

Multilingualism or assimilation? Three East African teens reflect on language and identity

By Maymuna Yusuf, Red Debebe and Eliham Mohammed, with support from Michelle Aguilar Ramirez
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Podcast transcript:

[Audio collage of KUOW staff members and RadioActive youth producers introducing themselves in their native languages]

Michelle: Language is the foundation of life. All our actions, perspectives and cultures stem from how we communicate with others.

But when our communities are tied to their methods of communication, what happens when we lose that ability?

Red: Welcome to another episode of the RadioActive podcast. My name is Red Debebe. I'm 16 years old and I'm Ethiopian.

Maymuna: My name is Maymuna Yusuf. I'm 18 years old and I'm Oromo and Somali.

Eliham: And my name is Eliham Mohammed. I'm 17 and I'm Ethiopian.

Red: *RadioActive* is a program where youth come together and produce radio stories at KUOW Public Radio in Seattle.

Maymuna: And in this episode, we're discussing what it's like being distant from our native Languages. Eliham, Red and I are all first generation East African women who struggle with preserving our native tongue, especially living in the United States and being conditioned to adapt to the "norm."

This has caused us to feel disconnected from our native languages that we either speak, understand, or might have forgotten along the way.

Eliham: Red, I know that you speak fluent Amharic. What is that like for you?

Red: Being a first gen American, I feel like I experienced linguistic struggles firsthand, and quickly had to realize that our bilingualism can be viewed as a weakness from a young age.

I did everything I could to avoid speaking Amharic because, for one, I didn't know how to anymore. And around ages five to nine, I didn't see the use of it anymore. My thought process was that if I'm in America, why can't I just speak English?

It kind of clicked to me around 10 years old that I needed to know the language of my ancestors when I was sent back home to Ethiopia on my own to spend an entire summer with my grandparents, who are also non-English speakers, so I knew I had to do something about my lack of ability then.

Eliham: Yeah, I get what you mean. For me, I grew up speaking my language fluently. Being a kid who was raised in Ethiopia for about four years, coming to the U.S and learning how to accommodate and how to learn American customs was extremely hard for me. My siblings, my cousins, my family all spoke English and I constantly felt left out. So growing up I saw myself drifting away from my native language.

Red: So Maymuna, what languages do you speak in your home?

Maymuna: Growing up in a family of 12 in Seattle in itself was interesting to say the least. Both of my parents speak Oromo and Somali, so naturally I understood it for the most part. But when my siblings and I went to school, where they obviously spoke English, it made its way into our home where we started speaking it until it just kind of like finally stuck. I fully understand Oromo and a bit of Somali, but I don't speak either of them unfortunately.

Red: Wow, I wonder what the science is behind understanding a language but not speaking it. Like that's so common, I just don't get it!

Maymuna: I think it's because our minds work faster than our mouths, you know?

Eliham: Yeah, I don't get it either, but it's always been that way.

Maymuna: When did you guys really learn the importance of language?

Red: I learned the importance of language when I was in a particularly tricky situation translating for my grandmother at customs and throughout international travels — *alone* at 10 years old, may I add. And I had just spent the entire summer with her trying to perfect my Amharic. So when me and my grandmother traveled back, I realized I wasn't as good as I thought when I almost had us arrested for misinterpreting to the police and trying to translate what I couldn't!

Eliham: No way. There's no way.

Maymuna: That's so scary!

Eliham: I learned the importance very recently around age 15 which was like two years ago. I went to LA with my cousins, and me and my cousin had an epiphany that we need to learn our language. So we asked my older sister who is fluent in Amharic to teach us, so for the whole trip we had to only speak Amharic, not English. It was such a fun experience, and it made me so much closer to my culture.

Maymuna: I always knew that my native language was important literally ever since I was a kid. But around the ages of 10-12 was when the question, 'Why don't you know your language?' started to come up a lot. And it really frustrated me and made me feel guilty.

At one point I started to question myself and basically was like, 'Omg everyone knows their own language, but look at me.' Especially when I would see my younger family members speak Oromo to

their parents and I couldn't. It was embarrassing and it really got to me. I felt lost, confused, discouraged, and so on. But as I got older, I started to do a lot of reflection and took a step back and realized it was pretty much out of my control.

Red: Wow that's very relatable Maymuna. I feel like every multilingual has that sort of realization at some point.

Red: So guys, what was it like being raised in America as a first generation student? And did you feel the need to fall in line with the American lifestyle ?

Eliham: Yeah, that's a good question. In my personal experience, growing up in elementary school wearing a hijab, I felt stripped of certain identities because sometimes I would be told I wasn't truly Black because I was Muslim, which isn't true, by the way. And I didn't understand that concept of race, that definitely pushed me away from my culture and language as well. I wish that young me would have known that the words of those children were insignificant.

Maymuna: Personally, not really, no. Mostly because I'm still very thankful to be able to follow my culture on a day-to-day basis. Whether that's eating certain foods, wearing cultural attire on special occasions, I still am actively participating. Not only that but I am Muslim so my lifestyle isn't the same compared to the average American.

There were times in high school where I felt like I was missing out on living an 'American high school' experience. You know, going to parties, prom and so on. But I knew that was something I probably wouldn't even remember in the next 10 years, so what was the point of turning my back on my morals if it wasn't giving me anything good in return?

And, you know, it was and still is a roller coaster dealing with so many different identities, being a first gen East African Muslim woman living in the states and seeing how different you are. While also simultaneously staying true to yourself.

Red: I think I definitely feel the need to fall in line with the American lifestyle to an extent. I would never sacrifice my language or important cultural elements like eating the food often, or that certain kind Ethiopian hospitality I always try to carry out to all people, Ethiopian or not.

I still have many years as a student to experience, but I'm grateful that the environment I grew up in hasn't brought judgment upon diversity but simple appreciation. That helps me conform to my own personal lifestyle — a mix of both American and Ethiopian cultures.

Eliham: Yeah, I definitely relate to that. Red, what about language do you guys appreciate the most?

Red: I think I love the kind of mental aspect behind it. Once you learn a language, I think in particular your native language, it becomes so much easier for your brain to pick up and understand its sister languages in the same language family. For example, knowing Amharic, which is a semitic language, will allow you to learn other semitic languages much easier, such as Tigrigna, Arabic, Yiddish, and Ge'ez.

Ge'ez is the original language of the Ethiopian empire and is now a dead language. Having that connection to the former people and rulers of that powerful empire is so interesting to me. I mean, how cool is that?

Eliham: I think for me it has to be the way it brings people closer together. Me and Red speak the same language and most of the time me and her speak to each other in Amharic and it has truly brought us closer together. It connects you to your people and people who have the same background.

Red: That is so true you find such a connection in languages, it's amazing.

Maymuna: Yes, I totally agree, I tend to bond with people who look quite similar to me — like if I notice we are either the only Africans or hijabis in the room, in my head I'm thinking we're gonna be great friends. I almost always kind of create a mentality of solidarity, kind of like a 'I see you, you see me' type of thing.

For example, when I met a colleague at *RadioActive* who was both Somali and Muslim, it was just a really comforting and familiar type of thing. So I truly just appreciate the way languages can be a way to communicate with those of similar backgrounds. But could also reach out to others who you know, don't come from similar backgrounds and still be able to create that same bond.

Eliham: Thank you for being a part of this conversation with us. If you feel distant from your native language, we want you to know that you are not alone.

I believe that this topic isn't very well spoken about. It has given all of us an understanding of our struggles with our own culture. Now we are fully aware that we need that connection.