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VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF SOMALINESS

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Somaliness: Between the Nostalgia of Orality and the Exigency of Writing

It has become something of a cliché to underline the richness of the oral tradition of the Somali people. People focus on poetry, which is often reduced to a handful of genres such as the *gabay*, neglecting other aspects of their culture.

While the admirable and delicate craftsmanship of the oral poetry gains attention, the extreme fragility of the orality, threatened by present-day changes, remains undiscussed. Yet the transmission channels of this heritage to future generations seem to be failing. Far from responding to the demands of Somali identity politics, the excessive glorification of oral tradition, which often goes hand in hand with nostalgia for the good old days, widens the gap between the 'memory generation' and the 'writing generation'. For the former, the exclusive attachment to the oral tradition serves as a palliative for, or a shelter from, their misadaptation to the modern world dominated by written works. Unlike their fathers, the second group, the urbanised or exiled youth, is tempted to either reject or ignore the elitist orality, as this highly praised poetry is often beyond their own capacities of understanding. Therefore, the overestimation of a limited portion of Somali culture and the promotion of a few poetical models leave many older Somalis in a ghetto of orality, while barring other younger ones from their cultural roots. The basic question which must be asked is that of the evolution of Somali orality within the new post-pastoral society and its relationships with a modernity based on writing.

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One cannot but notice that the Somalis deal with writing in a very contradictory way. This is true in spite of the existence of an official orthography since 1972, and in spite of the massive literacy campaigns undertaken by the regime of Siyad Barre before its drifts into tribalism. Writing has not yet replaced memory in matters of collecting, conserving and diffusing the oral heritage of the Somali people.

Equally, writing has not played a major role in facilitating the transplantation of the oral culture from its original framework (pastoralism being its essential reference) to the new environment shaped by urban centres. Although the Somalis are known for absorbing modern contributions quite rapidly and easily because of their spatial and social mobility, they show a peculiar conservatism towards writing. A great number of perfectly literate Somalis still use only audio and video cassettes when they communicate with their relatives and friends, instead of taking a pen and a sheet of paper - it goes without saying that letters are more manageable than audio-visual materials. For a nation which can pride itself on its fine ear and its sensitivity to the beauty of the Word, to poetics and epics, the Somalis possess very few writers. The great Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah remains an exception; he has gained his credentials in exile, outside this native country.

While humorists, dramatists, poets and storytellers are numerous, they persevere with orality, creating and communicating through the use of oral and audio-visual media. This prejudice against writing not only contributes to the progressive disappearance of the oral heritage, but also induces a real social and intellectual marginalisation of Somalis living in societies in which the writing medium is dominant.

One is familiar with the huge problems and misunderstandings confronting the illiterate

when they deal with bureaucracy and red tape. More significantly, the Somalis themselves tend to marginalise individuals who are devoted to reading and writing. Far from being acknowledged and welcomed, Somali writers are subject to fierce and unjustified criticism. Their pieces of writing fall victim to misinterpretation and false exegesis.

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Perhaps average Somalis are all the more suspicious of writing because they unconsciously tend to sacralise it? The fact that the only book consulted by Somalis is the sacred Qur'an might explain the sacralisation of writing, which in turn may conjure up the image of sacrilege whenever Somalis are tempted to write something themselves. If, for Somalis, writing was reserved for enshrining the Words of the Lord and the religious truths, it follows that mere human beings have no channels for profane messages except in orality.

My own experience is worth citing, because it illustrates the misunderstandings likely to emerge between authors and readers in a Somali context. In my book dealing with the *xeer*, the Somali social and political contract and the egalitarian society of the Somali nomads, I have tried to study truly historical facts which were conveyed by oral legends. Thus, through the legend dealing with the formation of one section of the Somali family, the Issa community, I have tried to show that this people, far from descending from a common ancestor, as genealogical tradition claims, formed a true confederation of clans or ethnic groups from different backgrounds, united not by blood ties but by a socio-political contract: the *xeer*. While analysing the assertions of that legend, I tried to demonstrate that the initial group of allied clans had been joined by another group of affiliated clans which had become full participants of the great Issa family because of the egalitarian framework of the *xeer*.

When this book was published in Djibouti, it scandalised some members of the so-called affiliated tribes who accused me of casting doubt on their origins and of denying the genealogical unity of the Issas. I have learned to my cost that nobody can question the founding myths of the Somalis with impunity, and that certainly one cannot write down another interpretation in black and white. I have understood that what my detractors accused me of was not reinterpreting a well-known legend, but enshrining it in a book forever, for this process was likely to change the legend into an unarguable and biblical truth.

This experience leads us to address the complexity of the transition from orality to writing. It has been taken for granted for a long time that the mere fact of being literate was a sufficient condition for succeeding in the passage from orality to the world of the written word. Alas, the different mental attitude which separates the two modes of reasoning has been underestimated. Writing is not simply the transcription of words, images and ideas of human beings; it suggests an altogether different way of thinking, a different method of analysing reality and transmitting knowledge. The two ways do not involve the same brain resources, senses and powers of language. In a nutshell, they appeal to different intellectual, emotional and individual skills. Needless to say, the advantages of writing are more important than those inherent in orality. The invention of the alphabet was a huge advancement for mankind.

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This relationship with orality on the one hand and with writing on the other is symptomatic of the identity crisis the Somali people are facing right now. The Somaliness we were discussing at the Turku Congress is somehow encapsulated between the nostalgia of a mythical oral world and the exigency of the hard writing reality of today. This is a traumatised identity, affected by four main disorders:

- the betrayal of the ideal and dream of a Greater Somalia by the latest Somali regime who, behind the propaganda on the elimination of tribalism for the sake of unity and nation building, in fact practised on of the most discriminatory clan based systems in the history of Somalis;

- the dislocation of the modern state institutions as well as the traditional social structures, which used to regulate community life;
- the collapse of the values, ethical code of conduct and social sanctions, which used to serve as barriers and watchdogs against anti-social behaviour of individuals and groups;
- the 'diasporisation' of the Somali people, whose professionals, intellectuals and the most educated categories were obliged to flee the repression of the regime and the civil war.

The combination of these disorders, aggravated by the traumas of the repression and the civil war, led Somalis to a state of social and psychological instability and insecurity, which I call 'Somalitude' in my writings. This phenomenon is characterised by a profound lack of self-confidence, an overwhelming distrust towards other Somalis and a disturbing loneliness. The alternative offered by the Somalis is to come back to the only social and psychological security system they knew well: the comfort of clanship or religious brotherhood.

These identity traumas are expressed by the Somalis in many different ways and through different means, as documented and analysed in many studies. These traumas are at the root of some of the social misbehaviour and cultural misunderstandings we are witnessing in Somalia as well as in the countries with a strong Somali refugee community, whether Finland or anywhere else.

There is a lot to say about the consequences of this problem on the integration of Somalis into the host countries, as demonstrated by the papers presented during this Congress by educators, sociologists and psychologists.

Although I myslelf studied the democratic and oral tradition of the Somali people, particularly their customary law on which the democratic tradition is based, I was also confronted with this identity problem. How could a people, who developed such a sophisticated socio-political contract and the accompanying conflict resolution mechanisms as the *xeer*, fall into this state of lawlessness and barbarism? Is it the socio-political environment inherited from colonialism and dictatorship which is the main cause or is it the Somali personality which generated the appropriate environment to develop these evils? Are there really some common natural and/or cultural signs which characterise a Somali, some common patterns which designate Somaliness? Are there one or many Somalinesses? These are some of the questions which came to my mind while witnessing this terrible tragedy of the civil war and clan hatred.

It is not easy to find exhaustive answers to these questions, but I found that this duality orality/writing could give us a certain indication. This is because orality is not only one of the pillars of Somali identity, the vehicle through which Somalis better express their frustrations and aspirations, it is also one of the telling signs of the identity disorders mentioned above.

For me, this attachment to orality, which excludes the other means of communication, is part of the problem of identity encountered by Somalis. It is not only a consequence of a specific cultural and historical process but also a clinical symptom of a certain social and cultural 'uneasiness'. As I said earlier, orality becomes a refuge for all those who have difficulty redefining their identity in the new environment in which they have to live.

As clan and/or religion identification became a response to social insecurity, so orality can be seen as an alternative to cultural and psychological loneliness. It does not only imply the well-known nostalgia of Somalis for the poetry, song and history of the golden old days, *bari samaad*. It induces a strong neglect of and reluctance toward all that is written.

This resistance, in turn, not only explains the poor reading and writing habits of Somalis, it also affects their attitude towards administrative papers. Somalis don't give much importance to the identity given by written documents like ID cards or passports. They consider them simply as tools to avoid administrative harassment or to cross borders. Their real identity is

determined by clan affiliation, authenticated by the genealogical names they are so proud to tell orally.

These tendencies have, of course, their social consequences. First of all, they lead Somalis to spend their time with people sharing the same habits, mainly other Somalis, which reduces their social interaction and their capacity to integrate themselves into the new country where they are living. They also give a very negative image of Somalis, who are seen as anti-social and ill-mannered. Many of the Somalis living abroad being beneficiaries of the welfare system of the host countries, their self-isolation is often presented as a calculated act of a people who just want to profit from a system without any will to integrate themselves into the society which has welcomed them.

The other grave consequence of this attachment to orality, already mentioned earlier, is the generation gap which affects the continuity of the transmission and consequently the identity building of the younger generation, especially those who were born or grew up in the Diaspora.

In fact, we are witnessing here a double identity crisis. The older generation feels lost by being cut off from the values and traditions which orality used to refer to, while the younger generation feels lost by not finding in that orality any references to and signs from their everyday life.

This is why I would like here to focus on the fundamental role of Somali intellectuals and professionals, in other words, all those who write or could write. We belong to this generation which I call the generation of orality turn-coat. The one well versed in the cradle of the Verb, the one fed on the milk of the Word. The word said, the word given, the sacred word, the unique and absolute word. I am talking here about our generation of writers, the ones who were forced by History to put themselves in the service of the other side: the kingdom of Writing.

We, at least, had the chance of belonging to the last generation who benefited from the transmission through orality before its structures and messages were disrupted by the profound changes. We had enough time to be immersed in the orality before school, books, radio, TV and cinema relegated to the background the agents of that transmission, such as parents, elders, story tellers and initiators. We, who benefited from that double culture, have a double moral obligation in:

- contributing to the preservation of the oral tradition and to the revalorisation of their depositors;
- helping the younger generations to better understand their cultural heritage by translating it into suitable languages.

In other words, Somali writers and scholars have the moral obligation to build bridges over the deep gap separating the generation of the memory, who is isolated in the prison of orality and the generation of writing who is confronted with modernity.

It is urgent, I think, for those who have the capacity to write, to stop idealising orality, to stop talking and overestimating oral skills. They must put down on paper and preserve by other technical means, the production of their creativity. What is more important right now is not the environment of nostalgia of the old generation but the guidance of the new generation in their critical process of identity building. For that, they have to innovate and find not only new styles and methodologies, but also new tools and means to attract the attention and interest of the young generation. The Internet offers large possibilities that they should explore.

The traditional transmission by orality being threatened by modernity, it is urgent to find other ways to utilise what modernity offers us, in order to preserve the Somali heritage,

protect against the identity crisis and develop a 'Somaliness' adapted to this new environment. And in that perspective, Somalis are rather lucky. The new trends of technologies lead to the creation of 'nomadic objects', like cellular telephones, which facilitate movement. With the invention of voice processing and voice control machines, these trends also lead to a certain rehabilitation of orality. The day should come - in fact it is already here - when a Somali elder, given access to the appropriate tools, could transcribe, transmit and print his oral knowledge without knowing how to read and write.

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