VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF SOMALINESS

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The Making of the Somali Crisis as Reflected in the Somali Oral Poetry of the 1960s and 70s

For the first time in their long history, in the colonial era, under common ruling powers, in the emergent urban centres, from different clans, Somali pastoralists were brought together. In the process, new forms of relationships were slowly coming into shape.

As a result, a feeling of oneness and a sense of belonging to one Somali nation were replacing the old segmentation based on the lineage system of the pastoralists. The idea of Somali nationalism evolved into the Somali state in 1960, born out of the union of the British and Italian portions of Somali territory. It became a major event in the history of the Horn of Africa, which many poets and song composers eternalized in the best of their poems and songs that are still remembered and sang again and again.

Magowdey cando haddii gellehaan marisoo
An maalif hakshee aan Maandeenq

The udder is bursting with milk.
Let us milk our she-camel Maandeenq.

In the same way, the new blue and white flag was also welcomed with a huge number of poems and songs, of which the most famous one is:

Sharayr u gaar ugu jeexleen
An sidu yahay egeee
Kaama sib, kaama saxaar

Stay ever higher, never come down.
To see how it looks like.
Lower that (the British) and raise this up to the heights (the new Somali flag).

However, attaining independence and uniting those two portions were not enough. To complete the five pointed star in the middle of the Somali flag, the other three, that is Djibouti, Ogaden and the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, must be brought in to form the union of greater Somalia. This took the conflict in the Horn of Africa to a new level and in the main between the new Somali state and the Ethiopian empire.

The Somalis, employing the modern means of mass media, especially the two radio stations of Mogadishu and Hargeysa, were very effective in their use of oral poetry in propagating the gospel of Somali nationalism, now unrestricted by the demarcation lines.

To convey their message, poets made references to the pastoralists' traditional pasturelands and watering wells, which are mostly on the Ethiopian side of the borderline.

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Words of Power

Ogadeen la dhacayo
Axmaar baay u tashee
Iisna waa dahalka
La aadcooma xaa
Aynu uguvaanu
Su soo warranaye
Ee-dama oo u hawshay 1

The Ogaden has been taken by force
And its people are under the yoke of the Amhars
And yet they are our kith and kin
Who are being subjected to enslavement
To have our revenge
Oh! All of you cry unity
And strengthen it!

The odds against this dream becoming a reality were huge. Economically, diplomatically and militarily, the new state was ill prepared, yet the unification of all the Somali inhabited territories was a priority. As a result, the civilian government, in the 1960s, were mostly criticized for their failure to bring the ‘missing territories’ back to the union.

Sidii baay u u dagaal ku xaylid haradhi doolloode
Oo welba dhibdaanayo iyo dirris joogtaay

Still, as before, cut off are the water ponds of the Doollo
And worst still, there is an ongoing provocation and conflicts that are rife

Moreover, the best of the livestock of which the Somali pastoralists prided themselves were on the Ethiopian side of the border, where the best water holes and lands for pasture were found.

Waa kaa dareer sadaam Axmaar dayraaddi abaatay

Indeed, by force took the Amhars the beautiful she-camels,
the very newly calved ones

While at the same time, lamentations and sorrow were expressed over the loss of these pasturelands, water holes and ponds

Hawd iyo dannaad
Haadhaamo ama?
Saw haraasimki
Hurarasha ka u noqon?

Hawd, the Dannood,
And the Haadaamo, where are they?
Weren’t the water ponds
left in ruins?

To come to the point, for the Somali pastoralist, that territory which contain the best of his pasture lands, watering wells and water ponds is not just a piece of land; it means a lot more to him. Everything he admires in life has a psychological association with these pasturelands and water holes. A pretty girl, her beautiful and shining hair in its softness and length, is likened to the pasture that grows in these grasslands.

Gaaroood oo roobleh
Geedhii ka bixayo
Guudweeda ma la mooday
Gannaansfaras

At Gaaroood, with a fresh rainfall
The pasture that grew
And, isn’t her beautiful hair
Reminiscent of that and the mane of a horse

When nostalgically thinking of time and place, it is those pasturelands which are cited as reference.

Nugaal waan jaclew
Inaan ku noolee
Nastibkaay waa anoo nabad yoo
Iddin koo nabad yoo nag rooreeyo

To Nugaal, I am longing
For it to return;
I will be fortunate if I in full health
And you the same and with plenty of rainfall

Sometimes hardships and difficulties in association with these pasturelands are referred to

Rassadi Garaan weeye
Wadanbiisa rawraw lahaa
Kaam rooqonee
Reer i gee

At the rugged land of Garani that you know of
Where hearts were throbbing with fear
I didn’t escape from that, for I firmly stayed with you
Take me for a wedding, I pray!

In line with this, as a result of the demarcation lines or the Ethiopian positioned garrisons in their areas, the pasturelands were made inaccessible to many pastoralists. As a result, lamentations and grief were expressed over this state of affairs.

Waddakka loo maroo
Wad yuqinay
Wardeere dal waana xareeyeyo

Though on the road to it
There is certain death
But what good pastureland it used to have!

The remoteness of these pasturelands was not only physical but has also taken a psychological dimension and was referred to, figuratively, when a person is referring to a love affair that is unattainable.
displacement of millions of persons and multitudes of refugees within and without the region, it made the Horn of Africa one of the worst disaster areas in the world.

However, to account for the final destruction of the Somali state, other contributing factors, mostly inherent in the state itself, has to be looked for.

The colonial state, with its institutions, alien to Somali pastoralism, was established without their consent or knowledge, run by Europeans in their respective languages, unknown to the Somalis whom they employed in menial jobs or as soldiers. Without the Somalis being well versed in the running of the colonial state, at independence, this state was handed over to the nationalists. These, for all their nationalist dedication, were ill prepared for the task of keeping an equilibrium between the different clans.

Prior to this, the clans competed for pasture and water, and they would naturally view the state as a replacement for these traditional sources of living; with the conviction that he who controls state power would have the greatest access to resources. Therefore, the competition among the different clans, who because of that pastoral background remembered past animosity, was inevitable.

Though a national flag replaced the old colonial ones, the colonial institution together with the native officials was left intact. Therefore, the new state was literally the colonial one in continuity.

The new actors on the state theatre imitated their predecessors in every way, even in their costumes and the way they behaved towards the citizens, they were reminiscents of the ‘white infidels’.

One who even when walking imitates the departed infidel, may he never be blessed. While in need of assistance, if you go where he was. And then as if he were a beast on a prey, when he stretches his neck up in haughtiness. And the tie around his neck, he touches its tip. And as if you were his slave, he behaves so. This is itself the misfortunes of the times that we are witnessing.

Another poet seconded the previous one in expressing people’s disillusionment in the people they had chosen to run the affairs of the country justly and with integrity.

‘The white infidel that I sent off and the one replacing him are one and the same thing. In his appearance, like a Somali in his complexion he looks. And yet, the cursed one, at heart he is akin to Mr. Carle (a colonial administrator of the British Somaliland)

Corruption and nepotism were soon widespread.

‘Adad haddii qabo baan tida bixiyey lagu halliyey dareen Waa kaa hadhuudhka cabsaa hawed u si raaqey’

Mohamed Abdillahi Rirash

Words of Power

Caawima hankaam degey
Ma Hawel oo Calaydha baah!
Hawelka you Cusaadka
Ma ka galay halkayey!

And tonight, the horizon I jumped to
Is it Hawel and Alayd?
In the problems and the love affairs
Have I indulged as usual?

When pointing out that the damage done is irreversible, a poet may refer to a well known watering well, famous for being one of the deepest wells in the area. When water is being drawn from these wells, if the ropes holding the water vessel are let loose and water vessel remains at the bottom, it is impossible to draw the water for watering the herds, an incident which would amount to a state of emergency.

Haddaay ceel Walwaaheed
Ku go'aan wadaamuhu
Waanuume dhowaaceeyey
Wadbaanahay far ku hayay.

If, into a Walwaa well
The water vessels got loose
The hope of retaining peace is lost and forever
Of the prospects I am very much worried

Taking this into consideration, it is understandable that the Somali state, run by people only one generation away from pastoralism, would get involved in confrontations with Ethiopia over the Ogaden pasturaleands and be criticized when they failed to realize that objective.

The conflicts and confrontations between the two states, together with the Somali pastoralists’ clashes with the Ethiopian forces of occupation, numerous revolts and open wars across borders, caused the loss of many lives and much property. In the process, many pastoralists were driven out of their pasturaleands to seek refuge in the Somali Republic, becoming an additional burden on its already shaky economy.

Moreover, the people from that region were putting pressure on the government, urging them to take action, as usual, poets expressed the popular feeling.


Sheep, horses, cattle and even wives and pack animals
Stripped off a people as we are and very furious about this
The Milch she-camels which we cared for
Are losing their milking powers and vanishing
With this deprivation, I am decided as many people to drag with me to a precipice
Words of Power

Only people in the eternal damnation in the custody of Bidhiodh are left
Look! The reddish millet to Haud he packed

This poem alludes to the fact that millet donated to the drought and famine affected people was sold by the above-mentioned administrator Bidhiodh. The whole republic was subjected to looting on a grand scale, and state funds were badly misappropriated.

Dhibba timdi jumaniyadda oo taaban la baahanayo
Iska wax u tahayey xaha 'tinimo kayso taageerye

What is breaking my heart is this republic being subjected to systematic looting
In self-enrichment and dishonesty, all are cooperating

Worse still, the poet thought the colonial period preferable to the present. Comparing the white administrator to the national one, he likened the latter to a monkey and the former to a tiger.

Tahahaansay daanyeey marxism 'taygar kii humaye 15

Strolling is the monkey when the tiger disappeared

Throughout the reign of the civilian regimes (1960-69), during which a constitution based on western democratic representation was followed, there existed some sort of equilibrium between the different clans. Yet, poets expressed the worries of the people, pointing out the mismanagement of the state affairs.

Goodnuuday colonkii dhulka geedho haddii qayb haddii
Gabbanse maaxa Maanadeed, haddii gamaashi mooodiine
Mar uun haddii uu la gawo geedha loo xakabi 16

Down is the flag, to the ground about to fall
Without sons Maanadeed is not, if you think it is sterile
Once, like a lion shot at, with all the fury it will arise

As a result of the factors stated above, change came in 1969, in the form of a military coup which brought General Mohamed Siyaad Barre to power. Many people who were blaming the civilians of corruption and inefficiency welcomed the change with relief.

The newcomers, who in their initial program vowed that they would put an end to all the ills that they had inherited from their civilian predecessors, were seen as national heroes and the poets were quick to express the popular feelings and expectations.

Gaal goobin maysaaskari gusgusen baan wada e!

In its journey it will never slow down again for a soldier bodily fit is at the helm!

But the same poet was quick to see the negative aspects of the military rule, all institutions of democratic nature, of freedom of speech, press, association and even of travelling, were all declared illegal or restricted. Anybody who violated any of these restrictions, or was suspected of trying to do so, was dealt with, very quickly and very cruelly.

The whole system was to be maintained with brute force and terror, in the form of political imprisonment, detentions without trial, political executions, disappearance of suspected opponents to the regime, for which a complex apparatus of security services were created.

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Askari sooryadhi wasu rasanat soudka daba yadda. 17
A soldier is only generous with bullets and swords that followed them

By adopting 'scientific socialism' (hebe fyo haddii xaadqadda), the new regime brought all economic activities of distribution and trading under the control of the state. Together with the placing of all the state powers in the hands of General Siyaad, it resulted in a grand disequilibrium within the Somali society in the republic.

In a society where each man saw himself as an equal to the others, under this regime some clans, because of their immunity to the wrath of the regime, were made 'more equal than the others'. Soon, the dictator placed members of his family in positions, irrespective of their background, education, experience or integrity; an act that alienated others who were denied equal access to the state power and to the state controlled economic facilities. Worse still, those who were earmarked for harassment from the state security were subjected to constant checks and surveillance. To any observer, it would be clear that a major disequilibrium within the Somali society, which would produce major conflict equal in magnitude, were in the offing. Poets, as usual were the first to sense the bleakness of the future, which they expressed in a strong language laden with emotion, anger and apprehension.

Sadaqadlaa laajo goortaa saaban ka caal waanye 18

From the weather forecasting, one can foretell a year of droughts and famines.

Though many people, naively, believed the propaganda of the regime that it was transforming the society and developing the country, poets saw it as both misleading and dishonest.

Subaadka ba muddoone in luo saabashay meel loone

This disillusion, let them think that they are being lead to a place of prosperity.

In a traditionally male dominated society, in which women were to play secondary roles to men, who controlled the political life of the Somali pastoralists, where elders played the major part, when womenfolk and women were placed in positions of responsibility, it was seen as in contradiction to everything that Somali pastoral culture stood for.

Nagfaa suruwadda kali musbaacaad haddii uu inta muuqaaleene
Markii talada habar noqon, haddii sebyo loo dhifay,
Ayey sayn cadda'adi yira wax garad haddii qaab qabgaaceene

Women in trousers for ululating let them line up
When responsibilities to demon possessed old women and juniors were handed over
Men of experience and talent simply shipped away.

Most of the major clans and clan families of the Republic, such as the Isaaq, the Hawiye, the Mageerree and the Warsangeli were subjected to the excessive measures of the regime.

Amigayo saaleebanadhi wayna sida taaye
Seefni Abayaa bay dal taal sawirta ahayd
Habargidaar saransooarda ku timtu sida ugu qaadka waa,
Si xilka kacaa kan u galay Sacad raggaasiiye
Warsangeli siibkaan tiyo ma hadhin oo haddii la saanatayey
Sarreex bh,amuucdaan ee Isaaq, sawir colaadeede.

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Words of Power

My classmates and those of the Salabaans are both on the hooks.
The sword on the necks of the Abgaal is placed, that very blunt one.
Upon the classmates of the Habargirdir, the blow that came
damaged the nagaas, his very life.

Very inhumanely the coup treated the classmates of the Saad, their very men.
For the Warsangeli remained neither a sultan nor a notable of name.

Impossed on the entire Isaaq is a ferocious type of war.

According to the poets, the injustices and the mismanagement of the state affairs were the true cause of the disasters, be they natural or otherwise, from which the country and the people suffered most.

Sadax gaaruu waxa waxaa dhaqaygii sababu sadaqadii u dhan ah.
Waxa wuxuu ahaan nagaas salladii, soo jiraan ahaan ah.

In its first three years, it is what brought upon us the deadly epidemic that decimated us.
It is what caused the famine which came upon us that spared none of the herds.

To the poet, Qassim, who composed this poem in 1975, since the major clan families of the Republic were excluded from participating in the running of the state affairs, those who ascended to the power were nothing but a bunch of madax-gaaruu, 'the short-headed', referring to minority clans.

Soomaalida waxa ka hadlay saska madax-gaaruu.

Of all the Somalis, only the 'short-headed' ones are firmly in position.

The imbalance which resulted from this would in turn result in conflicts of the most disastrous consequences.

Il-Laahay sidaan ka arki jiray wax kaa soo cattalay.
Dhaqan buuxda weqoqo ka u soo ah sidaa ka mid ahaa.

In such a situation, as usual, Allah's visitations are on the verge of coming upon all.
(But in which form?)

With blood this cloud is pregnant, which as if red with dust it seemed to you.

This prophecy in the bloodiest of forms materialized in the 1980s, in uprisings and revolts, where insurgents, who could only organize themselves on the basis of their respective clans and clan families operated against the government forces, who in their turn employed clanism in its worst form.

The situation had been aggravated by the tremendous build up of armaments by the importation of the most sophisticated weaponry from both east and west into the region.

Worst still, a huge number of these firearms fell into the hands of almost everybody in the country.

Now, the country has broken into feuding clans, after the state apparatus and institutions together with all the infrastructure and the communication networks have been destroyed.

Besides the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and the rest who in their millions are left homeless, dispossessed or refugees not only in the neighbouring countries but in the whole world, the road to national revival both physically and psychologically is very rocky and shrouded with uncertainty and darkness, through which only an optimist can see a beam of hope into a brighter future. It can only be realized if the positive side of Somali pastoral culture and Islamic faith are allowed to prevail. There must be an acceptance of compromise and equal accessibility to all opportunities, including the state power, just as the case was and still is in the pastoral set up, where equal accessibility to pasture and water for the herds kept the equilibrium within the society. And all the checks and balances must be evolved and set into operation.

Like any other society in the world, Somalis value livelihood, peace and tranquillity above uncertainties, fees and destructiveness. Wars and fueds are enacted in order to keep or redress internal balances. If necessity does not dictate so, no Somali clan will opt for a conflict where peaceful solutions can be found.

Dagaallaha ka dhexdeegiin ku socooyaana.
Haha ku darin:

Baagoo dikir baan ka aamin.

Dagaalluuna nabaa baan ka aamin.

For a war, do not opt, and against you kith an kin, never.
And not only that:

To cowardice, fighting a prefer.
To war, peace I prefer.

It has been the concern and the responsibilities of Somali poets, from time immemorial, to avert disaster, to warn against all excesses that may bring about a disequilibrium and the subsequent conflicts which will surely follow.

Muyrr waxaad ku weydaa inwaal kuma mahmaan tama.

Where in sanity you fail, in lunacy you can never succeed.

Where reason and compromise fail, confrontations of the sort we witnessed can achieve no better. Poets, likewise, always warned against all the dictatorial tendencies, which are both abhorrent and unsuited to their way of thinking and the way of life.

Nin aniga yaddhi, rag iska reeb.

A man who always repeated 'I and me'

Disregarded all other men.

A dictator's behaviour precipitated all the problems that in the end destroyed everything, including the dictator himself.

Nin dhiirkayn mudmuuqay hosaan maray maray mar saxiinsa Alleeye.

He who pierced the corrosive bark or the dhiirkayn tree
will surely have his skin burned.

This corrosive bark has been likened to the fury of the dictator's subjects, who will surely reach in violence and ferocity against his excesses, as the same poet pointed out.

Muggaaw weel ma dhawfsin loo ma ahaan ayaa qimbir.

A water vessel cannot hold beyond its capacity, in the name of Allah, one should not destroy the encampment.
Words of Power

In agreement with this, another poet seconded him, giving the same warning:

Haddii doobi horeyso, inuu xadta wax halis se

If a milk vessel is over filled, that it will overflow is certainty

As we have seen, the Somalis, in their traditional pastoral life and in the modern state, reacted through the extensive employment of the Somali oral poetry. Whenever there was an ‘overflow of &newline;dis-equilibrium’ within the society, there has been an ‘overflow of conflict’, of feuds and wars.

Notes and References


2 This verse is taken from the famous poem by the late Abdullahi Sultan Tina-Addi (Cabduuhaa Sultan Tina-Addda). An anthology of his poems, collected and compiled by Abdi Yusuf Duurqaa (Cabdi Yusuf Duurqaa), was printed and published by the Somali National Printing Agency, Mogadishu (no date).

3 A song by the late Mohamed Ismail Barkhad-As (Maxamed Ismaaaciil Barkhad-Cas), as from cassettes.

4 The verse is taken from a long poem by Ahmed Diriyey Qassin (Axmed Diriyey Qassin), a poet of talent whose poems are considered masterpieces by many. Available on cassette.

5 Ibid.

6 From a song on a cassette, originally from Radio Hargeysa.

7 From a cassette originally from Radio Hargeysa. The song from which I took this verse belongs to the ‘qurumum’ of the forties and fifties which are now classified as the classics of modern Somali song.

8 From the Somali poetic genre known as ‘guur; the pastoralists’ blues’, sung by unmarried young men and women to express their frustration over the long periods of isolation with their herds.

9 Ibid.

10 In a cassette by Abdi Aden Qays (Cabdi Aaden Qays), a great composer who has contributed to the development of the modern Somali song.

11 From a cassette by Mohamed Ibrahim Hadrawi, considered by many the greatest living Somali poet, an innovator who has made extensive use of the different Somali poetic genres, from the very short to the very long. His poems are well known for their philosophical depth, and their richness in poetic imagery. More than anybody else, he has in his poems highlighted the events in Somalia during the reign of dictatorship under General Siyaad which led to the disaster that befell the Somali nation and state.

12 The verse is taken from a long poem, Garmansii, by the great poet Abdillahi Dhoodaan, an Ogaden clansman who advocated the case of the Somalis in the Ogaden/Western Somali region, in the 1960s and 70s. He is still active and his poems are always acclaimed by the Somalis. He composed this very important poem in 1974, accusing General Siyaad of insincerity toward the Ogaden Somalis in the question of liberating their territory. Available on cassette.

13 From a cassette by Haji Aden Afqalo’ (Xaaji Aaden Afqalooc), a great poet who died in the 1980s at well over a hundred years of age. He witnessed many events that affected Somali pastoralism.

14 From a cassette by Ahmed Diriyey Qassin, op. cit.

15 Haji Aden Afqalo’ op. cit.

16 Ibid. For this period, see John Markakis (1990), with special reference to ‘Garrison Socialism’ defending the state (pp. 202-234).

17 Mohamed Diriyey Qassin, op. cit.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 From a poem by Sahid Qaman (Saahid Qamaan). An Ogaden clansman and poet who probably died in the late 1940s. His surviving poems, counting among the masterpieces of Somali oral poetry, have an everlasting effect on those who are familiar with them. Sahid Qaman together with five other poets, Farah Nadif (Faarah Nadiff), Gabay Shinni, Abdi Hersi (Cabdi Xiriio), Dubad and Osman Bulhan (Cusmaan Bulkan), were entrusted with the responsibility of dethroning Ugaa Hashi (Ugaas Xaashi), who tried to exercise a tyrannical rule over his pastoral clansmen. They told him in strongly worded poetry that he had to give up his position, and so he did.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.