

## A RECENT POETIC LAMENT FROM BRAVA

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Since his retirement from the nomadic life, Prof. Andrzejewski has been spending more of his time studying Somalia's urban and religious poetry, in which he has long had an interest. Much of that poetry, as he reminded us years ago, is composed in local and regional dialects. Though distinct in form and content from the classical genres of pastoral poetry, the poems and songs of the the Benaadir townspeople are nonetheless a rich and important part of the country's collective heritage.

Tragically, it has taken a civil war for the wider public to become aware of the diversity of cultures and popular traditions in the Somali peninsula. As smaller clans and communities find themselves threatened and frequently displaced by the fighting amongst a variety of heavily armed militias, their only weapons are words, their only source of solace their songs and prayers.

Among the ancient communities of the Horn who have found their way of life imperiled by recent events are the people of Brava, a lovely old town on the Indian Ocean coast some 200 kms. south of Mogadishu. For nearly a thousand years of recorded history, the people of Brava have carried on trade with the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and the East African regions to the south, and they have drawn their sustenance from farms and herds situated along the lower Shabeelle River in the hinterland.

Many of Brava's urban inhabitants trace their ancestry to Yemen; others to the northern portions of East Africa's Swahili coast; and still others to the ancient indigenous inhabitants of the Somali peninsula. The "multi-tribal" composition of the town

was noted by early Arab travelers, who found the inhabitants to be literate, well-versed in Islam, and extremely prosperous. The precolonial form of government, as far as can be determined from the fragmentary evidence, consisted of a council of clan elders, leading merchants, and religious notables. While it appears that there were important status distinctions based on wealth, ancestry, and religious pedigree, and that some of the wealthy urban residents used slaves or clients to cultivate riverine farms, there was also considerable intermarriage amongst urban families up and down the coast, and between Bravanese townsmen and the Tunni community of the hinterland.

In all of these features, Brava resembled many of the coastal towns of East Africa. The international character of its commerce did not prevent the Bravanese from developing strong local attachments to their town. Owning a family house constructed of coral stone, from which business was often conducted, and learning to read and write in Arabic, were signs of status and standing to which all residents aspired. Like the other Benaadir towns, Brava also evolved its own distinct language and cultural traditions, with prominent religious personalities as the focus of many local stories and annual pilgrimages

From this brief outline, it is not difficult to see how the occupation of the town of Brava by armed militias originating outside the district could have been a traumatic experience. Despite the fact that several Bravanese had been active in the nationalist movement that brought Somalia its independence from Italy, successive Somali central governments had largely neglected the district's development. The Siyad Barre regime (1969-1991) had been particularly suspicious of Brava's notable lack of revolutionary fervor; his security forces carefully monitored contacts between Brava's inhabitants and the numerous foreigners who liked to spend holidays in the friendly town with its glorious beaches and quaint seafront. With the ouster of

Siyad Barre, various armed militias took advantage of the vacuum of political power to loot the town and terrorize the inhabitants. Many Bravanese contend that such actions were not simply the work of undisciplined young hooligans, but rather part of a concerted effort by "war lords" and their allies to intimidate the Bravanese and force them either to flee or to submit to the authority of their new overlords.

While this is not the place to detail the atrocities committed in Brava--it was not alone in its tragedy--this background is essential to understand the lament which follows. Much of the best Somali poetry, as we know, was composed in times of great hardship and trial, under the threat of death, displacement, or defeat. This poem is no exception. It is quite direct and literal in its description of the attacks on Bravanese homes and property, and at the same time deeply spiritual in its attempt to find consolation in religion.

The song was composed in Cimini, the Swahili dialect spoken in the town of Brava. It is in the form of a tangelo, or song, typical of the Swahili coast. Composed in stanzas of three rhymed lines, it conveys the deep sense of sorrow and loss felt by the people of Brava. The concluding stanzas, which express anguish over the flight of many citizens to Kenya, suggest that it was composed by someone who remained in Brava. Nonetheless, cassette tapes of the song could be found among Bravanese refugees in Kenya, Italy, and England. Wherever it was played, we were told, Bravanese listened and wept.

Poem of Abudeera (tangila)

[Is there a good title?]

In a town without government, who will provide justice  
People with guns come with evils,  
They ask you, where is the gold, where are the dollars

People with guns come with (ferocious) anger  
→ They take you alive without any reason,  
(Asking) where are the dollars, where is the gold

I have heard about dollars, but have never seen them  
I have not held them in hand, to know their value  
But I am hearing of it from the hyenas who come

They attack with cars (technicals)  
They break the doors with their own choice  
The country has no government to defend it (to prevent them)

You will never see anyone in the neighborhood  
The people with guns have the upper hand  
They break right into the front doors

The doors are closed day and night  
God has taken away law and order  
We have relied (only) on religion and prayers

We have relied on the Qoran (with 114 suras)  
It is better than guns and mortars (I am not exaggerating)  
Anyone who relies on God will not come to harm

Day and night people were not sleeping  
You will hear people screaming and crying  
You will hear the muezzin calling for prayer

You will hear the muezzin calling Adaana from the mosque  
Our prayers have been answered with God's karaama,  
(Which) has made them fight each other.

If this group comes, the other group leaves  
They loot and take away what they have looted  
I cannot distinguish among the ants (for the color is the same)

[Repeat of first stanza]

[Repeat of second stanza]

In the night when you are sleeping, you will hear horns  
When people hear them, they scurry for cover like ants  
They feel pain like a woman giving birth

[Repeat of earlier stanza, "If this group comes..."]

MUUYI USHO DAWLA NAA NAKHUPO GARI  
WENYE MABUNDUKHU HUUYA KA USHARI  
ZIIKOPI DAHABU ZIIKOPI DOOLLARI

MBALAZI

WENYE MABUNDUKHU HUUYA KA QADABU  
KHUTAALA RUUHUYO BILA YA SABABU  
ZIIKOPI DOOLLARI ZIIKOPI DAHABU

DOOLLARI NKASLIZE SKU WONA LAMNAYE  
SKUTILA MKONOONI KIIWA SARAAFAYE  
NAKHKASAA MPISI KUBIGA INAYEE

HIINGILA WEERARO HUUYA KA MAGAARI  
HUVUUNDA MILAANGO WANAAYO KHIYAARI  
DALI NI DIBIDI NTAAGO SARKAALI  
HUMONI MUUNTU KARKA LPEENGELE  
WENYE MABUNDUKHU WANAAYO TELE  
HUVUNDA MILAANGO HIINGILA KAA MBELE

MILAANGO MIFUUNGE MASKUBA NA MUUNTI  
MOOJA ONDROSHEEZA SHAR'A NA SHURUUTI  
CHISKATIZLE DIINI NAKHSOOMA QUNUUTI

CHISKATIILE QURA'ANI MIA WA ARBATA'SHARA  
KOLKO MZIINGA NA BUNDUKHU SIWO MAADAMUKHEFAKHARA  
HISKATILO DIINI MOOJA HA MCONYI YAA DARA

MASKU NA MUUNTI HA ICHILALCOOWA  
TAKH-KASA NKELE NAA ZILO KULOOWA  
NUMA MA ADAANA YANAKUBIGOOWA

NUMA MISKITIINI TAKH-KASA MA ADAANA  
NA KARAAMA ZIITU ZIWEENA BAYAANA  
MOOJA ILU YAAWO SHTILA KULAANA

AWA WA JIINGILA AWAJE HU LAWA  
HUBIGA KHAFALI HUPATA DANAWA  
NTUUNGU SISTAAMBULI MIDIBU NISAWA

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MUUYI USHO DAWLA NAA NAKHUPO GARI  
WENYE MABUNDUKHU HUUYA KA USHARI  
ZIIKOPI DAHABU ZIIKOPI DOOLLARI

WENYE MABUNDUKHU HUUYA KA QADABU  
KHUTAALA RUUHUYO BILLA SABABU  
ZIIKOPI DOOLLARI ZIIKOPI DAHABU

MASKU LEELOPO TAKH-KASA ZIBUUMBU  
HUFAKATISHANA MITHAALI YA NTUUNGU  
WATIILA ULAAZO ZAYDI YA UTUUNGU

AWA WA CHIINGILE AWAJE HULAWA  
HUBIGA KHAFALI HUPATA DANAWA  
NTUUNGU SISTAAMBULI MIDIBU NISAWA

SINA USIINLILI WALLAHI HAQIIQA  
MANTOYA MAWAZI SA'A NA DAQIIQA  
QALBIYA FAZA'A NA NEEFU HUNDIIQA

NA KILA MAADAMU KHTIYILA NAFSIYE  
KULLAMO WASWAASI KH-KOODA NA QALBIYE  
RUUHU IJILAWA NTAKU BADDILIYE

ISH-KASOOWA YIILA YO HUFAKATOCWA  
NA BEETULLAHI HEEDRA HINGILOOWA  
WAKE NA WAWLI NTAKU KU JEROOWA

WAKE NA WAWLI WATIILA FAZA'A  
NTAYIKO AASHIQI NTAYIICO MANYA'A  
KULLAMO QALBIYE YIICO KAMBA SA'A

MUUYI IZDIHAMU ISHKASOOWA YIILA  
KAMZIAMA NA MAANA HUWA IZIMIILA  
KAAKUJA NA KAAZI CHI HARIMIILA

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ISHKASOOWA YIILA YO HU FAKATOCWA  
NA BEYTULLAHI HEENDRA HINGILOOWA  
WAKE NA WAWLI NTAKU KU JEROOWA

SHKASAPO BUNDUKHU MI HUWEREERSATA  
ICHIWA KA QARIIBU HIINGILA KH-FAKATA  
HEENDRA MISKITIINI NNUMBAYA HULATA

HIYALATA MAALI NA MIJUUMBA YIITU  
ZOTTE HUPATOOWA NAAZO SIWO CHIINTU  
HIINGILA MAKANI NUB MBA YA MOJIITU

WAANTU WA-ENZELE KENYA WA FARIQIILE WATANI  
AMRI NA KA MENYE KUUMBA SI CHIIMO KAAKE MAKANI  
HA CHILATI MUUYI WIITI SH-TILOOWA PAPA KAFANI

WAANTU WA ENZELE KENYA WA LASILE MUUYI WAAWO  
WA LASILE MAJAZUURI PAMOYI NA MUUYI WAAWO  
AMRI NI KA MENYE KUUMBA TAKUWO HAFIIDI YAAWO

MATAAJIRI WA LAZILE MASKIINI NAAYO MAJIITU  
SHARI KIITU ILAZILE ZIKO KHEYRI NUMA YIITU  
MUUYI WIITU KISTAWA CHI NAKHTARAJA KA MOJIITU

AHLIYA INFARIQIILE MI NAKH-KOODA NA NAFSIYA  
PELE NI MOONYEZE NAANI MI NAKHTA'AJABA DUNIYA  
ILA MAMPAKA PAPA NAAYA MAHURA NI SOMAALIYA.

MA MPAKA PAPA NAAYA

MA MPAKA PAPA NAAYA