
THE SOMALI MUSEUM UK: HERITAGE AND DIVERSITY

BY SALMA KEIZE BIHI



Numbi Arts team in action

Numbi Arts is an arts and heritage organisation. Founded by a multi-disciplinary Somali artist, Kinsi Abdulleh, Numbi provides opportunities for local communities to engage with Somali histories, to better understand how British Somali experiences have been collected, stored and disseminated by cultural institutions. It is in this spirit that Numbi launched the first Somali Museum in Europe.³

HISTORY OF SOMALI COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN

The presence of the Somali community in the UK stretches back well over 100 years, beginning with the arrival of seamen who worked for the Royal Merchant Navy. They settled, creating small but lively communities in port cities, most notably Liverpool, Cardiff and London.⁴ The British-Somali community has since grown, with a large influx of Somalis arriving in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Ahmed, 2014). Unofficial estimates suggest that there are almost half a million Somalis in the UK and yet there has been very little in the way of recognition. The community faces a myriad of issues, simultaneously underserved and overly-scrutinised by policy-makers.

Somalis exist within an interesting intersection of identities, between Blackness and Muslimness, with unfortunate stereotypes and prejudicial treatment becoming par for the course. The last decade or so, however, has seen the rise of British-Somalis coming into their own, creating brilliant cultural projects that explore what it means to be Black and Muslim in modern British society. It is in this spirit that Numbi Arts, an arts and heritage organisation, has begun the very necessary task of creating a space to explore Somali histories, working with local communities to establish the first Somali Museum in Europe. This space is not only necessary, but frankly overdue, especially when considering the long history of Somalis in the UK.

³ The Museum will be based at Rich Mix in east London with a planned opening date of 2022

⁴ See Gillat-Ray, S and Mellor, J (2012)

Walk through Brick Lane, in the East End of London, and you'll quickly notice street signs in both English and Bengali. Stroll through Soho, and once again, bilingual signs, this time in English and Chinese. London has been the refuge and home for millions of people from across the world for centuries, and we see traces of that in every nook and cranny. And yet, one group is curiously absent in public spaces, a community that has been part of British life for over a century, a sizable group, unofficially numbering more than a quarter of million. I'm talking about the Somali community, one of the oldest and most distinct Black communities in the UK. This lack of visibility goes beyond the surface however, highlighting the very real struggles faced by the community.

This community has faced many difficulties integrating into wider British society. Whilst Somalis fall under the category of 'Black Africans,' within the purview of the wider Black British community, there are unique challenges faced by the group, whether religious, or because of the refugee status held by many. The challenges they face are many and varied, from under-employment to health and social care. In addition, Somalis suffer from negative stereotyping and press attention, similar to the wider Muslim community, with Somali women often-times facing verbal and even physical abuse for both their skin-colour and *hijabs*.

THE CASE FOR A MUSEUM

There are a number of community spaces where being Somali is celebrated, but for the community to truly explore their experiences with identity and belonging in a safe and welcoming environment, a larger, multi-purpose space is needed. Museums provide space for educational exploration, a place where knowledge can be presented in a myriad of ways, allowing for a broader cultural understanding. For Somalis to integrate comfortably into wider British society, the history of Somalis in the UK needs to be taught, and the best way for as many people to access that knowledge is through the creation of a Somali museum and archive.

The functionality and various ways in which a museum can present a large amount of information, perfectly moulded to suit the needs of a particular audience makes it best suited for a large scale project like documenting and archiving the history of a community. An archive would play a necessary part in collecting and documenting the Somali presence. The Museum would work with the local community, providing necessary resources, but would also be part of the global conversation around what it means to be Somali in the modern world.

The Somali Museum will be a multi-disciplinary space, utilising art as a tool to engage people in understanding and studying Somali history. The Museum will be an educational space first and foremost, but will also be the home of cutting-edge culture and arts through a variety of mediums, inviting in those who would like to understand this community better. The Somali Museum will seek to promote awareness and appreciation of Somali material heritage within the Somali community and the wider British public.

Museums and other heritage spaces have needed to change in order to remain relevant, and part of the wider conversation. Historically, museums have been rather dry places, offering nothing more than objects with placards and a tour around the space. Nowadays, museums have become multi-disciplinary spaces, creating immersive experiences while also remaining informative. Certain institutions like the British Library and the Museum of London have been making efforts to recognise the importance of documenting British Somali stories, and have collaborated with Numbi to provide workshops and exhibitions centred on the British Somali experience.⁵ These events mark a transient community now laying roots, the migratory story seemingly coming to an end.

The Somali Museum would itself reflect that changing museum environment, taking cues from the more radical approaches introduced in the last few years. Coming from an art background, Numbi would be able to create a space that utilises art as a medium to educate and explore the historic presence of Somalis in the UK. Given that Somali culture is largely oral, with poetry and dance at the heart of Somali culture, the Museum would need a unique approach to facilitate the personal narratives of those whose stories need to be documented.

The Museum would provide the opportunity to implement cultural educational programs, perfectly tailored to the needs of the community, whilst also working collaboratively with the local communities and artists to develop Numbi's heritage programme. Community engagement is essential in order for cultural institutions that hold Somali collections to continue to develop, and become more representative and relevant to Somali communities.

LOOKING FORWARD

In her assessment of the 'knowledge centred approach' to cultural heritage in Somalia, well-known archaeologist Dr Sada Mire, argues that if a material collection does not offer a cultural representation that is identifiable and relatable to the Somali community, there will be no incentives to preserve it (2011). Representations of Somali culture have long been in the hands of those who were endowed with the institutional and financial power to document their people and survey their identity. Therefore, to facilitate engagement with the Somali community and their existing material heritage, they must be given the agency and voice to participate in the conversation through actively contributing to representations of their collective identity.

The varied sources accumulated and preserved by Numbi offer fertile ground for interaction with the Somali community. Through engagement with these written, audio and photographic archives, Numbi aims to reach out to creative individuals and groups in the local Somali community in London to ask them to contribute to responses to these archives, and to create contemporary artistic expressions of their cultural identity, in forms such as; photography, poetry, written/oral statements and artworks. Somali cultural heritage is transmitted orally between generations, and expressed through storytelling, art and poetry. Without proactive archiving the dynamic evolution of Somali cultural heritage through this generational transmission process, we cannot attempt to wholly document the culture. Archiving today is as imperative as archiving yesteryears.

⁵ See Ali (2018)

Most recently, we managed to raise more than £22,000 for the Somali Museum, smashing our target by more than £5000. It was an astonishing show of support from not only the Somali community, but also from fellow Britons and we even received donations internationally. It has become increasingly clear that this is a project that must happen, with more than enough support and interest surpassing our expectations. The potential for this project is incredible, offering a Somali-led museum and archive space, in which we can exchange cultural heritage with the London Somali community whilst pioneering a unique and innovative strategy of proactive archiving, and platform their success through exhibiting their output from engagement activities, in order to promote awareness and appreciation of Somali material heritage within the Somali community and the wider British public.



SALMA KEIZE BIHI

Numbi Arts

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Photo credit: Nadyah Issa

EVERYDAY MUSLIM: FRAMING AND DOCUMENTING BLACK MUSLIM HISTORY IN BRITAIN

BY SADIYA AHMED
