culture. It encourages creativity and research while ensuring protection of cultural practices. The establishment of cultural institutions, such as the Museum of "Somaliland", which opened in July 2024, and the Hargeisa Cultural Centre, further underscores "Somaliland's" commitment to preserving and promoting its cultural heritage.

20. See the Somali National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2024 <[https://www.facebook.com/NatcomSomalia/?locale=hi\\_IN&20https%3A%2F%2Fmoi.gov.so%2Fova\\_dep%2Fculture%2F](https://www.facebook.com/NatcomSomalia/?locale=hi_IN&20https%3A%2F%2Fmoi.gov.so%2Fova_dep%2Fculture%2F)> [accessed 5 May 2025]. See also the federal Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, Department of Culture <[https://moi.gov.so/ova\\_dep/culture/](https://moi.gov.so/ova_dep/culture/)> [accessed 11 May 2025].

21. See the Somali National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, 2024 <[https://www.facebook.com/NatcomSomalia/?locale=hi\\_IN&20https%3A%2F%2Fmoi.gov.so%2Fova\\_dep%2Fculture%2F](https://www.facebook.com/NatcomSomalia/?locale=hi_IN&20https%3A%2F%2Fmoi.gov.so%2Fova_dep%2Fculture%2F)> [accessed 11 May 2025].

22. Constitution of the Puntland State of Somalia. 2009. <<https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/soml97962.pdf>> [14 July 2025].

23. Constitution of Somaliland, 2001 <<https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2001/en/72769>> [accessed 2 August 2025].

19. "Somaliland" also has the Department of Archaeology Protection and Indigenous Arts Promotion under the Ministry of Trade and Tourism. The Department's mandate includes the development, research and implementation of legislation and policies about the protection of archaeology and the promotion of indigenous arts industries in "Somaliland."<sup>24</sup> The Department started as a community-based, self-help archaeology initiative under the leadership of a now-renowned Somali female archaeologist and an associate Professor in Heritage Studies at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London<sup>25</sup>.

20. Although the constitutions of Hirshabelle, Jubaland, and Galmudug do not contain specific articles dedicated to the protection and promotion of cultural rights, they recognise the relevant international human rights frameworks and include general references to elements of cultural rights<sup>26</sup>.

## IV. Somalia: a country rich in cultures and history

21. Somalia is home to both tangible and living cultural heritage, reflecting its rich history, traditions and interactions with other societies and cultures. It also reflects how Somalis interacted with their physical environment and utilised natural resources.

### Tangible cultural heritage

22. Somalia has many historical centres and archaeological sites, among the oldest in Africa, from the cave paintings of Laas Geel near Hargeisa, the historic centres of Warsheikh, Jaziira, Ghendershe, Marka, Barawe, Kismayo, and Sanaag to the Baajuni islands<sup>27</sup>.

23. One of the oldest historical and archaeological sites in the Horn of Africa is the Buur Heybe inselbergs (also known as Buur Eyle) in Buur Hakaba district, Bay region - 180 kilometres northwest of Mogadishu<sup>28</sup>. Buur Heybe - the mountain of the clay sand - has rock shelters with ancient paintings, in which archaeologists carried out excavation work in the 1930s and 1940s<sup>29</sup>. In 1983, the Somali Government launched the Buur Ecological and Archaeological Project, during which excavations yielded the skeletal remains of fourteen human individuals dating back to the early Holocene period<sup>30</sup>. The traditional inhabitants of the villages surrounding the Buur Heybe area are members of the minority Eylo community, which means hunters with dogs. Their main occupations are hunting and pottery making. The Buur Heybe potters continue to produce a variety of household utensils in different shapes, forms, and sizes. The popular items still used in southern Somalia are cooking pots, water storage containers, ablution pots, teapots and incense burners<sup>31</sup>.

24. See Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Trade and Tourism, Republic of "Somaliland" <<https://mott.govsomaliland.org/article/department-archeology>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

25. See HadhwanaagTV, Dr. Sada Mire Talks About indigenous And Community Archaeology In Somaliland, 2025 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDJOIXLCQQM&t=7s>> [accessed 9 July 2025].

26. For example, Chapter 2 of the Constitution of Hirshabelle recognises the application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international law, and treaties. See the Provisional Constitution of Hirshabelle State of Somalia, approved by the Delegation on 5 October 2016 <<https://moifar.gov.so/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/DASTUURKA-HIRSHABELLE.pdf>> [accessed 2 August 2025]. Also see the Provisional Constitution of Galmudug State of Somalia, approved by the Legislative Assembly on 28 July 2015 <[https://parliament.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/Dastuuro/Dastuurka\\_ku\\_meelgaarka\\_SOM\\_03092012-1.pdf](https://parliament.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/Dastuuro/Dastuurka_ku_meelgaarka_SOM_03092012-1.pdf)> [accessed 2 August 2025] and the Provisional Constitution of the Jubaland State of Somalia. 1 August 2015 <<https://moifar.gov.so/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Jubaland-Provisional-Constitution-ENG-Version.pdf>> [accessed 2 August 2025].

27. Abdulkadir, Khadid Maow, Restaino, Gabrielle, and Spina, Maria, Mogadishu and Its Urban Development Through History: Pages of the City's History. Exhibition catalogue. p. 13, 2018 <[https://www.casadellacultura.it/pdfarticoli/2021-29a\\_Carbonara-su-Spina-et-al\\_CATALOGO-rid.pdf](https://www.casadellacultura.it/pdfarticoli/2021-29a_Carbonara-su-Spina-et-al_CATALOGO-rid.pdf)> [accessed 11 May 2025].

28. Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, Historical Dictionary of Somalia (The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford, 2003), at page 61.

29. Ibid.

30. Brandt, S.A, Early Holocene Mortuary Practices and Hunter-gatherer Adaptations in Southern Somalia, *World Archaeology*, 20(1), (1988). p.40-56, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/124524>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

31. Belkin, Tara and Brandt, Steven, The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia (originally issued in 1991 and reissued in 2006) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYLPJZLNNHs>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

**24.** As a State party to the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Somalia nominated two nature areas for its first Tentative List to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in February 2024: Bushbushle National Park in Lower Juba region, Jubaland and the Hobyo Grass and Shrubland, located along the Indian Ocean coast between Hobyo in Galmudug and Warsheikh and Hirshabelle<sup>32</sup>. In January 2025, Somalia submitted another nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List: the Mogadishu Seconde-Lido Lighthouse, an architectural heritage in Mogadishu built in the early 1900s during the Italian colonial period. The landmark building, located in the historic Hamarweyne district, has been the symbol of the city for over a century. However, it partially collapsed in May 2023 due to the combined impacts of war, ageing and weathering<sup>33</sup>.

**25.** Other tangible cultural heritage of the Somali people includes traditional crafts such as textile making (Alindi fabric, and Barawe hat), cooking utensils, mats and baskets (exclusively carried out by women in Somalia), wooden tools, leather-made sandals, traditional containers for water and milk, and farming and fishing tools. In addition to being part of tangible heritage, the crafts continue to serve practical purposes in the daily lives of the Somali people. The preservation of traditional crafts in Somalia, including many belonging to minorities, faces significant challenges. For instance, the gold and silversmithing craft in Mogadishu has suffered from the prolonged armed conflict and competition from imported jewellery. Another threat to its preservation is the ageing generation of artisans and the declining interest among young Somalis in pursuing this craft. For instance, in Mogadishu, in Hamarweyne district, the heart of the gold and silversmithing industry, only approximately 20 men and six women continue to practise these crafts from the Qalin Shube community. This is a serious challenge for the community, which is identified with its craft. Gold and silversmithing is not just a job opportunity, but it gives the community an identity, a culture, and a shared history<sup>34</sup>.

## Living cultural heritage

**26.** Somalia's living cultural heritage encompasses oral traditions, poetry, music, and social practices that have been passed down through generations. This heritage is a blend of cultures and lifestyles ranging from nomadic and pastoral traditions to agro-pastoralism, farming, trading, and recent urbanisation. The contributions of the coastal communities, with their distinct languages, traditions, and art forms, further enrich this cultural tapestry, showcasing the diversity of Somali heritage.

**27.** The traditional clan system has been an essential aspect of the social, cultural, political and economic life of the Somali people. Linked to this clan system is Xeer, the Somali customary law, which has been an ever-present part of the Somali way of life. Xeer is not a written legal code but rather a set of traditions and precedents that have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Clan elders play a crucial role in Somali Xeer and its application, serving as negotiators, mediators and decision-makers to settle disputes and maintain social order<sup>35</sup>. For example, Xeer Ciise is a highly structured, codified system of oral customary laws of the Somali-Issa clan that provides democratic governance for the community, including a political constitution, penal code, and a code of social conduct<sup>36</sup>. In December 2024, the Xeer Ciise of the Somali-Issa communities in Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

32. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage, Somalia submits its first Tentative List for natural sites, 2024 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2707>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

33. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage, Mogadishu Seconde-Lido Lighthouse, 2025 <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6754/>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

34. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UN SOM), Qalin Shube goldsmith Omar Nur Basharah: "This is more than a job. It runs through our veins and forms the basis of our history, 2023 <<https://unsm.unmissions.org/qalin-shube-goldsmith-omar-nur-basharah-%E2%80%9C-more-job-it-runs-through-our-veins-and-forms-basis-our>> [accessed 11 May 2025].

35. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage, Individual Case, The Xeer Traditional Legal System of Somalia, 2024 <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/individual-case-study-00988?id=00032>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

36. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage, Xeer Ciise: Oral customary laws of Somali-Issa communities in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia, 2024 <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/xeer-ciise-oral-customary-laws-of-somali-issa-communities-in-ethiopia-djibouti-and-somalia-02087>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

28. Under the traditional Somali Xeer system, justice is administered collectively through the clan structure. Male clan elders, who are the traditional custodians of both Somali customary law and community authority, adjudicate, negotiate, and resolve offences, violations, disputes, and conflicts. One of the defining features of Xeer is its prioritisation of collective responsibility over individual rights and personal accountability. Another notable feature is the limited participation of women in Xeer proceedings, particularly in decision-making roles, even in cases that directly affect them. This raises concerns regarding the extent to which it protects the rights of women and girls. For example, the Somali Xeer fails to deliver justice for female survivors of sexual violence, raising serious questions about its compatibility with Somalia's national and international human rights obligations<sup>37</sup>.

29. Dances and rituals are integral to cultural identity, serving as forms of storytelling, communal bonding, entertainment, and preserving historical narratives. These are community-based living cultural heritages in which traditional bearers, practitioners, and knowledgeable individuals in each local community or clan safeguard and preserve their dances and rituals<sup>38</sup>. For example, the Saar dance is traditionally performed by both women and men in southern regions as a remedy for a perceived illness, and it is also enjoyed as a form of entertainment and celebration. Istunka is a famous dance battle marking the arrival of the new year in Afgoye district, Lower Shabelle<sup>39</sup>. Somali dances are associated with a geographic area and a specific community/clan. For instance, Wilisiqo (central Somalia), Dhaanto (performed mainly in the border areas between Somalia and Ethiopia), Shirib (south and central), Kabeebey (riverine areas), and Sharax (Benaadiri community). The Baajuni dances feature intricate footwork and storytelling elements reflecting their maritime heritage, while Garre ceremonies involve ritualistic movements symbolising social unity and spiritual beliefs. Similarly, the Jiido harvest rituals incorporate chants and movements celebrating the bounty of the land.

30. Somali music is another form of cultural expression that reflects the country's oral traditions, cultural diversity, ancient history and influences from Arabia and other parts of the world<sup>40</sup>. This form is used to narrate stories through songs that convey tales of love, prosperity, sorrow, struggle and everyday social issues in life. Additionally, Somali songs convey the spiritual life of the community as a whole, encompassing its past, present, and future<sup>41</sup>. Radio Hargeisa and Radio Muqdisho, established in 1943 and 1951, respectively, contributed to the development of Somali music<sup>42</sup>. The National Theatre in Mogadishu (built in 1968) became a centre for Somali music, hosting shows, concerts, and singing competitions. The renowned Waaberi, the Iftin band, and other Somali artist groups utilised the National Theatre and other public spaces in the country to enrich the cultural landscape in Somalia, resulting in the 1970s being referred to as the golden era for Somali music<sup>43</sup>.

37. United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UN SOM) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Tackling Sexual Violence in Somalia: Prevention and Protection (January 2017 – December 2022), 2023 <[https://unsom.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/tackling\\_sexual\\_violence\\_in\\_somalia\\_prevention\\_and\\_protection\\_jan\\_2017\\_-\\_dec\\_2022.pdf](https://unsom.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/tackling_sexual_violence_in_somalia_prevention_and_protection_jan_2017_-_dec_2022.pdf)> [accessed 30 June 2025].

38. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage, Involvement of communities, groups and individuals <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/involvement-of-communities-00033>> [28 May 2025].

39. The Somali Democratic Republic Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, Somali Folk Dances, 1977 <<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://arcadia.sba.uniroma3.it/bitstream/2307/2949/1/Somali%20folk-dances.pdf>> [Accessed 28 January 2025].

40. Bashir Goth, Somali music through the ages, Music in Africa, 2018 <<https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/somali-music-through-ages>> [accessed 14 July 2025].

41. Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, Historical Dictionary of Somalia (The Scarecrow Press, Inc, Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford, 2003), at page 102.

42. Ibid. pp. 186 and 259.

43. BBC World Service, Somalia, The Somali funk spirit that has overcome anarchy and exile, 2023 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64414472>> [accessed 14 July 2025].

31. As an oral society, poetry has been at the heart of Somali cultures, serving multiple purposes from functioning as an art form and a medium of communication to offering a commentary on politics, cultures, society, history and religion. Poetry has a significant presence in Somali society, enabling individuals and groups to present their cases most persuasively<sup>44</sup>. Hence, commentators refer to Somalis as “nothing if not a nation of poets.”<sup>45</sup> As poetry holds a special place in Somali cultures, poets wield significant power and influence in Somali society, and one commentator considers that poets in Somali cultures possess political power far beyond that of their counterparts in other cultures<sup>46</sup>. This power can serve as a tool for conflict and incitement of rivalries and enmities between clans or as a means to resolve conflicts, build peace and achieve reconciliation<sup>47</sup>.

32. Women play an important role in Somali poetry. Buraanbur is a classical form of Somali poetry performed by women, serving as a medium and platform for them to express their thoughts, share their experiences and address serious matters related to women, family and other aspects of life<sup>48</sup>. This genre is performed at weddings, social gatherings and celebrations, and it is a lively art form when accompanied by drums, clapping and dance. Buraanbur plays a fundamental role in shaping society, educating children, conveying messages about public and political affairs, and raising awareness on the low levels of participation of women<sup>49</sup>.

33. Somali women also play core roles in Somali society and its cultural heritage, contributing significantly to family life, social and cultural spheres, and also helping in the preservation of the Somali languages<sup>50</sup>, the performing arts, cuisine, and traditional medicine<sup>51</sup>. With the prolonged armed conflict and recurrent humanitarian crises, the contributions of Somali women to society and culture have grown beyond the traditional gender roles of primary caregiver, as they have increasingly taken on new and expanded roles, including becoming breadwinners for their families. Women dominate the informal sector and 70 per cent of households rely on them for financial support and the creation of enterprises within the country<sup>52</sup>. which further increases their influence on cultures.

34. Despite their importance in Somali cultures, Somali women often suffer disproportionately from certain cultural practices that undermine their rights, dignity and well-being. For example, female genital mutilation (FGM) remains one of the most widespread and harmful traditional practices in Somalia. It inflicts severe and lasting physical and psychological harm to women and girls subjected to it. According to the Somali Health and Demographic Survey (2018–2019), an alarming 99.2 per cent of women and girls aged 15–49 have undergone FGM. The Provisional Constitution of Somalia (2024 amendment) explicitly prohibits this practice, condemning it as “a cruel and degrading practice equivalent to torture.”<sup>53</sup> Despite this strong legal stance, enforcement remains extremely weak, allowing the practice to persist across the country<sup>54</sup>.

44. Samatar, Said S. *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

45. Ahmed I. Samatar, Interview with Professor Said Sheikh Samatar at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington, D.C. 2005 <[https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/bildhaan/v6i0/f\\_002i3i1\\_17715.pdf](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/bildhaan/v6i0/f_002i3i1_17715.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].> [accessed 12 May 2025].

46. Laitin, David D. *Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience*, (University of Chicago Press, 1977), page 37.

47. The Somalia Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (1998), *Spared from Spear—Traditional Somali Behaviour in Warfare*. Somalia: International Committee of the Red Cross <<https://blogs.icrc.org/somalia/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2015/09/ENG-Spared-From-The-Spear-Reference.pdf>> [accessed 14 July 2025]

48. Zeina Saleh, *Buraanbur: The Poetic Dance of Somali Resistance and Celebration*, June 2024 <<https://www.mileworld.com/buraanbur-the-poetic-dance-of-somali-resistance-and-celebration/>> [accessed 9 July 2025]

49. Jama, Zainab Mohamed. *Silent Voices: The Role of Somali Women’s Poetry in Social and Political Life*. Oral Tradition, Vol. 9, No. 1, (1994) <[https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/9i/8\\_jama.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/9i/8_jama.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

50. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *Scoping Study on the Culture Sector in Somalia: A Research Study Report*, 2013 <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000229187>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

51. *Ibid.*

52. See The Africa Enterprise Challenge Fund (AECF), *Growing Women’s Entrepreneurship in Somalia for Impact* <<https://www.aecfafrica.org/growing-womens-entrepreneurship-in-somalia-for-impact/>> [accessed 9 July 2025].

53. Federal Government of Somalia, *Provisional Constitution of Somalia (2024)*, Article 14 (4): Liberty and Security of the Person.

54. In alignment with the Provisional Constitution of Somalia, federal member states have begun enacting local legislation to prohibit all forms of FGM. In May 2024, Galmudug became the first Federal Member State to pass a comprehensive law banning FGM. Following suit, Jubaland approved its own anti-FGM legislation in March 2025. Meanwhile, in South West State, the cabinet endorsed a draft bill banning FGM in 2025.

35. Somalis have used oral traditions and expressions, including their languages, to preserve their living cultural heritage<sup>55</sup>, which has continued to survive for centuries without a written national language. The Somali language was codified in script in October 1972, when the then-Somali government established Somali (Maxaa-tiri) as the sole official language of the state and introduced a national written system using the Latin alphabet. This was a significant milestone in the history of Somalia, as the absence of a written Somali script had hampered the advancement of formal education, which was provided in foreign languages - Italian in the south and English in the north<sup>56</sup>. The introduction of Somali as the medium of instruction, coupled with a national literacy campaign, enabled the Somali population to enjoy its cultural heritage by using their own language for all purposes and at all stages. It also profoundly impacted the Somali cultures by facilitating their documentation and the development of textbooks, literature, and other educational materials in Somali.

36. While Somalia made efforts to adopt a Latin-based script after reviewing 18 different scripts, including Arabic and various local Somali orthographies, the then government of Somalia promoted only the Maxaa-tiri. In contrast, the Maay and a host of other languages and dialects, primarily spoken in the southern parts of Somalia, did not receive much state attention in terms of research and development<sup>57</sup>. The choice of the Maxaa-tiri and its promotion was a highly political decision by the Supreme Revolutionary Council during the early years of the Siad Barre presidency, and any criticism against it was prevented in the name of cultural homogeneity and monolingualism<sup>58</sup>. This preference inhibited the promotion of linguistic diversity in the country and further isolated and hindered the speakers of these languages from fully participating in public affairs and government services<sup>59</sup>.

37. Although Somalia has a rich cultural heritage, Somali people have not fully enjoyed their rights to take part in cultural life due to overlapping political, security, humanitarian and social challenges. The prolonged armed conflict and political instability have severely hindered creativity, artistic expression, accessibility and peaceful assembly. For over three decades, millions of Somalis have been forced to flee from their places of origin, with some of them experiencing multiple displacements within and outside the country in search of safety and protection<sup>60</sup>. Consequently, they lose their physical assets, language, poetry, traditional art and practices, and oral history.

55. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 2, Paris, 2003 <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

56. A. A. Castagno Jr. Somalia. International Conciliation, No. 522. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York, 1959, pp. 337–400 <[https://heinonline.org/HOL/LuceneSearch?terms=author%3A%28Castagno%2C+A+A%29&collection=journals&searchtype=advanced&typea=text&tabfrom=&other\\_cols=yes&submit=Go&sendit=>](https://heinonline.org/HOL/LuceneSearch?terms=author%3A%28Castagno%2C+A+A%29&collection=journals&searchtype=advanced&typea=text&tabfrom=&other_cols=yes&submit=Go&sendit=>) [accessed 12 May 2025].

57. Mukhtar, M. H., "Multilingual Somalia: Ploy or pragmatic" Das SGMOIK Bulletin, 37, (2013), pp. 16–21 <<https://eterna.unibas.ch/bulletin/article/download/960/1175>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

58. Mukhtar M.H, Historical Dictionary of Somalia (The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford, 2003), at page 136.

59. Minority Rights Group International. No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities, 2010 <<https://minorityrights.org/resources/no-redress-somalias-forgotten-minorities/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

60. As of 30 June 2025, the total estimated internally displaced persons in Somalia were 3,499,201, and an additional 949,000 Somali refugees were in neighbouring countries. See: UNHCR, Somalia Situation: Population Dashboard - 30 June 2025 <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/117708>> [accessed 2 August 2025].

## V. The impact of the armed conflict on cultural rights in Somalia

38. In the 20th century, cultural institutions, including some with colonial origins, were established to preserve and promote the cultural resources of Somalia. The respective colonial administrations established the National Museum of Somalia, the Somali National University, Radio Muqdisho and Radio Hargeisa. After achieving independence, Somalia upgraded these institutions and created additional ones that were vital not only for the cultures of the Somali people but also for the overall national development of Somalia. The National Library of Somalia, the National Theatre, the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Somali Film Agency helped Somalis access information, participate in cultural life and celebrate their cultural heritage. These institutions were mainly concentrated in Mogadishu and other urban areas, with limited participation and accessibility in rural areas. The state collapse in the 1990s and the subsequent chaos facilitated the destruction and looting of public property and institutions, including cultural ones. An important contributing factor was the association of these public assets with the military government, which had been accused of committing human rights violations against the Somali people for two decades<sup>61</sup>.

39. The prolonged armed conflict engulfed all parts of Somalia and has caused significant loss of human life and suffering and devastated the cultural heritage of the Somali people—both tangible and living. Hargeisa<sup>62</sup> and Mogadishu<sup>63</sup> saw some of the worst devastation.

40. In Mogadishu, although the conflict and looting engulfed the whole city, the historically and culturally significant districts in the centre of the city - Hamarweyne, Shangaani, Wardhiigley and Boondheere - were particularly affected. Cultural institutions and national heritage landmarks, including the National Theatre, the National Museum, the National Library, the old Garesa Museum, the Somali Film Agency, the Abdulaziz Mosque, the Arba'a Rukun Mosque, the lighthouse of Mogadishu, the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Old Parliament Building, the Al-Uruba Hotel, and the Jubba Hotel, were seriously damaged or destroyed during the 1990s conflicts. What was not destroyed in the war was subsequently looted and shipped to neighbouring countries<sup>64</sup>.

41. A UNESCO Education Sector Assessment in Somalia in 1992 found that within the first four years of the civil war in Somalia, two decades of efforts in the education sector were wiped out and 90 per cent of school buildings in the country were completely or partially destroyed in the context of the 1988-1992 conflicts. Moreover, the Somali National University, libraries, the Ministry of Education and Culture and all school records were destroyed<sup>65</sup>.

61. United Nations Department of Public Information, Africa Renewal. From strife to revival, Mogadishu holds hopes and dreams, 2016 <<https://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/strife-revival-mogadishu-holds-hopes-dreams/53946/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

62. The devastation started with the eruption of the armed conflict in 1988, as illustrated by the systematic destruction of Hargeisa. In 1993, Mark Bradbury noted that in Hargeisa alone, 60,000 houses were destroyed. See Bradbury, Mark. (1994), The Somali Conflict: Prospects for Peace (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 1993), p. 16 <<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-somali-conflict-prospects-for-peace-122751/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

63. In 1991 and 1992, the four-month conflict between the two Hawiye clan factions vying for power resulted in the devastation of central parts of Mogadishu, where the historic districts, cultural institutions and landmarks are located: Alex de Waal, The Prairie Fire that Burned Mogadishu: The Logic of Clan Formation in Somalia, 2018 <[https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100258/1/The\\_Prairie\\_Fire\\_that\\_burned\\_Mogadishu\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100258/1/The_Prairie_Fire_that_burned_Mogadishu_final_1.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

64. Ahmed, I. and Green, R, The Heritage of War and State Collapse in Somalia and "Somaliland": Local-Level Effects, External Interventions and Reconstruction, *Third World Quarterly*, 20(1), (1999) pp. 113-127 <[www.jstor.org/stable/3993185](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993185)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

65. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Somalia Crisis: The Challenge to Education, 1992 <[https://arcadia.sba.uniroma3.it/bitstream/2307/2667/1/somalia\\_20crisis%20The%20Challenge%20to%20\\_Education%20-%20UNESCO.pdf](https://arcadia.sba.uniroma3.it/bitstream/2307/2667/1/somalia_20crisis%20The%20Challenge%20to%20_Education%20-%20UNESCO.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

## 5.1 Al-Shabaab's attacks against Somalia's cultural heritage

42. Al-Shabaab, a non-state, organised armed group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, originated from the former Islamic Courts Union in Somalia. The group is subject to sanctions by the United Nations Security Council for engaging in acts that directly or indirectly threaten the peace, security, or stability of Somalia<sup>66</sup>, and is designated by the Federal Government of Somalia and other states as a terrorist organisation<sup>67</sup>. At its peak from 2007 to 2011, it controlled the major population centres, including Kismayo, Baidoa, Marka, Jowhar, Beledweyne, and parts of Mogadishu. Between 2011 and 2013, the Somali armed forces and the African Union Peacekeeping Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) successfully recaptured major urban areas from the group, which still maintains its control over some rural areas in the south, central and Puntland<sup>68</sup>.

43. Since its rise in the early to mid-2000s, a pattern of violations against Somali cultural heritage have been a feature of Al-Shabaab's plan to impose control and enforce its rules in Somalia. The group destroyed cultural sites and educational institutions, graveyards and mosques, suppressed cultural practices, curtailed cultural expressions through music, traditional dances and other forms of art, limited the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, participation in public affairs and targeted artists, journalists and media workers, students, football fans, clan elders and other community leaders with assassinations, bombings, abductions and beatings, and conducted attacks on the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education and venues hosting cultural events. In addition, it imposed a strict dress code on women and girls and prohibited women from leaving their homes without a male family member accompanying them<sup>69</sup>. These restrictions violate the rights of women and girls and exacerbate an already inhibitive social and cultural environment for them, which is characterised by physical, sexual, and psychological violence and discrimination both in public and private life.

44. Al-Shabaab's ideology and its interpretation of Islamic Shariah have been the main drivers of the group's violations against the cultural heritage of Somalia. As an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, the group calls members of the government, parliament and security forces "apostates" and Sufis "non-believers"<sup>70</sup>. Al-Shabaab reportedly destroyed more than 1,000 Sufi graves and shrines in areas it controlled in southern Somalia. For example, in March 2010, it destroyed the grave of Sheikh Muhyidin Eli, a well-known Sufi sheikh in Mogadishu and exhumed his remains. The late Al-Shabaab leader for the Banadir region, Ali Mohamed Hussein (Ali Jabal), justified the destruction of the graves of the Sufi clerics as a part of "the process of ending grave worshipping" and that the destroyed tombs were "godless"<sup>71</sup>.

66. United Nations Security Council, Al-Shabaab <<https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/751/materials/summaries/entity/al-shabaab>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

67. The Federal Government of Somalia, Sharciga La-dagaalanaka Argagaxisada [Counter-terrorism Law], 2023 <[https://www.osagsomalia.com/media/documents/bulletins-contents/legislation/2023/Sharciga\\_La-dagaalanaka\\_Argagaxisada\\_.pdf](https://www.osagsomalia.com/media/documents/bulletins-contents/legislation/2023/Sharciga_La-dagaalanaka_Argagaxisada_.pdf)> (Accessed 25 November 2025). The United States officially designated al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in March 2008. See United States Department of State, Foreign Terrorist Organisations <[https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations#:~:text=Table\\_title%20Designated%20Foreign%20Terrorist%20Organizations%20Table\\_content%20header,News%20Agency%20Amendments%20\(March%202022%2C%202019\)%20%7C](https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations#:~:text=Table_title%20Designated%20Foreign%20Terrorist%20Organizations%20Table_content%20header,News%20Agency%20Amendments%20(March%202022%2C%202019)%20%7C)> (Accessed 25 November 2025). The United Kingdom also banned the group in 2010. See UK Home Office, The Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2010 <[https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2010/978011494165/pdfs/ukdsi\\_978011494165\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2010/978011494165/pdfs/ukdsi_978011494165_en.pdf)> (Accessed 25 November 2025).

68. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSO) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Protection of Civilians: Building the Foundation for Peace, Security and Human Rights in Somalia, 2017 at page 11 <[https://unson.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/public\\_report\\_on\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians.pdf](https://unson.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/public_report_on_protection_of_civilians.pdf)> [accessed 9 July 2025].

45. Cultural and educational institutions in government-controlled areas have also become primary targets for Al-Shabaab's attacks, with the federal Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, which is civilian in nature, location, purpose and use, becoming a regular target for more than a decade. The group carried out mass-casualty attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against the Ministry starting in October 2011, when a vehicle-borne IED attack on the Ministry resulted in the killing of over 100 high school graduates and their parents waiting for the results of an exam for an education programme abroad<sup>72</sup>.

46. On 29 October 2022, two Al-Shabaab attacks targeted the headquarters of the Ministry in Mogadishu, causing 429 civilian casualties (111 killed and 318 injured). When claiming responsibility for this attack, Al-Shabaab stated its motivations by saying "... the Ministry was at the centre of a war on minds that teaches Somali children using a Christian-based syllabus"<sup>73</sup>. This is consistent with Al-Shabaab's position on education and cultures in Somalia. In April 2017, Al-Shabaab announced that it had developed a new curriculum for schools both within the areas it controlled and beyond. To enforce this, it closed schools to facilitate the re-training of teachers. Moreover, it summoned teachers living in government-controlled areas to travel to Al-Shabaab strongholds to be trained in its new curriculum<sup>74</sup>. Again, in June 2021, Al-Shabaab issued another curriculum in the Arabic language<sup>75</sup>.

47. To preserve memories and honour the victims of the Al-Shabaab twin IED attacks on 29 October 2022, the federal Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education erected two giant billboards in 2023 listing the full names of some of the people identified to have been killed in the attack. Each of the billboards depicts the names of victims on branches of a large tree. The Ministry is located in the vicinity of the Zobe Junction (renamed the 14 October Junction), which also holds annual memorials for nearly 1,000 civilian casualties of the 14 October 2017 attack by Al-Shabaab.

48. Hotels, cafes and restaurants have long been a central part of Somalis' urban culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, Mogadishu was home to some of the country's high-profile hotels, such as the Al-Uruba and Jubba, which were associated with music and cultural events<sup>76</sup>. In the last ten years, hotels, restaurants and teashops have become vital public spaces for the revival of the Somali cultures. Cultural events, including wedding ceremonies, book fairs, book launches, art exhibitions, poetry readings, music performances, talent shows, and similar activities, are held in these spaces.

49. While this signifies a positive development for the Somali people, it also attracts the attention of Al-Shabaab, which considers that these activities do not conform to the group's interpretation of the Shariah. Consequently, despite being civilian objects, Al-Shabaab targeted these public spaces and regularly called them "army bases", which serve, according to their statements, as "ministry offices for infidels and apostates"<sup>77</sup>.

69. Adam Smith International, Al-Shabaab's Gendered Economy, 2021 <<https://adamsmithinternational.com/app/uploads/2022/12/Case-Study-Al-Shabaab-Gendered-Economy.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

70. Al Jazeera, Somalia's Sufi revival, 2016 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/3/29/somalias-sufi-revival>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

71. See his interview on Al-Jazeera English in 2010 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2010/3/26/grave-sites-destroyed-in-somalia>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

72. United Nations Security Council, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea to Security Council, 2011 <<https://docs.un.org/en/s/2012/544>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

73. Abdi Sheikh and Abdiqani Hassani, Car bombs at busy Somalia market intersection killed at least 100, president says, 2022, <[www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-president-least-100-people-killed-car-bombs-2022-10-30/](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-president-least-100-people-killed-car-bombs-2022-10-30/)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

74. United Nations Security Council, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea to Security Council, 2017 <<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n17/303/17/pdf/n1730317.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

75. Garowe Online, Al-Shabaab Introduces New Arabic Curriculum in Somali Schools, 2021 <[www.garoweonline.com/index.php/en/news/somalia/al-shabaab-introduces-arabic-curriculum-in-somalia-schools](https://www.garoweonline.com/index.php/en/news/somalia/al-shabaab-introduces-arabic-curriculum-in-somalia-schools)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

76. MEE Correspondent, Iftin: The band that soundtracked Somalia's golden age, 2023 <[www.middleeasteye.net/discover/somali-music-iftin-band-tribute-golden-age](https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/somali-music-iftin-band-tribute-golden-age)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

77. Hamza Mohamed, Interview PI Al-Shabaab spokesman, Sheikh Cali Dheere, January 2017 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJwuw-H0mgs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJwuw-H0mgs)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

## VI. Measures taken to ensure respect and protection of cultural rights and the full realisation of the right to take part in cultural life

50. The Federal Government of Somalia has worked to rehabilitate national cultural institutions that were damaged or destroyed during the armed conflict. In 2016, the Federal Government of Somalia re-opened the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts (SOMASA) after 26 years of inactivity due to the armed conflict.

51. Since its establishment in 1951, Radio Muqdisho has been the leading national radio station in the country and holds archives of Somali history and cultures. After 70 years of operations, it faces a serious risk due to the deteriorating condition of the analogue archives and old reel-to-reel tapes—some of which have already deteriorated beyond repair. To date, the Federal Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, with the support of the UN in Somalia and other international development partners, has digitised approximately 25 per cent of the 225,000 old audio tapes, with a wide range of content, including music, poetry, drama, political speeches, and religious programmes<sup>78</sup>. The digitisation process continues to be slow and labour-intensive. In an April 2025 meeting with a visiting UNESCO delegation in Mogadishu, the federal Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism emphasised the importance of digitising the collection to preserve it for future generations and make it accessible through modern technology<sup>79</sup>. Government leadership is crucial in the digitisation process of the state-owned Radio Muqdisho archives; however, increasing public participation and awareness in the process is also essential to improve transparency, accessibility, accountability, and ownership of the digital transformation outcomes.

52. With the support of state authorities and private entities, book fairs have become common annual events in major urban centres such as Mogadishu, Hargeisa and Garowe over the past decade. These events, driven by private citizens, signify the revival of literacy and a strong interest in promoting Somali cultures. The active participation of youth and students as organisers, volunteers, and audiences has been particularly encouraging. In December 2024, the Somali National University hosted the 15th Congress of the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) in Mogadishu. Holding this high-profile event in the city for the first time in 30 years was a significant milestone. Since its foundation in 1978, SSIA has played a critical role in promoting scholarly research within and outside Somalia in all areas and disciplines within the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities<sup>80</sup>. The theme of the 2024 event, "The Beginning of a New Era: Reconstructing and Developing the Somali Nation", symbolises hope for Somalia's recovery and its commitment to cultural and intellectual growth<sup>81</sup>.

78. The UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSO), Radio Mogadishu: Saving historic audio recordings for future generations of Somalis, 2023 <<https://unsom.unmissions.org/radio-mogadishu-saving-historic-audio-recordings-future-generations-somalis>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

79. Somali National News Agency (SONNA), Minister of Information Meets UNESCO Representative for Eastern Africa in Mogadishu, 29 April 2025 <<https://sonna.so/en/minister-of-information-meets-unesco-representative-for-eastern-africa-in-mogadishu/>> [accessed 14 July 2025].

80. Lee Cassanelli, "The Somali Studies International Association: A Brief History", *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*: Vol. 1, Article 5, (2001), <<https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol1/iss1/5>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

81. As of 31 October 2025, the Somali National University has not yet published the proceedings of the 15th Congress of the SSIA.

53. Following the conclusion of the implementation phase of the National Development Plan 9 in December 2024, the Federal Government of Somalia officially launched the National Transformation Plan (NTP) 2025–2029 in March 2025. This plan recognises the cultural dimension of sustainable development<sup>82</sup> while emphasising Somalia's cultural resources are pivotal to its sustainable development and peacebuilding efforts and commits to large-scale initiatives aimed at protecting and promoting cultural heritage from 2025 to 2029. The proposed initiatives include the rehabilitation of the National Theatre in Mogadishu, the establishment of seven new theatres in other states, the creation of the Institute of Arts and Culture, and the expansion and renovation of the National Museum of Somalia and the National Library. Additionally, the NTP promises the development of the National Culture and Arts Law<sup>83</sup>.

54. Despite these commitments, the cultural sector in Somalia remains underfunded. Only three national cultural institutions—the Somali National University, the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Intergovernmental Academy of the Somali Language—are included in the national budget, in which the allocated funding remained almost the same for three years—2023, 2024 and 2025. The approved annual budget for the Somali National University was USD 8,272,680, while the budgets of the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Intergovernmental Academy of the Somali Language were USD 1,311,352 and USD 342,256, respectively. No resources have been allocated to other cultural institutions, such as the National Museum of Somalia, which was reopened in 2020 and has been operational since then. Meanwhile, the National Library and other vital cultural institutions have yet to be rehabilitated and reopened.

## 6.1 The role of cultural rights in conflict prevention and peace-building

55. The role of Somali cultures has been recognised and used in preventing conflicts and peace-building. For example, in the year 2000, the Somalia National Peace Conference in Djibouti (the Arta peace process)<sup>84</sup> was attended by more than 2,500 male and female participants from all sections of Somali society, including Somalis from the diaspora and minorities, to re-establish the Somali state. The conference lasted six months, and negotiations hit serious stalemates several times, but poetry, drama, songs, and speeches full of poetic quotes and Somali proverbs from artists and community leaders on the plight of the Somali people, the impact of the state collapse and the need for an urgent solution, were among several factors that helped break the stalemate and keep the talks on track<sup>85</sup>. The Conference resulted in the establishment of the Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000—the first central Somali authority to fill Somalia's seat at the UN and regional bodies since the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991<sup>86</sup>. After 25 years, the music from the Arta peace process remains popular and is played on local radio stations in Mogadishu<sup>87</sup>.

56. Another example of peace-building through culture was in 2003, when Mohamed Ibrahim Hadrawi, the renowned Somali poet, embarked on a long journey for peace and led a "peace caravan" of singers, poets and other cultural figures throughout Somalia, from Kismayo, Mogadishu, Baidoa, Jowhar, Beledweyne, Dhusamarreb, and Gaalkacyo to Bossaso. The poet and his peace message received overwhelming support from Somalis, who welcomed him as "*a beacon of hope*"<sup>88</sup>, and the peace caravan and its message challenged the control of powerful warlords and helped the formation of a multi-clan coalition for peace-building in the country.

57. Acknowledging the role of cultural rights in conflict prevention and peace-building among Somalis, the NTP 2025–2029 commits to leveraging oral traditions, storytelling, music, and communal rituals to foster dialogue, respect for diversity, mutual understanding, and national healing across diverse communities in Somalia<sup>89</sup>.

## 6.2 Cultures in focus: linguistic diversity

58. The Provisional Constitution of Somalia recognises Somali (Maay and Maxaa-tiri dialects) as the official language of Somalia, with Maxaa-tiri being primarily used for government business, education and commerce. Moreover, several Somali languages are spoken by minorities in southern Somalia<sup>90</sup>, including Maadoonte, Chimwini, Garre, Jiido, Baajuni, Dabarre, Af Tuni, and the Mushunguli. The Baajunis, the Baravenese, and the Mushunguli are among the languages classified as endangered, with limited state efforts to promote and preserve them<sup>91</sup>.

59. Although there are no sanctions prohibiting the use of their languages in public spaces, minorities sometimes encounter barriers to accessing information and participating in cultural life in their languages. For instance, in April 2020, officials in South-West State suspended the community-owned Radio Barawe for broadcasting in the Chimwini language in the Barawe district, Lower Shabelle region<sup>90</sup>, alleging that the language was not Somali but rather a mixture of Swahili, Arabic, Italian and Portuguese. The radio station broadcast programmes that included information and awareness-raising on COVID-19 in Chimwini. Authorities allowed the radio station to resume its operations after four days following public outcry over the suspension. Radio Barawe is the only media outlet that caters to the information needs of Chimwini speakers in Somalia.

60. In Jubaland, Jubaland government-owned Radio Kismayo and Jubaland TV do not broadcast in any of the eight minority languages spoken by minority communities. In addition, privately owned stations broadcast in Maxaa-tiri only, despite the sizeable population of Maay and other speakers of minority languages in the area, such as the Bajuni and the Mushunguli. According to civil society organisations in the region, the Mushunguli language is now spoken by only a few communities and is at risk of extinction. The lack of linguistic diversity in media contributes to their marginalisation and exclusion.

61. Somalia's media landscape is diverse, with radio remaining the most dominant and accessible medium—which aligns with the strong oral culture of Somalis and low literacy rates in the country<sup>91</sup>. While television, both public and private stations, is also growing, print media is extremely limited and has not recovered since the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991. Online platforms and social media have become vital sources of information for Somalis, particularly youth and urban populations, addressing various types of information needs, ranging from news and education to entertainment and civic engagement.

82. United Nations General Assembly, Development and Cultural Rights: The Principles, Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Alexandra Xanthaki, 2022 <<https://documents.un.org/access.nsf/get?OpenAgent&DS=A/77/290&Lang=E>> also see United Nations General Assembly (2023), Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Digital Technologies. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2023 <<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/422/28/pdf/n2342228.pdf>> [accessed 19 July 2025].

83. Federal Government of Somalia, Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development, National Transformation Plan 2025-2029, 2025 <<https://mop.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2025/pdf/NTP%20Report%202025-2029%20All.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

84. The United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS), May-August 2000 Updates, 2000 <<https://unpos.unmissions.org/may-august-2000>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

85. Maxamed Daahir Afrax, Towards a Culture for Peace: Poetry, Drama and Music in Somali Society in Accord Issue 21 edited by Mark Bradbury and Sally Healy, 2010 <[https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose\\_peace\\_is\\_it\\_anyway\\_connecting\\_Somali\\_and\\_international\\_peacemaking\\_Accord\\_Issue\\_21.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose_peace_is_it_anyway_connecting_Somali_and_international_peacemaking_Accord_Issue_21.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

86. Interpeace Somali Program, A History of Mediation in Somalia Since 1988, 2009 <[www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009\\_Som\\_Interpeace\\_A\\_History\\_Of\\_Mediation\\_In\\_Somalila\\_Since\\_1988\\_EN.pdf](https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/2009_Som_Interpeace_A_History_Of_Mediation_In_Somalila_Since_1988_EN.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

87. Raage Media, Darajo iyo Xil Yaa Mudan? Hees Qaaraami Shirkii Carta 2000, 2021 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IH\\_26Oj0q4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IH_26Oj0q4)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

88. Maxamed Daahir Afrax, Towards a Culture for Peace: Poetry, Drama and Music in Somali Society in Accord Issue 21 edited by Mark Bradbury and Sally Healy, 2010, <[https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose\\_peace\\_is\\_it\\_anyway\\_connecting\\_Somali\\_and\\_international\\_peacemaking\\_Accord\\_Issue\\_21.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose_peace_is_it_anyway_connecting_Somali_and_international_peacemaking_Accord_Issue_21.pdf)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

89. Ibid.

90. Federal Government of Somalia, Provisional Constitution of Somalia (2024), Article 5.

91. Meikal Mumin & Gerrit J. Dimmendaal, A Brief Sketch of Chimwini with Special Focus on Contact-induced Phenomena, Swahili Forum 26 (2019): 89-121, SPECIAL ISSUE: Variation in Swahili, ed. by Daisuke Shinagawa & Nico Nassenstein, <<https://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A70965/attachment/ATT-0/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

62. Despite the diverse languages in the country, Maxaa-tiri dominates the state-owned outlets. Both Radio Muqdisho and the Somali National TV broadcast limited news programmes in Maay. The privately owned Arlaadi Media, which owns an FM radio and TV channel, broadcasts in Maay in the country. Nevertheless, it has complained that it could not access some state institutions and information held by state authorities. On 23 August 2022, the outlet issued a statement claiming that a senior official in the Office of the Prime Minister discriminated against the station and denied it access to the Office of the Prime Minister because of its use of Maay<sup>94</sup>. The Office of the Prime Minister did not comment on allegations of discrimination against the Maay-speaking media outlet.

63. The use of Maay in government affairs is limited at the Federal level. For instance, the House of the People of the Federal Parliament uses Maxaa-tiri in all its proceedings, including debates on bills and during the appearance of members of the Federal Government of Somalia before the House of the People or specific parliamentary committees. Maxaa-tiri also dominates in other federal institutions responsible for formulating national legislation and policies. For example, the National Education Policy (2020), developed by the Federal Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, does not include a reference to linguistic diversity in Somalia. It proposes the use of the Somali language (which could be understood as Maxaa-tiri) in all primary education from year one to year eight and English and Arabic at the secondary level<sup>95</sup>.

64. In December 2023, the former Chairperson of the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts controversially demanded the withdrawal of the recognition of Maay in the Provisional Constitution of Somalia and termed it a local dialect, which does not unify the Somali people. The Prime Minister of Somalia dismissed him immediately after a public outcry<sup>96</sup>.

65. Since its reopening in 2020, the National Museum of Somalia has been playing a vital role in rebuilding the cultural sector in Somalia. For example, in 2023, as part of the Human Rights 75 Initiative, the National Museum of Somalia, with support from UNTMIS and OHCHR, collaborated with local civil society organisations and community leaders from different linguistic groups to promote understanding of human rights in minority languages. In December 2023, this effort resulted in the first-ever translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) into Maadoonte, Chimwini, Gare, Jiido, Bajuni and Dabarre. It was also translated into Maay. Building on that milestone, the Somali National Museum took the lead in June 2024 by hosting an exhibition in Mogadishu to celebrate the linguistic diversity of Somalia. Using the translated UDHR centrepiece, the exhibition showcased the richness of Somalia's languages and dialects, emphasising the importance of preserving them for future generations.

66. In December 2024, UNTMIS collaborated with the federal Ministry of Health and Human Services and the National Museum of Somalia to host an art exhibition commemorating Universal Health Coverage Day. The exhibition featured artworks and posters displaying messages on the right to health, emphasising Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which were translated into seven minority languages spoken in southern Somalia. Speakers of the seven minority languages who attended the event, along with other dignitaries, stressed the need to ensure that health services are inclusive and accessible to all, both linguistically and physically. Following the event, the messages were printed on posters and distributed to both public and private hospitals in Mogadishu.

92. Federation of Somali Journalists (FESOJ) News, South West State Bans Radio Barawe to Broadcast Local Dialect and Arrests VOA Journalist in Baidoa, 2020 <<https://fesoj.org/south-west-state-bans-radio-barawe-to-broadcast-local-dialect-and-arrests-voa-journalist-in-baidoa/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

93. Media Landscapes: Expert Analysis of the State of the Media, Somalia, 2025 <<https://medialandscapes.org/country/somalia/media/radio/>> [accessed 30 June 2025].

94. Arlaadi Media Network Press Release, Canbaareyn ku socoto Madaxa warbaahinta ee Xafiiska Raiisul Wasaaraha [ Condemnation against the Director of Communications and Public Relations of the Office of the Prime Minister], 2022 <<https://waajid.wordpress.com/2022/08/25/masuulka-xiriirka-warbaahinta-xafiiska-raisul-wasaaraha-mr-farxaan-maxamed-jimcaale-oo-dhibaatooyin-iyotacadiyo-ku-haya-warbaahinta-tv-ga-araadi-media/>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

95. Federal Government of Somalia, Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education, National Education Policy, 2020 <<https://moe.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/National-Education-Policy-Eng-Version-Final-DG-copy.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2025].

96. Hiiraan Online, Prime Minister Barre sacks Somali Academy of Sciences & Arts chairman over dialect debate, 2023 <[www.hiiraan.com/news4/2023/Dec/194191/prime\\_minister\\_barre\\_sacks\\_somali\\_academy\\_of\\_sciences\\_arts\\_chainman\\_over dialect\\_debate.aspx](http://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2023/Dec/194191/prime_minister_barre_sacks_somali_academy_of_sciences_arts_chainman_over dialect_debate.aspx)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

## VII. Conclusion

67. Somalia has a rich and diverse cultural heritage, reflecting centuries of interactions with Africans, Arabs, Asians, and Europeans. These exchanges have enriched its cultures, including the oral traditions, poetry, music, cuisine, traditional clothing, architecture, and traditional arts and crafts.

68. Somali society has preserved its cultural heritage through its oral traditions, allowing generations to pass down cultural traditions, values, history, religious beliefs, recipes and traditional crafts. Poetry, storytelling, oral history, and other forms of art have been key means of communication.

69. Successive Somali Governments have made efforts to build national institutions and legal frameworks for the preservation and development of Somalia's cultural heritage. For example, in 1972, the then-Somali Government adopted the Somali Latin script, making Somali (Maxaa-Tiri) the official language of the government and replacing English, Italian, and Arabic as the primary media of instruction in Somalia and the official languages of other aspects of public life. In addition to the promotion of literacy in the country, the adoption of the Somali script made education more accessible to the Somali people. This positively impacted the country's overall cultural landscape, and the 1970s are often considered the golden age of contemporary Somali cultures, particularly in music and arts<sup>97</sup>.

70. The prolonged armed conflict has been marked by widespread human rights violations and abuses against the Somali population and destruction and damage to their cultural heritage. Since their emergence in the early 2000s, Al-Shabaab's extremist ideology and its attacks have particularly inflicted significant damage on Somali cultural heritage. Despite setbacks and losses, Somali people and their cultures have remained resilient.

71. In recent years, there has been a slow but steady recovery of the cultural sector in Somalia. To build on this progress, Somali authorities should intensify efforts to create an enabling environment that allows all citizens to contribute to, access, and participate in the development of cultural heritage. Legal reforms and institutional development are crucial for rebuilding a human rights-based cultural sector in Somalia. Education and awareness-raising on cultural rights aimed at fostering respect, understanding, and preservation of cultural heritage should also be part of these initiatives at the federal and member state levels.

## VIII. Recommendations

### A. To the Federal Government of Somalia

72. Expedite the development of the National Culture and Arts Law and ensure that domestic laws, policies, and administrative measures are consistent with the applicable international human rights standards on cultural rights, including reviewing and enacting new legislation where applicable.

73. Strengthen engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms and accelerate the submission of the overdue initial reports under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and relevant UNESCO conventions.

97. Okay Africa, Learn How the 70s Became Somalia's Golden Age of Music in This New Video, 2017 <[www.okayafrica.com/video-somalia-golden-age-of-music/](http://www.okayafrica.com/video-somalia-golden-age-of-music/)> [accessed 12 May 2025].

**74.** Ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols, as Somalia committed to becoming a Party to the Convention and its two Protocols at the International Conference on the 20th anniversary of the 1999 Second Protocol of the 1954 Hague Convention in Geneva in April 2019<sup>98</sup>.

**75.** Fully incorporate relevant international human rights standards into the domestic legal order and ensure that cultural rights, including the right of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage, are justiciable, and report on the progress of the national implementation to the international human rights mechanisms, such as the treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review.

**76.** Implement the recommendations on the prohibition of harmful traditional practices (female genital mutilation and child and forced marriages) from the Concluding Observations on the two initial reports of Somalia, submitted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee in 2022 and 2024, respectively<sup>99</sup>.

**77.** Secure sufficient financial resources, at a minimum, comply with the UNESCO recommendation that Governments use one per cent of total national expenditures for the revival, rehabilitation, and development of cultural heritage, and integrate these initiatives into long-term national development plans. Priority should be given to the rehabilitation and maintenance of key cultural institutions, such as the Somalia National Museum and the Somalia National Library, while also ensuring public access to these institutions.

**78.** Using human rights-based approaches, establish community-based living cultural heritage inventory projects, with support from UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Fund and use community mapping tools for minority living Cultural Heritage traditions, aligning with UNESCO's "participatory safeguarding" approach.

**79.** Conduct preliminary assessments and inventories of tangible cultural heritage to support full nominations to UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List and engage with UNESCO's Emergency Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage in Crisis Situations for post-conflict restoration.

**80.** Consider using UNESCO's Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators) to measure and monitor Somalia's implementation of commitments to cultures and their contributions to the envisaged national transformation during the NTP's lifecycle.

**81.** Using human rights principles, review the national school curriculum with a view to ensuring its content is adapted to national realities; add, where necessary, material and information relating to national history, important people and events, cultural practices, heritage resources, and languages.

**82.** Initiate educational programmes and awareness for cultural rights and promote them as the heritage of all the people of Somalia and support and facilitate the efforts of private Somali citizens, cultural rights defenders and civil society actors, such as book fairs, sports and cultural programmes and events.

**83.** Ensure that the relevant state institutions take special measures to promote and protect the rights of minorities and marginalised groups to enjoy their cultural life including their diverse languages, cultures and traditional arts and crafts, ensuring their full and meaningful consultation, participation and empowerment of concerned communities and individuals throughout the process of identification, selection, classification, interpretation, preservation, stewardship and development of cultural heritage.

98. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), International Conference on the 20th Anniversary of the 1999 Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention: Protecting Cultural Property – Conference Proceedings (Geneva, Switzerland, 2019) <[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CulturalRights\\_Activities/Geneva2019-ConferenceProceedings.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CulturalRights_Activities/Geneva2019-ConferenceProceedings.pdf)> [accessed 22 July 2025].

99. See the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. CRC/C/SOM/CO/1: Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Somalia, 2022 at para. 42 <<https://nwm.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/concluding-observations-crc-somalia-en.pdf>> [accessed 2 August 2025], and also the United Nations Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Somalia, 2024, at para. 15 <<https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/SOM/CO/1>> [accessed 2 August 2025].

**84.** With the support of international partners, strengthen the capacity of cultural institutions in Somalia to rebuild cultural heritage and protect and restore cultural properties, such as architecture, artworks, museum collections, and archaeology, while ensuring all the restored properties are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities.

**85.** Ensure that, in preparation for the protection of cultural heritage during and after crises, Somalia puts in place emergency response mechanisms and guidelines, and frameworks for the recovery and restoration of damaged heritage sites and the restitution of cultural objects.

## B. To the Federal Member States

**86.** Promote and protect the cultural rights of all individuals and groups in all districts and regions in each state.

**87.** Strengthen legal protection for the enjoyment of cultural rights of minorities and marginalised groups, including promotion of their languages and traditional crafts.

**88.** Take measures to ensure that public spaces and public institutions are accessible and welcoming to a diversity of cultural expressions and practices.

## C. To the International Partners

**89.** Support financially and technically the capacity of State and non-state actors engaged in the preservation and development of cultural heritage and a diversity of artistic expressions.

**90.** Advocate for the promotion and protection of the rights of everyone, including minorities and marginalised persons and groups, to contribute to, access, and participate in cultural life in Somalia.

**91.** Support civil society actors engaged in cultural rights and advocate with the relevant Somali authorities for expanded civic space.

## D. To Al-Shabaab

**92.** UNTMIS and OHCHR urge Al-Shabaab to fully comply with international humanitarian law, including protection of civilians, civilian infrastructure and cultural heritage, and respect international human rights law.

