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# THE SOMALI CHALLENGE

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## From Catastrophe to Renewal?

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## The Mirror of Culture: Somali Dissolution Seen Through Oral Expression

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The human race had the wisdom to create science and arts; why should it not be capable to create a world of justice, brotherliness and peace? The human race has produced Plato, Shakespeare and Hugo, Michelangelo and Beethoven, Pascal and Newton, all these human heroes whose genius is only the contact with the fundamental truth with inner most essence of universe. Why then should the same race not produce those leaders capable of leading it to those forms of communal life which are closest to the lives and harmony of the universe?

—Leon Blum

Reer ba'oww yaa ku leh!  
(O, wretched household, to whom do you belong!)

—Popular Somali saying

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, a Somali poet and playwright, Mohamed Warsame "Hadrawi," produced a satirical play using the above Somali saying as its title. The plot centered around a poor nomadic family victimized by a member of the corrupt ruling elite. This saying can, however, be more aptly applied to the current upheaval in Somalia. Indeed, the whole nation could be described as a *reer ba'ay*, a place squalid in every sense of the phrase.

The entire fabric of Somali society has been ravaged. The very existence of the whole nation has sunk in a deep dark sea of unimaginable human and material disaster. Furthermore, in my view, the communal mind of the society seems to be in a coma. No collective responsible effort, voicing national concern or calling for saving the savable, has so far emerged. For a nation proverbially

known for its deep-rooted traditions of reasoning and a history of national consciousness, this is an utterly puzzling development. Why and how has it happened? This is the knotty question that persists as Somalia increasingly captures the attention of the world.

Any attempt to deal successfully with this problem requires a better understanding of Somali culture and society. What, in cultural perspective, are the real reasons for this unprecedented collapse of Somali political and civic life? Is it true that the cause lies in the old Somali culture, as repeatedly argued in some recent newspaper articles and other publications? What are the basic characteristics of Somali culture? What are the principal messages conveyed by the major forms of Somali cultural expression, both traditional and modern? This chapter is a modest attempt to contribute to the search for answers to these questions. Obviously, this is not an easy task because this chapter seeks to focus on a theme that, I feel, has never been studied before.

In order to achieve its goals, the essay is broken into four components. The first introduces the salient cultural values and attitudes of traditional Somali society, as featured in its stories, plays, poems, and oral traditions. The second section explores the predominant cultural trends during the two and a half decades spanning the early 1940s to late 1960s, a landmark period in the development of Somali culture. The third part traces the present catastrophe to practices of social and cultural deformation that took place during the past twenty years. The major argument in this section is that a systematic social, cultural, and moral destruction has preceded and paved the way for political and economic collapse, precipitating the present insanity. A whole body of new and destructive political culture has set in, replacing the positive cultural values of the nation.

The concluding section attributes the present agony to the legacy of the ill-intended political excesses of the military regime under Siyaad Barre, its outrageous manipulations of the traditional kin system, and armed and clanist factions on the scene today. Finally, I suggest that a serious effort at cultural reconstruction and a rehabilitation of the Somali mentality are prerequisites for a political or economic reconstruction.

### Culture and Society: The Precolonial Era

The definition of the term *culture* is still a matter of debate, and it is not the intention here to delve into this complex dialogue. Suffice to

say that culture will be referred to, in this paper, as a people's mode of perceiving the world and reacting to it through various forms of creativity. At all times, culture is closely associated with the environmental, social, and political conditions of a society; at the same time, it plays a considerable role in the regeneration of these conditions.

Given the fact that the remote history of Somalia is shrouded in mystery, as well as the recent destruction of the locations of whatever reference material existed in Somalia, oral culture remains, in my view, the most reliable and effective resource to a better understanding of this society. I believe that study of Somali national culture can provide important insights into the modes of life and thinking of the Somalis throughout history. Such study can therefore be helpful for any serious attempt to deal with the current peculiar situation in Somalia.

The abundance of Somali oral expression and the exceptionally important role it plays in Somali life has repeatedly been confirmed by early testimonies of outside observers and scholarly works by contemporary researchers of different origins. As elsewhere, Somali society contains most contradictions: good and evil, right and wrong, constructive and destructive. The divisive character of kin ideology is evidence for the existence of some negative aspects in Somali traditional attitudes. This will be discussed later in this chapter. On the other hand, it must be emphasized from the outset that it has been the constructive virtues that have given the Somali national culture its salient features. The bulk of Somali oral culture provides ample evidence that a strong belief in (unwritten) law and reason and an unmistakable sense of respect for social institutions have been the prominent traits of Somalis. Poets and parents consciously and constantly used narratives and other forms of cultural heritage as educational tools to imprint in the minds of their children the ideals of tolerance, mutual aid, condemnation of violence, and commitment to the common good. In the pages that follow, I shall substantiate these statements through various illustrations of Somali verbal art. First, however, I shall consider the negative aspect mentioned above.

Anthropologists and political scientists believe that the socio-political organization of precolonial Somalia rested on a clan family system based on descent. In the absence of a centralized national state, the traditional clan system was a necessity. In contrast to the hypocritical clanism in the contemporary urbanized circles, the traditional clan family system established a high degree of mutuality among people who lived under harsh environmental conditions. However, there are many negative elements to a clan-based world

outlook, wherever it exists. Among Somalis, such attitudes and behaviors represented potential threats to national unity and the very essence of a modern state. For example, consider the following Somali saying:

Haba kuu darraadee dad waa ina adeerkaa.

(However unhelpful to you, your cousin remains the best of people.)

According to the above saying, one has to judge people on the basis of blood ties and not on their merits. This saying is derived from the widely held concepts of *sokeeye* and *shisheeye*, according to which people are divided into kin, for whom support is compulsory, and strangers, who are often perceived as potential foes.

Shisheeye shiilo duxa ma leh.

(Expect no mercy from outsiders.)

Clan-based principles can potentially become dangerous. For example, if a man wants to commit a murder, he may be encouraged by the feeling that he will be protected by his kin; likewise, the aggrieved party may seek to take vengeance not just on the murderer but on his kin individually and collectively. As a result of this irrational outlook, innocent people may be harmed, and culprits need not be held accountable for their deeds.

The most disastrous application of this ideology is manifested in the political life of present-day Somalia. A ruthless tyrant, Siyaad Barre, and such similar culprits as the present warlords and war criminals have succeeded in manipulating the kin mentality, protected—even encouraged—by the majority of their immediate kinspeople despite the fact that, unlike traditional clan members, these “leaders” clearly do not represent the interests of the group. On the contrary, their acts are potential threats to the very existence of their own particular clans.

It must be noted here that in traditional Somali society, the harmful consequences of this sort of clan “insurance” for wrongdoers was avoided by the existence of a more powerful cultural force operating within the kin group. The righteous majority of the kin group, vested in the elders and wise men, were always able to control violent actions and other evil practices that were likely to be committed by extremists. Everyone had to abide by the *heer* (the

customary law) and the collective will of the community, i.e., the clan family.

Talo walaal diide, tagoog buu ka jabaa.  
(He who rejects brotherly advice, breaks his thighbone.)

Nin qaldan qabashadi, nin qumman quweynti iyo nin  
qatan wax-siintii buu tol ku dhaqmaa.  
(It is in restraining those who are at fault, supporting those  
who are upright, and coming to the aid of those who are  
hungry that kinship is properly exercised.)<sup>1</sup>

In spite of a profound sense of dignity and pride, "the Somali is willing to bow before reason as long as he is proven wrong." However, it must still be said that the above negative aspects in kin relations can be described as dark shadows in the generally bright scene of Somali culture.

A mature knowledge of Somali custom disproves recent arguments widely propagated by the Western media that violence and anarchy constitute the cornerstone of Somali culture, or that in Somali society political tolerance is anathema. This assessment by the media accurately describes Siyaad Barre's regime, as well as those who compete to replace him, but such anarchy was *not* always the case. The following samples from Somali oral tradition illustrate the extent to which people believed in reason and tolerance as supreme cultural virtues.

The first is the well-known parable about a young man who, fed up with his wife leaving him frequently, decided to cut her shins. The man was charged and instructed that he could no longer divorce his wife, that he could not marry a second wife, and that he had to pay special attention and care for his wife for life because he disabled her. When the man's father heard the verdict some days later, he asked if his son had accepted the sentence. Yes, was the answer. The father replied with relief, "Then, I recognize him as my son."

The moral of this parable is clear. It is aimed at teaching the coming generation to be tolerant, to side with justice and reason, and to respect the majority rule, even if your immediate personal interests are at stake. The popularity of this story and the way it has been preserved in the collective memory of Somali oral traditions signify the extent to which the story is a true expression of the collective consciousness. There are many proverbs and popular sayings that convey the same message, such as

Gar-diid waa Alle-diid.

(He who rejects a verdict rejects God.)

Somali oral tradition teems with hundreds of proverbs, poems, and prose narratives with explicit messages condemning violence and despotism. They preach the virtue of peace and the value of law and order. The following are but a few:

Dagaal waa ka-dare.

(War is worse.)

Xeer la'aan waa xukun iyo xoolo la'aan.

(Without moral and social codes, all is lawlessness and abject poverty.)

Gacmo wada jiraa galladi ka dhalataa.

(Joint hands bear success.)

Aan wadahadallo waa aan heshiinno.

(Let's talk means let's reconcile.)

Rag waxaad "walaal" uga weydey waran ugama heshid.

(What cannot be done by persuasion cannot be done by the spear.)

Nin talo ma yaqaane gun baa talo taqaan.

(A lone man knows no solution; a council knows it.)

In addition, oral narratives depict the characters of tyrannical rulers as villains. The stories of Arrawelo<sup>2</sup> and Geeddi Babow<sup>3</sup> may be cited as examples.

It is likely that self-governance of traditional Somali society was based on the rule of the majority. This is what I. M. Lewis calls *pastoral democracy* and Ali Musse Iye describes as *Go'aankii Geedka* (the decision under the tree);<sup>4</sup> all the mature men of the community would participate in collective decisionmaking under a tree (the lack of democracy in excluding women is another serious matter). These thorough discussions and verdicts demonstrate that there was a compulsory reference to tradition and customary law in the past. Each speaker was aware that the weight of the deliberations would be validated with the support of a whole range of literary background (such as proverbs, poems, quotations of wisdom, and historical events), just as the Islamic ulema would substantiate their preaching with verses from the *Quran* and *Hadith*. This form of decisionmaking is one of the practices that preserved and disseminated oral tradition.



It is worth emphasizing that the role of the intellect was traditionally very important in Somali culture. The kin community used to pay its highest respect to cultural producers and intellectuals. Prominent among the traditional intelligentsia were three groups: the poets; men of erudition, experience, and competence; and the Muslim ulema. If a member of these groups was present in any given circumstance that required the resolution of a problem, he would be the one to be consulted. These intellectuals were members of *biri-ma-geydo* (those not deserving a sword), a group of seven men who would not be killed in the event of war. Complicated issues were referred to those esteemed for their ability and experience. Their decisions were final and had to be implemented because, as a traditional Somali saying goes, "a man who is a year older than you is wiser than you."

The verses of poets had tremendous power. A vivid example of this is that Ali Dhuh, a distinguished poet, put a whole kin group into a disastrous war by reciting his well-known poem "Guba" (That Which Burns).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Salan Arabey's declaration "Waar tolow colka jooja" (Oh, my kin, please stop the hostility) disarmed the warring factions of the Ahmed Farah and Dahir Farah subclans, who had reneged on all agreements and were ready that day to annihilate each other.<sup>6</sup>

In a comparison of traditional Somali society with that of current times, it is self-evident that the former was far more thoughtful and intelligent. Bullets and immorality dominate today, showing the magnitude of intellectual and cultural bankruptcy. Undoubtedly, as with any other society, old Somali society had its own share of negative values and vileness. But the positive elements usually prevailed, thanks to the guidance of the traditional intelligentsia. Today, however, it is the other way around.

### **Culture and Society: The Era of Great Awakening, 1940s–1960s**

The period of roughly two decades commencing around the end of World War II and ending in the 1960s was significant in the history of the development of Somali society and culture. The whole spectrum of Somali life was characterized by an overwhelming feeling of rejuvenation or rebirth, a general sense of being on the threshold of a new experience.

In this section, I endeavor to examine how this renaissance expressed itself in forms of cultural creation. I begin by looking briefly at three salient aspects of this rebirth. The first was the transformation of people's consciousness from kin loyalty to a higher form of



national awareness based on *soomaalinimo* (Somalism). The second was the trend toward education, based on a general feeling that modern education was the only road to a better life. The third was the rise and flourishing of new works of art and oral expression. I shall pay particular attention to the last, through which the other two will be illustrated.

The richness and intensity of the experience of the time and the important social, political, and cultural changes that were under way inspired a whole body of new art and oral expression. This, in turn, greatly contributed to the regeneration of the changing social and cultural realities. The first half of the 1940s saw the rise of modern music; urban theater; and *heello*, which evolved into today's *hees* (songs), the most popular form of contemporary poetry.<sup>7</sup>

A review of the literary works of the time will provide important insights into the way in which the people of the predictatorial Somalia perceived themselves and the world around them. Here, I focus on how the poetry and theater of the 1950s and 1960s reflected the two principal sociopolitical concerns of the time: Somali nationalism and the search for enlightenment as a tool for progress.

### *Nationalism as a Major Theme of Oral Expression*

Any examiner of the Somali verbal art of the past fifty years will note that *soomaalinimo*, or patriotism, is the major theme in almost all major works. The relation between Somali nationalism and oral expression is of paramount importance. First, a word of forewarning: what is routinely referred to as *soomaalinimo* need not be associated solely with the period of struggle for independence or even the days of Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan. The concept of *soomaalinimo* as a communal identity has obviously existed since the time when the Somali entity was forged through culture, language, geographical location, and ethnicity. A camelboy would sardonically reply, "I'm Somali" to an inquiry about his clan. Similarly, a nomadic woman whose husband was not around used to say, "We're Somalis" in reply to strangers' questions about who her family was; it was a sign that the wife was not prepared to host guests. The travelers would in turn say, "We're all Somalis, but which clan?" The camelboy and nomadic woman were aware that their own lineage ultimately led to their Somalihood. This knowledge made Somalia unique among other sub-Saharan countries, where people do not identify themselves with the national name that their country assumed after independence.

Nationalism is not a mere political concern, as many have incorrectly believed. In fact, Somali nationalism existed long before the modern concept was given its political interpretation. In recent times, Somalis collaborated in an organized manner to achieve Somalism through a new structure: a modern and independent state shared by all Somalis. This became an ideology that superseded the kin consciousness for many people. Others, however, stuck to their old affinities or straddled the two worldviews, creating in their wake a jumble of contradictions. Contemporary poets and playwrights deal with this subject, voicing the new and criticizing the old. Although a detailed explanation of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will present one reasonably elaborate depiction that stretches across three or four different periods of modern Somali history: the image of a symbolic she-camel called Maandeeq, a well-known character frequently used in most genres of Somali oral expression during the past forty years or so.

The imagination of Somali poets and playwrights created Maandeeq as a symbol of the country, the state, and sovereignty. The reason for choosing a she-camel to embody the most valued ideals lies in the nomadic cultural background of most of the authors. In this context, the she-camel is the most valued of all property. The man whose she-camel is stolen does not rest, and the one whose she-camel has just given birth misses no prosperity but has to protect it from the beasts. To understand the evolution of Maandeeq's image in oral narratives is to read the history of the modern Somali state.

In particular, changes in Maandeeq's image symbolize the history of Somalia over the past half a century, which can be divided into four different periods. The first was the preindependence period. The following stanza by Yusuf Hagi Adan is an example of the oral expression of this age:

Hadhuub nin sitoo hashiisa irmaan  
 "Ha maalin" la leeyahaan ahay  
 Dagaal nimuu haysto meel halisoo  
 Hubkiisu hangool yahaan ahay

(I'm a man with a milking vessel and a dairy camel  
 But told not to milk it for himself  
 I'm a man dangerously encompassed by war  
 Whose only weapon is a wooden hook)

The year 1960 marked the second period. An independent Somali Republic was born at last. The streets of Mogadishu, Hargeisa,

and everywhere else were filled by jubilant people dancing in celebration:

Maantay curatoo  
 Caanaha badisee  
 An maallo hasheenna Maandeeq  
 (Today is its first delivery  
 Her production increases  
 Let's milk our she-camel, Maandeeq)

The months of June and July 1960 saw a gush of hundreds of songs composed in celebration of the joyous occasion of the independence,<sup>8</sup> but the feeling would soon change. What happened? Abdillahi Qarshi answers:

Hashaan toban sano u heesaayey  
 Hadhuubkiyo heeryadiiba cuntee  
 Lixdankaan haybin jirey maxaa helay?  
 (The she-camel I've been singing about for ten years  
 Has eaten both the milking vessel and the saddle  
 What happened to the [year of] sixty I so much longed  
 for?)

The poet angrily depicts the people's concern by questioning the misallocation of the supposedly increased spring milk of the suckling Maandeeq. A Somali audience would easily decipher the message. The poet shows that independence was beginning to fail the people who struggled for it.

A later reference to Maandeeq was made by the significant composer Hussein Aw Farah. In a song that begins with "Markii ay gabeenee" (When they failed her [Maandeeq]), Farah portrays a she-camel flagrantly neglected by her herders—tortured by thirst, hunger, and blood-sucking ticks—that is finally rescued by good men who move her to rich pastures and protect her from the effects of chronic diseases. A great Somali artist customarily expresses the feelings of the majority of the people at any given time. In this example, Farah, in anticipation of badly needed reform, depicts the jubilation with which the majority welcomed the military coup in 1969.

Shortly thereafter, however, poets who used to complain about misallocation of the she-camel's milk and a drought during which she grossly suffered portrayed the slaughter of Maandeeq. Silence descended on the whole country as militaristic regimentation

became the order of the times. "Abdulkadir Hirsi" (Listen to the Truth) captures the beginning of the suffocation of creativity:

Dhabanada ayaan labada suul dhaygag hayaaye  
 Dhibaatay runtii noqotay oo la isku dhaadhiciye  
 Sallax buu ku dhegayaa afkii laga dhawaajaaye<sup>9</sup>

(With my two thumbs pressed against the cheeks, staring  
 It's truly a difficulty to face imprisonment  
 The mouth that dares to shout sticks to a stony floor)

Finally, let us consider a portrait of Maandeeq being mutilated, found in a play called *Aqoon iyo Afgarad* (Knowledge and Understanding), jointly authored in 1972 by Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame "Hadrawi," Saeed Salah Ahmed, Mohamed Hashi Dhama' "Gariye," and Musse Abdi Elmi. In this play, Maandeeq is represented by a character named Dahson (Invisible), a girl from a poor family. Dahson is tormented and becomes blind. She visits a doctor, who cannot help her but prescribes medication anyway. The doctor's real advice to Dahson is to look for the one man with the power to cure her, an army officer named Dahir. Following the instructions of the doctor, Dahson takes the prescription note to Dahir. He supplies her with medication that makes her condition worse. Furthermore, Dahir seeks to use Dahson as bait for her sister, Dulmar, with whom he would like to have an extramarital affair. The play painfully depicts the anguish and distress of Dahson:

Cirrolihii dhulku aaway?  
 Yaa caruurtii halleeyey?  
 Caanihii dhashu aaway?  
 Hashii yaa candho gooyey?  
 Cindiid yaa na wadaajey?  
 Isna sii cayilaaya?  
 Camalkiinnu xumaa!  
 Bal ayaan u cawdaa?  
 Yaa codkayga kasaaya?  
 Dhaayahaygan caweermay  
 Yaa cruuqda dhayaaya?  
 Jinjimii cududaydiyo  
 Cambarkii surku aaway?  
 Mee hugaygi cusbaa?  
 Alla yaan cuskadaa?  
 Ciirsi yaan ka filaa?

(Where are the elders of the land?  
Who has abused the children?  
Where is the milk for the babies?  
Who has cut the udder of the she-camel?  
Who has made us share stupefying cocktail?  
And is getting himself fatter?  
How ridiculous are your deeds!  
Whom should I complain to?  
Who should understand my voice?  
My blurred eyesight  
Who should medicate the veins?  
The bangles on my arms  
Where is the amber on my neck?  
Where is my new dress?  
O Lord, whom should I turn to?  
Whom should I expect to help?)

Even the dress and the fashionable jewelry of the defenseless and blind victim are stripped off her, one by one. With no guide, Dahson falls over a steep cliff, indicative of the times. In the end, a rescue operation must be mounted by the people to retrieve her.

This play *seems* to contain references about circumstances in the late 1960s. However, a careful analysis reveals that the play is a statement on what was happening in the 1970s. An example is the "infallible" officer, who has all the power yet no one dares to blame him for anything. The last scenes of the play seem to be a deliberate attempt to finish a sad story with an artificial happy ending. Such a practice was common during the military dictatorship. Moreover, this final act could be the result of last-minute censorship by the Ministry of Education, so that the play would meet the standards for study materials for secondary schools.

### *Education as a Major Theme of Oral Expression*

One of the attributes of the great awakening of the period under discussion was a generalized realization of the importance of modern education. Earlier, the colonial administration was suspected of having covert designs to convert the Somalis to the Christian faith. By the 1950s, however, this attitude dramatically changed in favor of the campaign for modern education. Somali oral expression always reflects issues of public concern, so the idea that knowledge is the key to development and that the Somalis ought to take note of this was reiterated by many poets, including Ali Husein Hirsi,

Osman Yusuf Kenadid, Abdullahi Suldan "Tima-Adde," Mohamed Ismael "Balaya-Ass," Ali Elmi Afyare, and Areys Isse Karshe. All of these cultural notables are now dead, and their life histories wait to be written.

In regard to popular songs, Abdillahi Qarshi composed his most memorable piece in 1961:

Aqoon la'aani waa iftiin la'aane  
 Waa aqal iyo ilays la'aane  
 Ogaada ogaada dugsiyada ogaada  
 Oo gaada oo ogadaa  
 Walaalayaal oo adaa!

(Lack of knowledge is lack of enlightenment  
 Homelessness and no light  
 Be aware, be aware of schools, be aware  
 Be aware, be aware  
 Brother, be aware!)

John Johnson reminds us that this song was one of the most popular songs for several years, to the extent that it was chosen as the signature tune of Mogadishu Radio. It was later replaced by "Dhulkayaga" (Our Land).

The immense popularity and memorization by the public of songs like this clearly reveal the eagerness with which most households and individuals received education in the 1960s. "Lack of education is lack of enlightenment" was a favorite expression. Plays, poetry, newspapers, and artist groups adapted names derived from the words and the intrinsic meaning of this song. One such derivative was given to the only literary journal of the time, *Iftiinka Aqoonta* (The Light of Education).<sup>10</sup> This was not merely a coincidence. Rather, the words *education* and *enlightenment* were often used in the dissemination of modern literature through the media. Plays were undoubtedly the major form of art advocating the quest for modern education. Ironically, the playwrights themselves, with the exception of a very few, had no chance for the formal education they were promoting.

In the 1950s and 1960s, plays depicted educated characters as positive protagonists. For instance, in Mohamed Ismael "Balaya-Ass"'s 1959 play *Inan Sabool* (A Poor Daughter), a pivotal character is a man named Elmi, a descriptive name meant to signify an educated man. The play is about a beautiful and worthy girl from a poor family (the girl symbolizes Somali sovereignty). She is vulnerable and



needs care. Uneducated men try to seduce her and take advantage of her. They all fail to win her, but they keep pestering her until Elmi finally appears on the scene. The play has a simple plot, representative of the plays of the period. The underlying message, however, promotes nationalism and enlightenment, thereby expressing Mohamed Ismael's conviction that independence and true sovereignty can be achieved through education alone.

A later example is Hassan Sheikh Mumin's 1969 play *Gaaraa-Bidhaan* (Fireflies), in which the protagonist is a young man who goes abroad for higher education. The man returns after some years and is saddened by the state of backwardness in his country. He works hard to educate the people. The only sources of criticism Mumin has for this character concern the character's marriage to a European woman and the shaky relationship between his wife and his extended, tradition-abiding family. The play expresses disapproval of marriage to foreigners and what is seen as a serious deviation from cultural origins.

A pertinent question to ask is whether this image of the educated Somali in modern oral art forms (including plays) is typically accurate. Unfortunately, it is not. The artists were reflecting the feelings of those who had a profound understanding of the significance of education, but many of these artists became disappointed in the efforts of those who were given the opportunity, through the meager resources of the state, to become educated. The poems and songs of the last twenty years are replete with lamentations and condemnation, as the once-positive depiction of the educated is tarnished by images of surrender or cowardice. An example of this shift is found in a play called *Qaran iyo Qabiil* (State and Clanism), by Abdi Migane, staged in Djibouti in 1985. The protagonist is a character named Samadid, a young graduate in charge of a government agency. Instead of acting professionally, befitting his status, he plunges himself into clan politics. The agency becomes bankrupt, and he undermines his own future.

Although this period of great awakening came to an end around 1971 or 1972, its last thrusts delivered the creation of a Somali orthography, completed on 21 October 1972. Abdille Rage's poetry is representative of this moment:

Labaatan iyo laba aamustiyo shaqal irmaaneeya  
 Ebyaniyo haddaan magac-u-yaal ku arkay joornaalka  
 Mar haddii afkaygii la qoray aabbe iyo hooyo  
 Mar haddaan amaahsigi ka baxay lagu agoontobey  
 Abaal waxa leh nimankii fartaa soo abaabulaye

Amiirnimo sin iyo garab jirtay nagu abuureene  
 Afafkaa qalaad iyo maxaa eregta ii dhiibtey  
 Anaa macallimoo raba dad loo furo iskuulaade

(Twenty-two consonants with vowels that make then  
 sound

Having seen an article and a pronoun in the newspaper<sup>11</sup>

Having my mother and father's language written

Having relieved myself from the borrowing that made us  
 orphans

Gratitude to the men who arranged the script

They created a mammoth pride in us all

Why should I accept foreign languages and borrowing

I too am a teacher who needs schools)

The cultural excitement and euphoria that greeted this important achievement, heady though it was, could not forestall the coming of despotism—a killer of human creativity.

### **Arrested Development: The Extortion of a Culture**

The popular characters that are often used in traditional Somali oral narratives include a small boy by the name of Higis and a beast called Afar-Bo'le (Four-Throats). This fictional beast, usually found in children's stories, is said to frighten youngsters out of their wits. Among the instructive and rich tales in which Higis and Afar-Bo'le appear is the following one:

One day, Higis's mother left him at home. Afar-Bo'le, knowing that the little boy was alone, came to him. Afar-Bo'le is widely known for its cunning and tricks to deceive children when it is hunting them. The beast has the ability to disguise itself as someone familiar to the children. It dresses and wears a veil like Higis's old aunt, who usually brings milk to him. Afar-Bo'le knows that the boy is hungry and needs milk. From some distance, the beast mimics the voice of Higis's aunt. Higis cheerfully welcomes the imposter. When Afar-Bo'le enters the house, Higis joyfully comes close. Quickly, Afar-Bo'le takes off its disguise and grabs Higis, exposing its dreadful canine teeth with the aim of scaring the child to death.

Of course, Higgs is not real, and nobody has ever seen Afar-Bo'le. Both are creations designed to deliver educative messages to each new generation. The emphasis is one of vigilance and alertness against the myriad deceits and sinister acts of evil forces.

The Somalis of the late 1960s and early 1970s apparently forgot the lessons that their ancestors stored in this tale. Like Higgs, they fell into a deadly trap. Such is the fate of contemporary Somalia. The critical question is, why did Somalis, including some of the sagacious ones, embrace the military order that was introduced by the coup d'état of 1969? Obviously, the first reason is that most Somalis were sick of the incompetence and corruption of the civilian government of the day. Second, the army was regarded with a great deal of awe, verging on a romanticization of its role as the defender of the nation. Third, the Somalis are basically nonconformists; they like change. Fourth, Somalia was part of a pattern of military coups in Africa that year. The fifth reason is that events were moving at a fast pace and that the low level of public awareness made it impossible for Somalis to anticipate the true consequences of military rule.<sup>12</sup>

Culture and literature were among the areas most profoundly affected by the military regime. The cultural structures of the nation were undone and spiritual values distorted. As the traditional moral code of right and wrong became reversed, what was once seen as offensive assumed a degree of acceptance or was even perceived as salutary. For instance, theft, lying, hypocrisy, rape, and dishonesty began to be defined as indicators of *ragannimo* (manhood). *Xoogga Dalka* (the National Army), one of the most respected social institutions, turned into a much-feared tool of repression and killing.

The opposition groups that stepped forward were not much better than Siyaad Barre. They adopted the same policy of political intolerance, clanist rivalry, and blind violence, as though salvation lay in surpassing the regime in acts of killing and destruction. Two reasons, among others, can be suggested for this tragedy: The first is that the leadership of these groups consisted of former Siyaad Barre loyalists who fell out with him simply because they found their political ambitions threatened by Barre's perfidious manipulations. After all, many were military officers who had been involved in turning the National Army into a looting, raping, and intimidating concern. As the Somalis say, "Hal booli ahi nirig xalaal ah ma dhasho" (A stolen she-camel does not give birth to a rightful baby). The second factor for the spread of this grievous mischief is that the broad masses did not rise up in opposition, mainly because the new

destructive political culture of "bowing before guns rather than reason" was already at an advanced stage.

Somalia has been ravaged by these kinds of people, who in turn are empowered by this perversion of traditional culture. The country is still hostage to them. Any attempt at rescue must start by defeating all those who dominated the country in recent times and depriving them of the weapons they have illegally inherited from the defunct National Army.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight the stark contradiction between traditional Somali thinking and that of the present. It is my contention that no neutral observer of Somali cultural production could fail to notice the astonishing distance between the dignity of the past and the current state of mindless degradation.

The corpus of oral expression and tradition examined in the first section of chapter has shown that precolonial Somali society was governed by a moral code of right and wrong based on reason, tolerance, rule of law, and a strong sense of obligation, on the part of the individual, to the general welfare. "People, know your leaders; leaders, know your limits" goes an ancient Somali saying. To be sure, negative attitudes and behaviors did exist, sometimes resulting in such events as kin or subkin fighting. It must be emphasized, however, that community elders, poets, and other wise individuals were always able to either preempt such conflicts or settle the issues quickly. Consequently, peace was maintained, and hatred was kept under control.

Much of the modern period, particularly the 1940s through the 1960s, represented a significant landmark in Somali history and cultural development. An entire body of art and oral expression emerged and blossomed, thereby playing a major role in the strengthening of political awareness—including the transformation from kin loyalties to a Pan-Somalist nationalism. This change was crucial to decolonization and the establishment of a modern state. Most took this period as the beginning of a better life, but such hope began to dry up by the end of the 1960s. Somalia's failure to bring about a system of competent leadership and governance capable of fulfilling Somali aspirations led to the current plight.

The bulk of material reviewed in this essay provides ample evidence that old Somali national culture had very little to do with the making of the ongoing bloody anarchy and political immorality. In

fact, these are products of disrespect and are relentless violations of the deep cultural values and social norms of the Somali people.

But the voice of protest is not done, and poets continue to speak. The following are Abshir Nur Farah's words, reflective of the cry of the 1990s:

Mooryaan<sup>13</sup> hubaysani balaay, noo hor-kacayaane  
 Wixii hudurku nugu beeray bay, ku hamminaayaane  
 Haddaan laga hor-tagin wacad allaad, marin habowdeene  
 Helina wayde hadafkaan rabnaye, nugu habboonaaye.

(Armed Moryans would only lead us to disaster  
 They dream of the very thing that the sickness planted  
 in us  
 If unchallenged, by Allah's word, you will lose your way  
 And you will not find that which we wish and deserve)

Finally, it is my firm belief that a systematic cultural renewal is as urgently needed as any plan for political and economic rebuilding. Preservation of what is left of the nation's cultural heritage is a monumental task, but such culture can do miracles in Somalia; it can restore sanity and hope, reintroduce democratic thinking, and help formulate a new vision of local community and national reconstruction. But to come to the aid of their country, poets, artists, and other traditional intellectuals must be helped to pick up the pieces of their own shattered lives and regroup.

### Notes

The major references used in this chapter are unpublished works of oral expression collected by the author during the past fifteen years. These materials exist in the form of tape recordings and original manuscripts in the author's possession.

1. Translated in Andrzejewski, "Reflections," p. 77.

2. *Arrawelo* is a very popular oral narrative about a ruthless legendary queen. For details, see Xaange, *Sheeko Xariirooyin Soomaaliyed*.

3. According to the oral narrative, Geeddi Babow was a despotic ruler based in Bur Hakaba, in the area between the Shabelle and Juba rivers.

4. Iye, *Le Verdict*.

5. *Guba* has become the name of a famous series of poetic combats centered around a kin rivalry. It was initiated by Ali Adan Goroyo (Ali Dhuh) in the early 1930s. Other prominent poets who had combated with him included Qaman Bulhan and Salan Arabey.

6. See Andrzejewski and Lewis, *Somali Poetry*.

7. For more information about the emergence of the genre heello and its transformation into the present-day hees, see Johnson, *Heellooy*. For a detailed account of the history and nature of Somali theatre, see Afrax, *Fan Masraxeedka*.

8. Author's interview with two statesmen of modern Somali art, Abdillahi Qarshi and Hussein Aw Farah, Mogadishu, 1979.

9. The poet alludes to a Somali parable that ends with a well-known saying by a fictitious and irreverent pastoralist. The saying expresses the herdsman's protest against what he saw as the unfairness of muzzling him (sticking his mouth to a stony floor) in order to instruct him not to complain about the slaying of his goats by the order of Allah.

10. This journal was issued in Mogadishu during 1966 and 1967, and was edited by Shire Jama.

11. The poet refers to and uses the newly introduced terms of Somali grammar.

12. Despite the intimidating atmosphere, many literary creators attempted to portray the realities of military rule. Consider three examples from three major areas of creative writing: poetry, theatre, and fiction. The first example is Mohamed Warsame "Hadrawi"'s two 1973 poems, "Hal la qalay raqdeed" and "Wadnahaan far ku hayaa." Both were early warnings that led to the poet's exile to a remote village and his silence at gunpoint for several years. The second example is Abdi Mohomed Amin's play *Muufo*, which was performed as part of the official celebration of 1 May 1979 (Somali Workers' Day). It was staged at the Mogadishu National Theatre. Siyaad Barre himself attended the performance and immediately reacted with outrage. He attacked the playwright and everyone involved in a half-hour diatribe. The third example is my second novel, *Galti-macruuf*, which was serialized in the leading daily *Xiddigta Oktoobar* until it was suddenly discontinued. I was arrested and interrogated for several days by the National Security Service. The major events of the story take place in the offices of a parastatal (Wakaaladda Horumarinta Qudaarta), run by a middle-aged former military officer, Elmi Gurey, who is corrupt and sinister.

13. *Mooryaan* is a new Somali word invented to refer to the armed thugs who indulge in murder and extortion in Somalia.