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*Editors'*

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*Professor Said Samatar, a prolific Somali writer, whose scholarly commentaries on the Socio-political culture of the Somali society, touches our row nerves, both entertaining and challenging, treats us yet again with another piece worth of our utmost attention. Dazzling with rich prose, yet ornate with poetic fluidity, this piece illuminates the poverty of poetry in contemporary Somali society, and he does this by a careful juxtaposition with past society's rich in Bards. In what at times appears to be wailing words, the author explicitly longs for the lost role, both negative and positive, poetry played in past social changes. By equating poetry in Somali society to that which is played by Western journalism - a collective checks-and-balance superstructure, Said seems to unabatedly hint that the society is deserted by those who could have articulated the language of cultural repository as well as conflict mediation. Although with visible pain to his guts, he forcefully pronounces the death of the Somali Bard and the demise of the society*

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### **SOMALIA: A Nation's Literary Death Tops Its Political Demise**

Somalia has been falling apart for nearly two decades—and counting. However strenuously the international community—the African Union, European Union, the United States, the UN—strove mightily to put the African humpty-dumpty back together again, the Somali center refuses to hold. Consequently, this mad Cassandra of a nation seems only too happy to lurch heedlessly towards self-destruction. Can it be said that hope springs eternal where Somalia is concerned? Maybe. Be that as it may, this essay aims to explore three inter-related themes: firstly, to revisit the ongoing story of the centrality and salience of oral (and subsequently written) poetry as Somalia's principal cultural achievement; secondly, to contend that years of random violence attendant upon the collapse of the state in 1991 have left the country collectively unhinged, and impoverished of soul in a manner that beggars description; and thirdly, to make a feeble attempt at charting a tentative course towards national redemption and renewal.

#### **Once upon a Time – a Nation of Poets**

After eighteen years of civil war and related social cataclysms, the international community knows only too well Somalia's demise as a nation-state. What the world doesn't know—a far greater calamity than the political collapse—relates to Somalia's other loss—the loss of her literary soul as a direct result of years of relentless violence and random anarchy. Once upon a time, Somalia was known as a nation of poets whose poetic heritage was intimately connected with the people's daily lives. In particular, foreign students of Somali language and culture used to remark, often in astonished tones, on the pervasive, sometimes sinister, influence of poetry and

poetic arts on Somali life and lore. Typical of these observers of the Somali literary scene was the peripatetic romantic British traveler, Richard (later Sir Richard) Burton, who visited the Somali coast of Zayla' and city of Harar in 1854, disguised as a Muslim holy man named al-Hajj Abdallah. Burton wrought a number of subterfuges on the unsuspecting Somalis, one of which was to con them into appointing him as imam (Friday prayer leader), as well as their spiritual guide and all-purpose mentor. The eccentric Englishman distilled his Somali experiences into a book that, not without self-aggrandizement, he entitled: *First Footsteps in East Africa*. (Someday when I grow up I should want to write a tome entitled *First Footsteps in America* as a payback to Burton and his spiritual offspring, the supercilious Americans!) Burton's condescending outlook notwithstanding, he expressed notable respect for Somali culture, especially the "Natives'" keen cultivation of the poetic arts. He observed with a note of astonishment:

The country teems with 'poets'... Every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines—the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation ... Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan, and the great patronize light literature by keeping a poet. (Burton 82)

Burton's judgment has been echoed over the years by other observers of the Somali cultural landscape, namely M. Maino, Magaret Laurence, B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, and John Johnson. Nearly without exception, these expatriate scholars and unmentioned others underscore the pervasive role that oral poetry plays (or at least did once upon a time) in the social fabric of Somali life. The foreign observers' assessment of the pre-eminent role of poetry in Somali life and lore has received unequivocal confirmation on numerous occasions from Somali pundits and public commentators, most remarkably the late president of the Somali Republic, Dr. 'Abdirashid 'Ali Shermaarke. Shermaarke judged his country's pastoral verse as "one of the two national assets of inestimable value." (*The Somali Peninsula* v) Islam was the other asset that Shermaarke had in mind as being of equal merit, and in setting his nation's pastoral poetry on the same pedestal with that of the sacred Koran in the ranks of cherished national values, the president unmistakably meant to lavish the highest possible praise on his country's poetic heritage.

I recounted elsewhere the reasons for the enduring popularity of poetry and poetic arts in Somali life. (Samatar *Oral Poetry*). Therefore, I should confine my remarks here only to a few snippets of an episodic kind. B. W. Andrzejewski, the late and lamented "elder statesman of Somali literature," reported a revealing vignette about the supremely prestigious place that poetry occupies in Somali literary temper and tastes, to say nothing of its potent use in socio-political relations. In the late 1950s, while engaged in the study of Somali prosodic systems, he was accosted by a group of hoary elders who queried the foreign researcher somewhat provocatively, thus:

You English ... You make wondrous machines: lorries, airplanes, steamships, instruments that get water spewing out of the bowels of the earth. You are

undoubtedly skillful as engineers. But as poets ... Do you have poets!?! (oral communication).

What a pity that the pastoral interlocutors had apparently never heard of that British wizard of words, named Shakespeare! If they could override the barriers of space, language and culture, the English Bard would no doubt win many literary disciples among the Somalis.

The reader should be alerted at this point that, my use of the present tense notwithstanding, the poetically-endowed Somalia described in the foregoing notes seems to have gone dormant, if not altogether disappeared. That Somalia seems to have been replaced by another, a barren Somalia—politically, socially, literarily--scrubbed off to the bone of any aesthetic sensibility, to say nothing of its bucolic, lyrical verse that once stirred the imagination of foreign observers. That is, nearly two decades of civil war marked by sustained violence and the consequent onset of social anomie—steady erosion of standards and values—has left unhappy Somalia something akin to T. S. Eliot’s “Wasteland.” The nation of poets has given way to a nation of victims and criminals where the Kalashnikov has expelled the poetic craft as the mediator of social relations and the arbiter of ultimate authority. Thus, today’s Somalia is a nation adrift, having hit bottom, and hence collectively deranged and constricted of the soul—a wistful, surrendering, supine Somalia—except in the employment of guns--in short a very “Heart of Darkness.” Indeed, once upon a time – a nation of poets!

And yet, in the life of nations as of individuals, hitting bottom entails the lingering hope of bouncing back upwards, of climbing up from the depths of the abyss to the dawning hope of a national revival. More than this, memory seduces the mind, believing as it does in the notion of the good old days, when in fact there never have been any such. And this sobering realization of the possibility of memory as an illusion, should, perhaps, serve as a salutary check on my romantic clatter above about the once-poetic Somalia. Still, remembering Somalis (of whom there may not be many) surely must lament the loss of their nationhood and their literary heritage, along with their dignity and, consequently, their becoming the laughingstock of the world; for statelessness and anarchy have become the synonyms of the word Somali. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that the modern outlook ranks statelessness the most primitive state of human existence, who, cannot one ask, says a human community must inhabit a territorial state in order to have happiness and dignity? Consider the bizarre fact, for example, that despite the absence in Somalia of a functioning centralized state for close to two decades now, no less an economic authority than the eminent Economist reports that stateless Somalia outperforms in GDP per person (and therefore presumably in standard of living) the neighboring states of Ethiopia and Eritrea! (“A Hint of Hope”)

And it may be of interest here that of the five zones (Kismayu and its neighborhoods, the capital of Mogadishu and adjacent lands, the Hiiraan hinterlands, and the breakaway statelets of Puntland and Somaliland), it is only in troubled Mogadishu and its outskirts, contested as they are by Ethiopian occupation forces in support of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia on the one hand, and an Islamist-clan alliance on the other, that people face daily violence and starvation; and that it is cheaper and less bureaucratically impedimental to make a phone call from Hargeisa (Somaliland) or Garoowe (Puntland) than from Nairobi or Addis Ababa. (Professor Hamdallah) Somalia’s economy without a state, thus, marvels the expatriate community, having become as it has the ultimate in *laissez faire*

economics. The Scotsman Adam Smith must be rejoicing somewhere in the Scottish heaths at this turn of affairs, and likely to be murmuring in his grave: “Who needs a state?”

Still, the urge to belong to a national community, to have a state, a flag, a passport and a corner of the earth remains a universal longing, and those who lack these are invariably the object of universal scorn. Thus it may be that the yearning for respect and for collective self-esteem could prompt members of the Somali elite to remember the past, the idyllic yesterday when theirs was counted a nation among the community of nations; and that, their memory thus triggered, may bestir themselves sooner or later into playing their historic role in binding the wounds of their fallen nation. One hopes so, but one doubts.

### **Purposive Violence and Poetic Creativity**

The view has been expressed in the preceding notes that the 1991 Somali collapse and the violent upheavals that ensued did much to stifle Somali poetic creativity. This doesn't follow as cause and effect. Violence of itself does not explain the current, seemingly collective sterility in the Somali poetic imagination. To the contrary, experience shows that the period of the worst violence in recorded Somali history (1900-20) also stands out as the era of the greatest outpouring of the finest poetry in the annals of the nation's verbal/artistic productivity. Thus, the key to understanding the current desiccation of the Somali imagination is rooted in the **KIND OF VIOLENCE, AS OPPOSED TO VIOLENCE PER SE**, that has overtaken the Somalis in recent years. To which we shall return shortly. For the time being it could be said that in the acephalous, schismatic segmentary lineage system that characterizes the Somali polity, where feuds and vendettas are the order of the day, purposive violence, as will be shown below, in fact serves as the midwife and mother of the Somali pastoralists' poetic sensibility. Take, for example, the three decades that followed the turn of the twentieth century, during which the Somali Dervish anti-colonial movement led by the poet, mystic and warrior, Sayyid Muhammad A. Hasan, the Mad Mullah of British colonial literature and il Mullah Pazzo of the Italians, fought off the combined powers of Britain, Italy and Ethiopia, almost bringing them to a standstill. As a result, the Dervish resistance struggle and the colonial campaigns to put it down engulfed the Somali peninsula in an orgy of killings in which an estimated one-third of the population of northern Somalia perished. And yet in Somali eyes, this was an age of heroic struggle that saw the composition and dissemination of massive amounts of high-minded oral poetry, by both the Dervish warriors and their opponents, the colonial-collaborating clans. Despite the cataclysmic social upheavals, the period brought to the fore an unparalleled concentration of poetic talent, resulting in the blooming and maturation of such notable bards as Raage Ugaas, Qamaan Bulhan, 'Ali Jaama' Haabiil, Salaan 'Arraby, Ismaa'iil Mire and 'Ali Dhuh, to mention but a few. These gifted poets waged literary war on one another, and their pro- and anti-Dervish poetic duellings and diatribes reverberated throughout the Somali peninsula.

The first political poem on record involving the Dervish struggle seems, on the basis of internal evidence, to have been composed in 1900, shortly after the Dervish attack on the Ethiopian fortification at Jigjiga. (Samatar “Poetry in Somali Politics” 151). It was not composed by the Dervishes but by their enemies. When the poet, 'Ali Jaama' Habiil (whom we will come across quite frequently in these pages as the chief poetic antagonist of the Sayyid), learned of Dervish reverses at Jigjiga, he composed his poem “Mahammad the Mad or the Lunatic” (Mahammad Waal), thereby immortalizing in prosodic formula the Sayyid's enduring and unflattering epithet.

(Samatar, "Dissertation," p. 181).

With a measure of malice and withering sarcasm, Haabiil gloated over Dervish losses and scoffed at the "vaunted martial prowess" of the Dervishes who bragged, he charged, of their bid to vanquish the Abyssinians:

The uncontrollable man—he who'd seek Minilik in battle,  
 Who says: "with my sword I'll smite the Abyssinians,"  
 Who says: "I will give you the Habar herds as booty,"  
 Who'd weave lies around us,  
 Who'd take away our minds as if we were brainless camels...

The implication of these lines, obvious in the Somali version, is that the Sayyid promised more than he could deliver: over-inflamed with a false sense of his military might, he sought out Minilik (the wily sovereign of the Ethiopian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century) in battle and lost miserably (historically, this is not completely accurate, of course); he further promised his followers the possession in booty of the fabulous Habar Yoonis herds, and failed to do so equally miserably; that the Sayyid was a liar "who'd take away our minds as if we were brainless camels." Having thus scoffed at Dervish military capability, he turned to ridicule the notion of the Sayyid as a miraculous man of God:

He who says: "I'll spear the heavens and fill the earth with fine pastures,  
 Who says: "like a ship, my prayer-mat can take you across the seas,"  
 Oh, how hollow is our imagination when we deem the Lunatic  
 Mahammad our apostle!

Curiously, the poetic response defending the Dervishes did not come from among their camp but from an outsider, one al-Haaj Ahmed Samatar (no relation), a poet who was a resident of Aden at this time. He dispatched off an epistle which he sent with a dhow returning from Aden, saying:

Is Minilik of your kindred that you should sing praises to him?  
 As for the cruising ships of the infidels:  
 Know ye not they are but Allah's brief providence to the misguided?  
 If glorious were the infidels, they'd not be destined to perdition,  
 The things they invent, and the wealth they amass are but their damnation,  
 And the ingenious artifacts their abominable foretaste of ultimate perdition.  
 This reveling in material things brought the mighty Pharaoh down.  
 If the meaning of the prayer-mat moving you across the sea escapes your  
 unbelieving mind...

Consider: your origin, the very first day when you were created,  
 In the darkness of the womb, the Lord protected thee.  
 Miraculous was your place of origin!  
 You came into the world by the will of Allah,  
 O, mindless one, make a reflection on this,  
 Speak not ill of the Sayyid, O brainless one, lest this leads you to Hell,  
 The ways of the saints, you fool, are dark to you,  
 And do not take him (the Sayyid) lightly,

For unattainable is his likeness!

(Samatar “Literary War” 159).

By pastoral standards, al-Haaj Ahmad Samatar does not pass muster in making a successful defense. Although his poem, with its heavy metaphysical focus, may appeal to the pious and the other-worldly, it falls far short of the first poet’s assault, especially in its failure to address the issues raised by the attack-poem: Dervish reverses at Jigjiga, the Sayyid’s promises which proved hollow, and the charge of insanity in the Sayyid. Nevertheless, the Sayyid was sufficiently pleased with Samatar’s repartee on behalf of the Dervishes that he reportedly rewarded him with the payment of 150 camels, quite a lavish gift even by today’s standards (a fit stallion from Somalia fetches as much as \$2,000 in the bazaars of the Gulf countries, Somali livestock being keenly sought after by the Arabs). Dervish sympathizers are quick to cite this incident of an outsider coming to their defense as an instance of the appeal that their cause had for the Somalis. Opponents of the movement, however, counter that the poet was motivated not so much by an alleged attraction which the Dervishes had for the Somalis as by sycophantic greed, hoping as he did, they contend, to collect material gain by toadying to the Sayyid. (Samatar “Literary War” 161)

During this period, the Sayyid does not seem to have joined the war of words. Other men, like the Khusuusi (council of advisers) member Afqarshe and Ismaa’iil Mire, both of whom were poets of note, acted, so to speak, as ministers of propaganda. Space and thematic coherence do not permit a detailed description of how the Sayyid throughout the early days of the struggle employed other men to conduct the war of propaganda for him. The intriguing question, though, in a study of the Dervish resistance struggle is to speculate into the Sayyid’s motives in suddenly taking to the composition of vast quantities of political verse from 1904 onwards, thereby becoming his own poet-in-residence, instead of delegating others to perform that task as he had before. When confronted with such a question, indigenous sources would argue that he did not compose political poetry before this date because he did not know how to, with the inference that he received “an abrupt inspiration” to versify without foresight or premeditation. (Samatar “Literary War” 165) This view we may take note of, but would do well to treat with skepticism. Given the strenuous demands which the poetic craft imposes on its practitioners among Somalis, men/women simply do not become celebrated bards overnight.

In the first place, political poetry is a potent tool in socio-political control among the pastoral Somalis and the possession and use of this asset makes for honor and influence in society. The Sayyid knew this and he was likely to capitalize on the prestige of his talent in this respect and make sure that it was used to enhance his own authority within the Dervish leadership structure. Consequently, the composition and use of political verse became, later on, a jealously guarded affair with access to it limited to a select few. In order not to lose their privileged status, these few had to sing praise-songs to the “Father.” (Samatar “Literary War” 165) They had to do a good deal of self-effacing, dwelling *ad nauseum* on the inferiority of their verse to that of the all-wise Sayyid and their indebtedness to the master for inspiration. A case in point relates to Ismaa’iil Mire, a capable military commander and an established poet. When he, together with the Sayyid’s brother, Aw Yuusuf ‘Abdille, successfully mounted a raid against Colonel Richard Corfield’s Somaliland Camel Corps, the general, in the great euphoria of the moment, inadvertently dashed off a narrative epistle “Residing at Taleeh” (“Annagoo Taleex Naal”) on the history of the expedition, apparently without prior clearance with the Sayyid. Although Mire

duly gave credit for the victory to his master: “Cartridges of bullets he distributed among us / Lord bless him. He prayed to God for us,” he was nevertheless asked upon return to Taleeh, the Dervish capital, to “explain the circumstances of his poem.” (Samatar “Literary War” 187). The remark hinted darkly of the Sayyid’s displeasure at the liberties which his lieutenant had taken. The Sayyid is said to have added further that Mire’s poem left something to be desired in that it failed to give a detailed description of Corfield’s death. This gave Mire a chance to get off the hook. “Master,” he is reported to have said ingratiatingly, “I reserved that opportunity for you to put forth a poem that would make history for the Somali people.” (Samatar “Literary War” 166). For the occasion the Sayyid did compose a history-making poem (“O Corfield, Now That Thou Hast Departed”) (“Aadaa Kooflow Jitayaan / Dunida Joogayne”) (Andrzejewski and Lewis 73-74).

Perusing his corpus of banter and poetic diatribes, one senses that the Sayyid was fixated on the number “three” which seems to have had something of a mystical hold on him, the inspirer, as it were, of his artistic creativity. Not only in his poetry but also in his anecdotes, proverbs and wise sayings, he displays a marked predilection to the formulation of concepts in triplet expressions. An example from his numerous proverbs goes something like this:

Mandhow, saddex lama aamino:  
 Geelaaga jire,  
 Gasiinkaaga cune,  
 Iyo gurigaaga jooge.

My son, three do not trust:  
 He who tends your camels,  
 He who eats (or prepares) your dish,  
 And he who grows up in your household.

(Samatar “Literary War” 173).

We may forgive the note of paranoia and cynicism which inhabits these lines due to the long record of betrayals, internal strife, and even death which plagued the Sayyid’s household. (On numerous occasions he escaped assassination by one or the other of his multiple wives.) Further examples of triplet formulations in his proverbs:

A liar I despise  
 A miser I despise  
 And I despise him who eats polluted food.

A tobacco-chewer I despise  
 I despise compulsiveness in men  
 And fat without strength.

I despise an uncourageous man  
 Of small lineage  
 I despise a tool that doesn’t obey its user...

A white man’s peon I despise

I despise his houseboy  
And I despise him who submits to his sway.

An unjust king I despise  
A flag without an army I despise  
And a city without rule I despise.

(Samatar “Literary War” 181).

To put the Sayyid’s poetic combat in wider perspective, it may be useful to discuss it in relation to that of the legion of poetic antagonists who did literary battle with him. The most notable among these are the two poets, ‘Ali Duuh and ‘Ali J. Haabiil. Throughout the long struggle, these two maintained virulent literary duels with him, managing, on occasion, to more than hold their own. Ali J. Haabiil was a resident of the colonial city of Berbera. Urbane, pious and of an unusually handsome physique, ‘Ali Jaama utterly lacked those traits that would be vulnerable to slander by the Sayyid. And he pilloried the Sayyid:

And a thousand devout worshipers he butchered as one would a he-goat,  
And caravans are given the safety of Allah,  
But he cuts tendons of weary traveler and hogs their dates,  
He’s batted on the weak and the orphan,  
Call ye this infidel a Mahdi? How puzzling the thought!

(Samatar “Literary War” 176).

The accusation here is that anyone guilty of such atrocities, as ‘Ali Jaama claims to have been regularly committed in the name of Dervishism, could not be a genuine Muslim but rather a vicious charlatan. Further the Sayyid, by all accounts, had his share of the poet’s weakness for pleasures of the flesh, and the “beauty of women” received persistent attention both in his poetry and lifetime pursuits. He is said to have contracted at least a dozen nuptials, some of them, no doubt, political marriages while others attracted his “keen eye for the fair maiden.” (Bikrad Bilic leh). (Samatar “Literary War” 176). (Since in Islam a man may marry no more than four wives at a time, the Sayyid was obliged, in his attempts to facilitate his multiple romantic transactions, to marry and divorce frequently and this may have contributed to the instability, marital infidelity, internal strife and even death which from time to time afflicted his household.) ‘Ali Jaama further accuses the Sayyid of being a libertine and an adulterer: “Of free women / he cohabits with seven.” ‘Ali Duuh for his part went further and charged the Sayyid with incest:

And the women you consort with are fifteen...  
Like a fattened ram among sheep in heat,  
He tires not of lust, the Lecherous Devil,  
In a crimson shawl and a silken veil,  
Many an innocent lass night-visited him,  
And lo, Rooha, his sister, has come to the office,  
Testifying to partnership of lust...

(Samatar “Literary War” 177)..

In the end, it becomes clear that the combined weight of his legion of attackers was having a corrosive effect on the Sheikh and, on occasion, he betrayed the extent of his bitterness against his accusers. In 1908, he wrote to the British Commissioner of Somaliland that one of the prime causes of the disturbance of the peace stemmed from the insults, intrigue and envy directed at him by poets of the colonial government clans:

Being cursed [he complained] is harder  
for us to bear than having our necks cut off ... I am considered  
[by opponents] and called a bad man, such as ‘old singer,’ ‘looter,’  
disturber of the peace...

(Jardine 163).

The foregoing poetic exchanges – at once lyrical and playful, polemical and acrimonious, that played so vital and fateful a role in the national struggle against colonialism--constitute what the Somalis call the Dervish Silsilad (an Arabic loan word which means “Chain,”) a series of political or social debates traded through the medium of oral verse. It forms an intimate part of a vast corpus of Somali traditional systems of prosody that have, alarmingly, declined if not died with the demise of Somalia as a nation. Their animated style of charge and rejoinder, jab and counter-jab along with sharply deployed witticisms, embodies a dramatic illustration of the traditional centrality of vibrant poetic discourse that was intimately linked with the vicissitudes of the people’s daily lives. Other silsilads, that in the course of time, got seared into the collective Somali consciousness include the “Guba’,” or “Burner,” so named on account of the exceptionally bitter tone of the exchange, a silsilad par excellence considered by Somalis to be the “crowning achievement of the genre.” This was recorded and analyzed for English readers as “A Somali Poetic Combat” by B. W. Andrzejewski and Muusa Galaal. (15-28, 93-100, 190-205). Then there is the “Halac Dheere Series,” a scorching composition that branded an Ogaadeen clan chieftain with a seal of shame, gleefully stigmatizing him as an archetypal embodiment of greed and other ignominious character traits. Needless to say, this poisoned relations between the Ogaadeen and Majeerteen clans for a generation. Also the “Nafti Hafar,” or “Self-Delusions Series” (1950s), so named because the poets in this contest ran amok with effusions of grandiloquent boasting that bore no relation to the actual merits of their respective clans; and finally the Hurgumo (1970s through the ‘80s), a series that foresaw, with stunning prescience and foresight, the impending collapse of the Somali state.

### **Random Violence, Wrecked Souls**

The above Dervish episode has shown that violence per se need not asphyxiate poetic creativity and that, to the contrary, purposive violence—that is, the kind of violence occasioned by the clash of high causes such as honor versus dishonor, group interest against group interest, freedom versus bondage, colonialism as opposed to the nationalist anti-colonial struggle--served to inspire, rather than stifle, the creative muse of the Somali clan world. What is unprecedented in the new catastrophic cataclysm of Somalia’s continuing civil strife concerns a universal explosion of purposeless violence, a colossal mass hysteria that led to a wholesale unraveling of traditional normative values that mediated the rules of violence through time-tested sanctions of checks and balances. The consequence of this breakdown of the traditional regulators of inter-clan discourse is patently a traumatized deranged society, in which men and women have taken

to blindly falling on one another, flailing amorphously, hacking away at one another, or rather indiscriminately machine-gunning everything that moves in a dazed hysteria reminiscent of a kind of mad dance that could only have been drawn from the pages of a Dostoevsky novel. Not only the state, the very Somali Weltanschauung has heedlessly reverted into a feral state. As I write, on the average in the capital city of Mogadishu, thirty to forty people are killed daily with no one knowing who targeted them or why. The killing is all! If today a stranger with a loud-speaker descended from the sky and inquired of the denizens of Mogadishu: “Why are you shooting?” the answer would undoubtedly resound back: “Because this is our way of life.” No wonder Somalia is said to represent for African states a cautionary tale in where not to go.

To judge by this continuous random violence, the Somalis have created for themselves a hellish domain of indiscriminate generalized destruction where Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Buendia family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would surely feel at home. Fear – abject fear has paralyzed the Somali poetic sensibility. That is, the poetic muse is on the verge of vanishing from the collective Somali psyche. There was one notable exception: in the late 1990s a group of Somali professors and professionals (including me) under the working name of Ergo, or the Peace Advocates, commissioned a number of poets inside the country to address the ills of the nation. The response was the composition—and dissemination in cassette tapes-- of a sizeable corpus of modest-quality poems for which we lacked the needed resources to undertake the necessary follow-through. Additionally, the late satirist Ahmed Ismaa’iil Diiriye, a talented poet who wrote under the name of Qaasim, and the two urban poets Mahammad Ibrahim Warsame “Hadraawi” and Mahammad Hashi Dhamac “Gaariye,” have no doubt addressed in poetry the on-going Somali calamity. Qaasim’s biting burlesques are -- though of enormous interest and need to be collected, studied and analyzed in a monograph of their own --too passé to be of use here. With respect to Hadraawi and Gaariye, I have yet to receive enough of their recent materials to undertake a worthwhile analysis. It’d be desirable to inquire formally into the works of the latter two to examine how substantive their contributions are to Somali poetry in general, and to the national issue in particular. (Someday I should want to do this when their recent verse, hopefully, becomes available to me.) Other than these, to my knowledge, not a single line of poetry addressing the great issues of the day, as of olden days, has come out of Somalia in seventeen years of murderous upheavals. Instead, teenagers brandishing Kalashnikovs, high on the narcotic Qat, with sunken cheeks, popping eyes and haunted countenances, wildly shooting, to borrow a colloquialism, “every which way,” roam the streets of the Somali capital. Further, the Kalashnikov has taken over from the pastoral bard as the ruling king of the roost. The result is that in the post-civil war Somalia of random violence and wanton destruction, there remain only wrecked, stunted souls. Consequently, the nation of poets is no more, eclipsed as it is by a nation of dazed zombies, barren of the literary imagination and inventiveness of their forebears. Qat and the Kalashnikov nowadays define the new degraded Somali patrimony, especially in Mogadishu and its outskirts.

### **Cry, the Beloved Bard**

At the risk of belaboring the point, in pre-collapse Somalia, poetry served as an all-purpose pervasive force, an aesthetically precious asset that at once betokened the pride of the nation and the boon of every Somali bosom. And yet so thoroughgoing is the current desiccation of the Somali poetic scene that I can scarcely believe that I wrote the following some twenty-six years ago:

What makes poetry such a pervasive force in Somali society? To the Somalis the question is not so difficult to answer: poetry is the medium whereby an individual or a group can present a case most persuasively. The pastoral poet is ... the public relations man of the clan, and through his craft he exercises a powerful influence in clan affairs. For unlike Western poetry, which appears to be primarily the concern of a group of professionals dealing with, more often than not, an esoteric subject matter intended for the members of a secret society, Somali pastoral verse is a living art affecting almost every aspect of life. Its functions are versatile, concerned not only with matters of art and aesthetics but also with questions of social significance. It illuminates culture, society and history.

In addition to its value as the literary and aesthetic embodiment of the community, Somali poetry is a principal medium of mass communication, playing a role similar to that of the press and television in Western societies. Somali poets, like Western journalists and newspapermen, thus have a great deal to say about politics and the acquisition of political power. Because it is the language and the vehicle of politics, the verse which Somali poets produce is an important source of Somali history, just as the printed and televised word performs a similar function in the West. It is the duty, for example, of the pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize the dominant issues of the age – in short, to record and immortalize the history of his people. And since the poet's talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts and actions of his age.

(Samatar Oral Poetry 3).

It may be interesting to note in passing that two neighboring Eastern African societies seem to be similarly poetry-obsessed, notably the Swahili of the East Coast with their short lyrics and epic poems, and the Watutsi who possess a body of sophisticated poetry with official rankings of different positions of poets such as the “President of Poetry Society.” Members of these societies would understand, maybe even appreciate, why poetry strikes a responsive chord with the Somalis. But inasmuch as this essay is solely concerned with the uses of Somali poetry, it will not do, temporally or spatially, to delve into their artistic traditions.

Returning to the Somalis: the new cultural desert of today's Somali landscape must prompt us to intone despairingly: “Cry, the Beloved Bard, Bereft of Your Erstwhile Place as Prophet and Seer of Thy People, and Banished now into an uninhabited wilderness by the Ak-47.” For the grim fact is that Somalia's literary death tops its political demise. Will there ever be a light at the end of the Somali tunnel? Hope—as in the Audacity of Hope (Barack Obama) may be abiding. Maybe this fortune-teller of a book should be made mandatory reading for all Somalis. Still, “Mercy drops round” the Somalis may start “falling.” Witness the possible glimpses of recovery here and there, including the launching in Djibouti of a new literary journal in triplet tongues—English, French, Somali-- entitled Hal-Abuur, or the Literary Inventor--under the able editorship of Mahammad Daahir Afrah, Professor Lidwien Kapteijns, Mahammad A. Riiraash and others. I've rummaged through a volume of this, and it shows promise in format, style and content. It

surely deserves to be supported – financially, authorially, morally – by all of good will. And if Nuruddin Farah finally manages to clinch the ultimate Prize of the Nobel, this could turn out to signal a major turning point. But will we, being Somalis, once again refuse to turn?

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