The present tragic state of Somalia is such that a survey of the country's MSS is unthinkable. The crisis threatens not only the present generation, but also the nation's past. The present note is offered as an inadequate record of the situation as it seems to be now.

Somali culture is nomadic and oral; as in other areas of Sudanic Africa, there were few institutions to serve as repositories of MSS. Holy families, who produced writings, were as mobile as the rest of society and thus their MSS travelled with them. Moreover, the Somali language was not written before the present century. The characteristic expression of Somali culture is oral poetry in Somali, which has only been written down in recent times. Such Arabic MSS as exist comprise mainly Shāfi‘i fiqh and tajneewuf.

Nevertheless, it is certain that manuscripts are preserved in the hands of holy families. "These 'books', or collections of Arabic manuscripts, typically contained religious writings, hagiographies of saints, and bits of Islamic law, though [Casanelli] was told that sometimes they contained written versions of the community's most important traditions. It appears that many such local traditions were written down in the early part of the twentieth century, perhaps in response to colonial efforts to record the indigenous histories of their new administrative districts."

Other MSS will be found in mosques in such towns as Mogadishu and Barawa. A small collection of MSS was made during the colonial period and kept at the Garesa (later National) Museum in Mogadishu; a list was published in Mogadishu in 1934. A number of these MSS were destroyed during the Second World War and it is now reported that the museum has been totally destroyed during the recent fighting.

The following are some relevant works on Somali Islamic culture which contain direct or indirect information on written materials:


This will include the Arabic writings of Somalia.

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1 Casanelli (1982), p. 266, n. 1. The collection of MSS made by Professor I.M. Lewis fits this description; see Andrzejewski and Lewis (forthcoming).
Includes quotations from Somali Arabic MSS.


SOUTH AFRICA

by

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