

Article

Identity Artefacts as a Methodological and Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract

Mary-Rose is currently writing up her doctoral research: 'Reimagining family literacy: exploring the pedagogies of migrating mothers in third sector spaces'. This two-year pedagogical ethnographic study took place in two third-sector organisations in the West Midlands, with an experimental pedagogical space established in each. Three perspectives were explored: the researcher/teacher; third sector practitioners; and refugee and asylum-seeking mothers from Somalia, Afghanistan and Kurdistan. The research is underpinned by a postcolonial feminist framework, and approaches literacy from a social practice perspective, that is the being and doing of literacies. The mothers' presented visual, sensory, and oral methods to represent their socially and historically situated experiences of motherhood, migrancy and literacies. This included using symbolic objects as 'identity artefacts'. The research aims to understand the experiences of migrating mothers in third sector spaces and to expand ways of knowing about teaching and learning beyond government-funded contexts.

Introduction

This article centres on two aspects of storytelling: firstly, the use of symbolic objects as a methodological and pedagogical tool which I have named 'identity artefacts'; and secondly, the storytelling which was generated from the identity artefact of Zeinab (pseudonym), one of the mothers in my family literacy class at a Somali community centre in the West Midlands. I used identity artefacts as part of my postcolonial feminist methodological approach for my doctoral research, in which I was both a voluntary teacher and researcher at the Somali centre. The overall aim of the research was to explore a 're-imagining' of family literacy provision in the third, or voluntary sector; a sector in which educational provision is open to all as opposed to government-funded sectors where access is restricted according to migration status. As part of this re-imagining I aimed to foreground the voices of the Somali mothers and to explore the pedagogies which emerged from their experiences. The family literacy class had no pre-established curriculum or pedagogical planning. I set out to establish two experimental pedagogical spaces to explore the literacies and pedagogies which emerged collaboratively, as far as possible led by the Somali mothers.

Methodological Choices

With regards the mothers' stories, I considered different visual forms in order that the mothers could choose the visual format that they wanted to use, such as photographs or objects, as a stimulus for talking about something that they chose to share. I was influenced by the work of Pahl and Rowsell (2010) who have progressed thinking in literacies to encapsulate multimodal and artefactual practices, theorising artefacts as embodying diverse aspects: people; stories; experiences; identities; spaces and places; feelings and thoughts. Artefacts in literacy learning bring the outside world in and open the student's world to the teacher.

My methodological approach was also deeply inspired by the work of Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai-Smith. In approaching my analytical approach in the use of symbolic objects for storytelling with the Somali mothers, I kept in mind the following words from Tuhiwai-Smith (1999: 51):

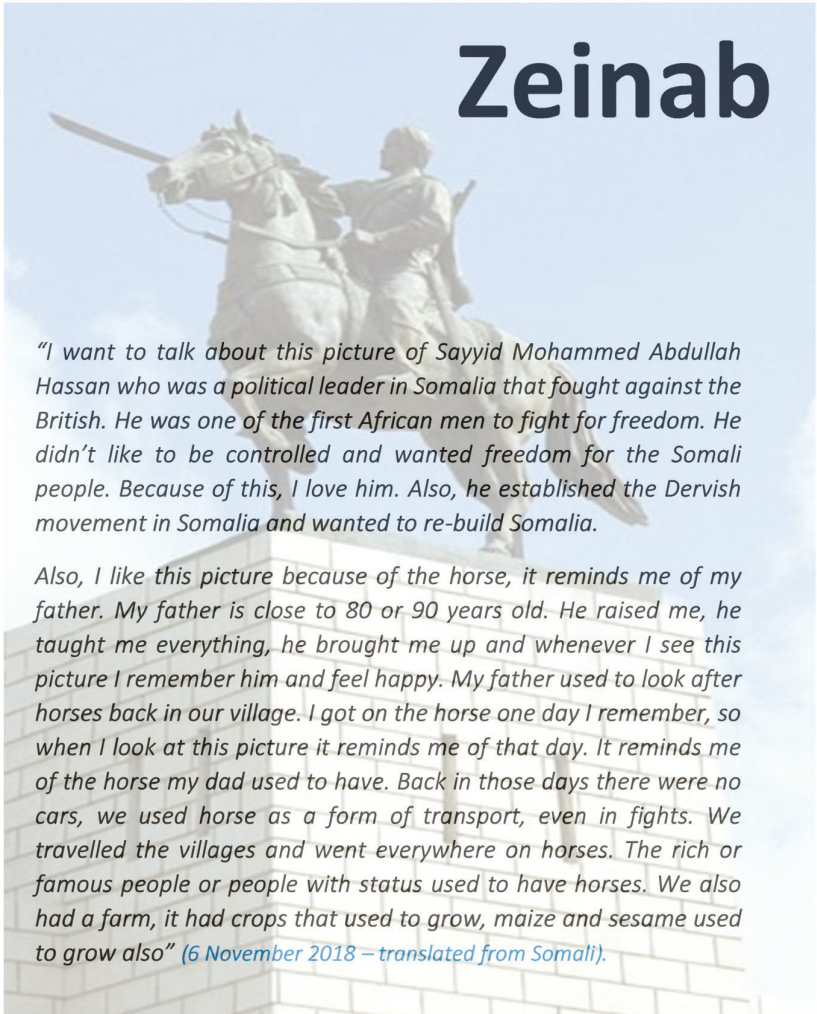
For the indigenous world, Western conceptions of space, of arrangements and display, of the relationship between people and the landscape, of culture as an object of study, have meant that not only has the indigenous world been represented in particular ways back to the West, but the indigenous world view, the land and the people, have been radically transformed in the spatial image of the West. In other words, indigenous space has been colonized.

At the heart of my methodological approach was a commitment to interrogate my own position as a white woman, from an economically privileged western country. Equally important was a commitment for a carefully considered, ethical approach to my analysis in order not to privilege my own interpretations and reading of the artefacts over the mothers'. Drawing on Tuhiwai-Smith's terms, I wanted to avoid colonising the Somali mothers' world view. Yet, I did want to do some further independent exploration of the artefact in order to interrogate its positioning in a more globalised 'post' colonial framework.

Zeinab's Artefact

With Zeinab's permission, I chose one of her artefacts for this article because it speaks of both her personal and political memories and it also acted as a stimulus of learning and reflection for me. In sharing their artefacts, the mothers' stories were all recorded in Somali, and translated into English later.

Zeinab



“I want to talk about this picture of Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan who was a political leader in Somalia that fought against the British. He was one of the first African men to fight for freedom. He didn’t like to be controlled and wanted freedom for the Somali people. Because of this, I love him. Also, he established the Dervish movement in Somalia and wanted to re-build Somalia.

Also, I like this picture because of the horse, it reminds me of my father. My father is close to 80 or 90 years old. He raised me, he taught me everything, he brought me up and whenever I see this picture I remember him and feel happy. My father used to look after horses back in our village. I got on the horse one day I remember, so when I look at this picture it reminds me of that day. It reminds me of the horse my dad used to have. Back in those days there were no cars, we used horse as a form of transport, even in fights. We travelled the villages and went everywhere on horses. The rich or famous people or people with status used to have horses. We also had a farm, it had crops that used to grow, maize and sesame used to grow also” (6 November 2018 – translated from Somali).

Zeinab posted a photograph to our class WhatsApp group of a statue constituting a man upon a horse, brandishing a sword. Although at first perplexed, I then connected the unfamiliar image I was looking at with the familiar recognition of it as a political statue. Throughout mine and Zeinab’s relationship her passion for historical knowledge was evident. Colonisation and Somalia’s battle for independence had emerged at different times as pedagogical focal points, in which Zeinab was always the teacher. Whilst I did not recognise the man in the statue, I smiled as I anticipated my next history lesson.

Through Zeinab’s dialogue, I sensed the adoration and high esteem she holds for this man, Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, referring to her love for him. Her words are emphatic, referring to his actions in freedom fighting and what this figure represents for Somalia as a nation in terms of freedom and strength; powerful lexis which I felt affected the atmosphere in the room as she spoke of him.

Zeinab used the image of the horse to recall memories of her own childhood and particularly of her father and speaks of the feelings for him this image evokes, with a strong recollection of one particular day in her life. Zeinab's dialogue gives some insight into, what Stuart Hall (2017) refers to as 'routes' rather than 'roots', including her knowing of the world: growing up in a rural locality; the important presence of animals in her childhood; the strong influence of her father as an educator; and her historical and political knowledge of Somalia's independence.

As a white British-born woman, the image stirred in me uncomfortable emotions towards my national history which I had not fully acknowledged before, even more so as I held such respect for Zeinab. Somalia's history, inseparable from the 'West's' colonial past, through my eyes, became present in the room. I sensed that the way Zeinab spoke of this leader brought his legacy temporally closer.

Through further reading I discovered that Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan was a leader in the Dervish movement, who died around 1920, and was referred to as the 'Mad Mullah' by the British. In 'post-colonial times' he was celebrated as a national hero of Somali, with his poems learnt in school and his statue erected in Mogadishu on his favourite horse Hiin-Faniin (Hoehne, 2014: 2). The statue was destroyed in the 1990s and sold for scrap metal, and, due to its purpose as a pan-Somali national symbol, was unable to be resurrected following the start of the 1991 civil war (Roble, 2014). However, a bronze replica of the statue now stands in Jigjiga, the Somali Region of Ethiopia; a story which holds its own complicated political history (Roble, 2014).

In approaching Zeinab's artefact, and in consideration of my own position, I returned to Hall's (2017) work regarding the continuous presence of the *postcolonial* as a radically evolving configuration of power, institutions and discourses in new forms. In this regard, the very existence of the statue itself required interrogation; as a symbol of both memorialisation and national independence following British/Italian colonisation in Somalia. I sensed a paradoxical postcolonial air in this knowing.

The essence of political statues is for memorialisation and to evoke feelings; I therefore viewed Zeinab's artefact as a deeply personal evocation. I read the style of the statue itself as connotating the historical tyranny of the west. I interpreted the image as the viewer standing in the shadow of the statue on its highly raised plinth, which itself contemporaneously stood in the shadow of colonialism in its new forms. New forms comprise globalisation, which some refer to as the 'global colonialism' based on the historical structure of capitalism (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001) and, more

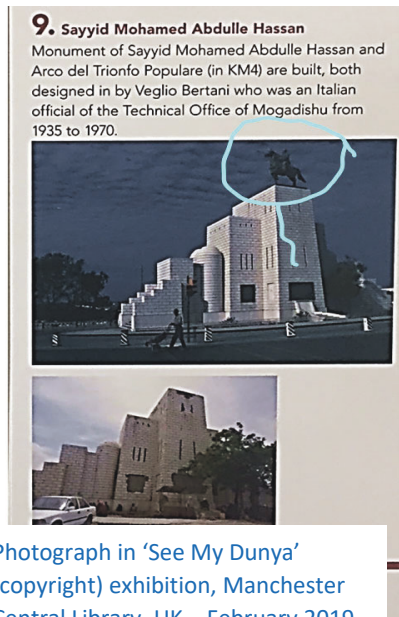
specifically in Somalia, what Ejiogu and Mosley (2017: 1) refer to as the ‘postcolonial wave of new terrorism on the African continent’. With the knowledge I had learnt from Zeinab, in addition to my wider reading, the statue stirred feelings in me of injustice and a continued haunting of the presence of western powers.

‘An Artefactual Re-encounter’

Just over two months later, I encountered the statue once more. Following Zeinab’s history lesson, the image of the statue, as well as Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan’s name, was imprinted in my mind. In February 2019 I sought out an exhibition, ‘See My Dunya’, in my home town of Manchester.

As I followed the historical timeline around the exhibition space, Zeinab was constantly in my mind and I found myself wishing she was there to see it for herself. My attention was immediately drawn to a recognisable image. My recognition and knowledge of the statue became entangled with different feelings of people and places. I had a powerful sense of imagining what it would be like to look at this image in its actual physical form in its original time and place. I also felt gratitude towards Zeinab, who had orchestrated the statue’s presence in our Family Literacy class in Birmingham. These feelings were entangled with nostalgia of the statue’s presence in an exhibition which also centred on the Somali community in an area of Manchester that I had taught in for several years. This was a coming together of what Leander and Ehret (2019) refer to as ‘affectively charged associations’ in pedagogical spaces. I was excited at the thought of sharing the experience with Zeinab and the other mothers in the class. I was also overcome with a feeling akin to a child wanting to impress their teacher. I sensed that the traditional teacher/student roles had certainly reversed in this moment. Utilising Freire’s (1970) terms, this event importantly reframed the traditional teacher-student relationship to that of ‘student-teacher’ and ‘teacher-student’.

My experience at the exhibition also responds to Gutierrez’s (2008) conceptualisation of a pedagogical third space, consisting of hybrid learning zones in which home and school are bridged through the sustaining of hybrid language and educational practices. The learning I had gained from Zeinab in the class was realised in this outside space. The exhibition became a learning zone in which I was able to draw on the language and resource of Somali culture and history, combined with my experience of the Manchester Somali community, in a way I would not have been able to if I had seen the exhibition in another time and place.



Photograph in 'See My Dunya' (copyright) exhibition, Manchester Central Library, UK – February 2019

2nd February 2019

I was back in Manchester this weekend and went to an exhibition about Manchester's Somali community at the Central library. The exhibition was called 'See My Dunya' which means 'See My World'.

I became very excited as the exhibition included both a timeline of Somali history as well as photographs of the Somali community in Moss Side where I taught for several years. The latter included photos of lots of the older residents of the community as well as young people and I'm sure I recognised a few faces!

I took photographs of some of the pictures on the historical timeline and accompanying text. It started in XVIIIAD right up to the present day. I was thinking about Zeinab the time I was there as she has taught me so much about Somali history and is so passionate about the subject. My eyes were drawn to a photo from the 1969-1988 period of a horse statue on top of a building. On closer inspection

I saw that it was the same one Zeinab had spoken about in the identity work; the statue of Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan! I couldn't wait to tell her about it! Afterwards I sent the mothers the pictures from the exhibition on our WhatsApp group.

Notes from my teaching/research journal



Sharing the exhibition photographs with the mothers on WhatsApp – 9 February 2019

From a Foucauldian perspective, the heterotopic learning space can be viewed as 'an encapsulation of everything and everywhere'; 'a kind of hieroglyphic site' (Soja, 2004: x). The messiness of *postcolonial* relations emerged across different spaces: Zeinab's identity artefact in the classroom in Birmingham; the outside learning space of the Manchester exhibition; and the sharing of the image of the statue from both Zeinab and I on the virtual WhatsApp space. Zeinab's identity artefact became an agent of dynamic learning and community memory across these hybrid learning spaces, making the *postcolonial* both present and affecting. It also opened up space for uncertainties and negotiations, stories and memories, which have important implications for the being of doing of teaching and learning in the *postcolonial* family literacy classroom.

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