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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.¹

Magawdoo candhadii gollaha marisee
An maallo hasheeshanna Maandeeq

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

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:

Sarreeyow ma nuqsaamow
An siduu yahay eegee
Kaana siib, kanna saar²

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 pasture-lands and watering wells, which are mostly on the Ethiopian side of the borderline.

* This paper was first presented at the 5th Congress of Somali Studies International Association, Worcester 1993. It was not included in the Proceedings of that congress. In Turku, it was presented to a new audience, and is here printed for the first time.

*Ogaadeen la dhacyoo
Axmaar baa u tashee
Isna waa ehelkeen
La addoonsana yaa
Aynnu aargudannee
Su soo ururaaye
Eedama oo adkeey ey!*³

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 bay u daba-goosi tahay haradi doolloode
Oy weliba dibdindaabyo iyo diriri joogtaaye*⁴

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 dareersaday Axmaar dayrcadkii dhalaye*⁵

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 damood
Haadaamo me?
Saw harooyinkii
Huruusha ha ma noqon?*⁶

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:

*Gaarood oo roobleh
Geedihii ka bixiyo
Guudkeeda ma la mooday
Gammaan faras*

At Gaarood, 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 jaclaa
Inaan ku noqdee
Nasiibkaygu waa anoo nabad iyo
Idinkoo nabad iyo naq roobaad*⁷

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:

*Rassadii Garanneed ogeyd
Wadanihii rawraw lahaa
Kaama roorine
Reer i gee*⁸

At the rugged land of Garanni 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.

*Waddada loo maroo
Wad yaallaaye
Wardheer dal wanaagsanaydaa*⁹

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.

*Caawana hirkaan degay
Ma Hawd iyo Callaydh baa!
Hawlaha iyo Caashaqa
Ma ka galay halkaygii?*¹⁰

And tonight, the horizon I jumped to
Is it Hawd and Allaydh
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.

*Hadday ceel Walwaaleed
Ku go'aan wadaamuhu
Waanwaani dhacantee
Wadnahaan far ku hayaa!*¹¹

If, into a Walwaal 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 pasturelands 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 borderlines, caused the loss of many lives and much property. In the process, many pastoralists were driven out of their pasturelands 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

*Gorod iyo gammaan iyo lo' iyo xili iyo gaadiidba
Gabaahir dad laga joojiyoo gaydh qabaan nahaye
Igadhkaan Gondaalka u sidnaa gaagaxoo lumiye
Ana gelelefskaasaan rabaa cid an galaaftaaye*¹²

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

This last verse proved to be highly prophetic. It just preluded the disastrous devastating Ogaden war (1977-78) which more than anything else was instrumental in bringing about the destruction of both states. Together with the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, the

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 nationals. These, for all their nationalistic 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 reminiscent of the 'white infidels'.

*Mid tallaabadii gaalki leh tegay ma liibaane
Adigoo wuxuun tabanayoo tegay halkuu joogay
Marku sida libaax raqi u taal qoorta kor u taago
Uu 'teyga' luquntiisa sodhan taabto faraqiisa
Oo inad addoonkiisa tahay taana la ahaatay
Iyana waa tabaalaha waqtiga taynu araqnaaye*¹³

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.

*Isma doorin gaalkaan diriyo daarta kii galaye
Dawliilka Soomaali baad dugulka moodaaye
Misne laguma diirsade qalbiga waa dirkii Karale*

'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.

*Dad habaar qabuun baa Bidhiidh lagu halleeyaaye
Waa kaa hadhuudhkii casaa hawd u sii raraye*¹⁴

Only people in the eternal damnation in the custody of Bidhidh are left
Look! The reddish millet to Hawd 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/Bidhidh. The whole republic was subjected to looting on a grand scale, and state funds were badly misappropriated.

*Dhibta timid jamhuuriyaddan oo tahan la boobaayo
Iskaa wax u tabciyo khaa innimo laysku 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.

*Taltallaabsay daayeer markuu 'taygar'kii lumaye*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.

*Goodaadsay calankii dhulkuu gaadho baw hadhaye
Gablans maaha Maandeeq, haddaad gamashi mooddeene
Mar uun bay sidii aar la ganay geydh la soo kaciye*¹⁶

Down is the flag, to the ground about to fall
Without sons Maandeeq 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.

Gaad gaatin mayso askari giigsan baa 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.

*Askari sooryadii waa rasaas soodhna daba yaalle*¹⁷

A soldier is only generous with bullets and swords that followed them

By adopting 'scientific socialism' (*hawl iyo hanti-wadaag*), 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.

*Saadaaladaa lagu gartaa saban ka caal waaye*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.

Sabaalada ha moodeen in loo sahanshay meel roone

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 juniors were placed in positions of responsibility, it was seen as in contradiction to everything that Somali pastoral culture stood for.

Naagaha surwaal kali mashxarad ha u sinnaadeene

*Markii talada habar saar lahiyo sebiyo loo dhiibay
Ayey sayn caddaa iyo wax garad sibi q dhagaaqeene*

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 slipped away

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

*Annagiyo saleebaanadii waynna sida taaye
Seeftii Abgaal bay dul taal sawirta ahayd
Habargidir saransaarada ku timid sigay ugaaskii ye
Si xilluu kacaan kani u galay Sacad raggiisiye
Warsangeli suldaan iyo ma hadhin oday la saantaaye
Saamee dhammaantood Isaaq salaw colaadeede*

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

Hadduu doobi buuxsamo, inuu daata waw halisi e

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 disequilibrium' within the society, there has been an 'overflow of conflict', of feuds and wars.

Notes and References

¹ John Markakis (1990): *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. 2nd edition, London/New Jersey: Zed Books. The chapter 'The Somali Unification Struggle' depicts how the Somali struggled trying to bring the five Somali inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa together.

² This verse is taken from the famous poem by the late Abdullahi Sultan Tima-Addeh (Cabdullaahi Sultan Tima-Cadde). An anthology of his poems, collected and compiled by Abdi Yusuf Duaaleh (Cabdi Yuusuf Ducaale), was printed and published by the Somali National Printing Agency, Mogadishu (no date).

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

⁴ The verse is taken from a long poem by Ahmed Diriye Qassin (Axmed Diiriye Qaasin), 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 *qaraami* of the forties and fifties which are now classified as the classics of modern Somali song.

⁸ From the Somali poetic genre known as *guux*, '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, *Garnaqsi*, 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 Diriye 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 (p. 202-234).

¹⁷ Mohamed Diriye 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 (Faarax Nadiif), Gabay Shinni, Abdi Hersi (Cabdi Xirsi), Dubad and Osman Bulhan (Cusmaan Bulhan), were entrusted with the responsibility of dethroning Ugas 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.