A Virtuosic Touch: Hodeide, a Life with the Oud and More

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He is as distinguished as any Somali of national accomplishment. Still tall with a straight back, the gait strong, the mind in full alert, the greatest living Somali master of the oud (*kaman*), Ahmed Ismail Hussein, Hodeide, is now nearly eighty. Like almost a million of his compatriots, he is in exile from the continuing violent misery that is the Somali Republic. It is December 27, 2007. We just ended a delicious and long lunch at one of London's best Indian restaurants, a stone's throw from the British Museum.

He looks as formidable as the late André Segovia, the renowned Spanish and world-class guitarist who transformed that instrument into a treasure of classical music. If Hodeide was born to a country more integrated into the world, he could have been regarded as the Segovia of the oud—famous, rich, and more…

We are sitting in my hotel room on a cool day in London, one of his many *kaman* instruments lovingly held on his lap and the famous and big right-hand fingers itching to strike and set us in at once a tantalizingly sweet and sour mood.

There is little doubt that Hodeide is a gifted man, a virtuoso that not only can manipulate the strings to exquisite sounds, but has proven to be capable of astonishing patriotic and romantic song compositions. Moreover, his knowledge of Somali musical performance is among the most arresting, with discriminating judgments to boot. Even a cursory examination of his lifetime of artistry will find it difficult to disentangle his breathtaking technical potency from a deep-seated personal integrity and careful situational intelligence. This is particularly remark-

able given the long years of exile and personal economic brittleness. Perhaps all of the above are part of his durable allure. Hodeide was an official guest of Macalester College in the summer of 2004, when he, in the company of other artists, such as Fadumo Qassim Hiloule and Abdinoor Allaleh, performed, to full capacity, at the Concert Hall.

During this London occasion, I had an opportunity to persuade him to visit with me and respond to a few questions. We conducted the interview in Somali.[1]

AIS: Welcome Mr. Hodeide.

H: Thank you, Professor Ahmed.

AIS: Before we go further, what does the Somali word *fuun* mean to you?

H: *Fuun* connotes artistic activities that are, at their most thrilling, even hypnotizing, and worthy of celebration. Such creation ranges widely, from musical mastery in the playing of the flute, the oud, the drums, beautiful singing voice, composition of drama or poetry, to painting, sculpture, and sweet writing. In short, *fuun* conjures up high quality artistic creativity—evocative power that is almost magical.

AIS: How did you come to be a *kaman* player?

H: From very early in my youth in British Aden [Yemen] I knew I had a fascination with music. Whenever I saw the police contingent playing their drums and marching, I would run to them, walk behind, and let myself imagine I was one of them beating on those drums. I would get carried away, losing the sense of time, until a member of the family would find me and take me home. At elementary school, I used every opportunity to turn the top of my wooden desk into a drum-like surface, with the fingers of both of my hands impatient to experiment. I became quite good at it and my classmates were impressed. Then an event of major significance happened: a man by the name of Abdillahi Qarshe arrived in Aden.

AIS: You mean the legendary Qarshe? The composer of such classic nationalist songs as *Qolaba Calan Kaydo Wa Cayno* and *Agoonlaany wa Ifteen Laan*?

H: Yes! But he was young and obscure then—all of that renown was years and years away.[2] He grew up in Aden but left and then returned with a reputation as a *Fanaan*. I quickly decided to court his attention

and, hence, offered to play the drums to accompany his oud performances. At this time, Qarshe was not highly skilled in his playing but he was distinctive in being the first Somali in the area to publicly and fully pick up the challenge and, in addition, began to sing against colonialism. I met him soon. One day, in an intimate setting, I began to touch and caress his *kaman*. He noticed this immediately, retrieved the *kaman* from me gently, and then inquired about what things my father had bought for me to enter school. I replied that the items were books and pencils. Qarshe said that was fine, but I should also buy a basic *kaman*. I took the advice to heart and within no time had my own piece. In this formative moment, Qarshe was key—he did not give me lessons, but he inspired and encouraged me to take up the practice. At the time I had bought my own *kaman*, the two artists who taught the techniques were the late Abdi Afweyne (who had done some performances in Djibouti) and Hassan Nahaari—iconic names in the early history of Somali *kaman* performance. They used to rent their pieces when they wanted to rehearse or perform. Since I had my own *kaman*, they needed me, so I got many opportunities to do my practice. After three months of intensive learning, I became more confident, with my name becoming increasingly associated with the instrument. You see, Ahmed, *kaman* playing is primarily dependent on rhythmic balance. The greater a performer's inner sense of rhythm, the more stunning the sounds. That is the constitutive secret.

AIS: Rhythm, what does it mean?

H: Rhythm has a number of elements, but two stand out, in my opinion: emphasis on a beat *and* timing or the movement of a touch. The first is the product of the concrete encounter between the appropriate part of the human body and the instrument; the second relates to the velocity of the action. But remember this: though both might seem mechanical in the first instance, the complete act is thrust forth by a less visible but a generative, sensitive, and indispensable force of artistic imagination.

AIS: How long did you stay in Aden?

H: Until I became *Doob Guraan*. That is, till around the age of 25 years.

AIS: Between early youth and *Doob Guraan*, did you perform occasionally or did you decide to dedicate your whole energy to mastering the instrument?

H: No, no! I became a total devotee, and the Somalis in Aden encouraged me a great deal. In a citywide carnival organized at that time, Somalis were invited to participate. I was one of the younger artists asked to make a contribution. Consequently, members of the community brought to me two white "traditional" sheets, or *goyaal*, and draped them around me: one on the lower body, the other on the torso. This outfit, one I had never seen before that day, was accompanied by sandal shoes, "*Faygamoor*," made of wood, and a prayer rug. It was really at once a strange and beautiful profile—a very unique and, for many, authentic Somali dress! Then I was handed the oud and performed solo. Other competing communities filled out a small orchestra. In the end, the combination of the dress and the playing of the oud, Somali style, created enough of an alluring moment for the judges to declare me the winner of the first prize.

AIS: I assume at this time your parents were alive?

H: Yes.

AIS: How did they react to the direction your interests and life were heading?

H: We were at war with each other—kick and punch became the medium of our encounters. For them, it was as if their boy was deciding to destroy his life before it even bloomed. You see, both of them hated and despised what we call *fuun*.

AIS: Apparently, like the majority of Somalis of their age, and some of the other generations to follow, they believed a career in *fuun* was tantamount to failure and social disgrace?

H: Yes!

AIS: Did they ever change their minds?

H: They never did and, in fact, died disconsolate over what they felt to be my cursed fate. Fortunately, however, my father's brother lived long enough to reverse his judgment and, therefore, gave me his blessings.

AIS: Heavy sadness but a bit of sweetness, too! What period are we talking about? After the Second World War?

H: Yes, right after the War. This is the time when *Bellwo* will appear as a genre in Somali singing and musical imagination.

AIS: When did you leave Aden?

H: First time was 1949. I left Aden for the sole purpose of wanting to be heard over the new Radio Hargeisa. I arrived there and played the drums for the rising star, Abdillahi Qarshe. After a brief period, I returned to Aden. At this stage in my life, my competence in the spoken Somali language was elementary and poorly developed. It was my enchantment with *fuun* that taught me to appreciate the combined elegance and muscularity of the Somali language. Moreover, the political songs of the age were mesmerizing to me and, consequently, I threw myself into this cultural milieu.

AIS: In Hargeisa, you stayed for a while and then, feeling excited, returned to Aden?

H: Yes. While in Aden, I took part in another competition, one focused on the composition of nationalist/independence songs that were being prepared for the grand celebration of 1960. My compositions were sent to Hargeisa. You see, when the independence of British Somaliland was being declared, the British colonial office in Aden arranged an impressive celebration, bigger than the one set in Hargeisa. At that time, Mr. Mohamed Hashi Abdi, an officer of Radio Hargeisa, was sent to Aden. Some members of the community convinced Mr. Abdi that I was a suitable young person to make an artistic contribution to the festival that would accompany the raising of the flag of independence. This was an instantiation of the famous exaggeration that Somali Adenis were known for! Mr. Abdi decided to record one of my compositions and gave it the name "*Dhalad*," or Birth. That song became my initial identity and with it I moved to Hargeisa permanently.

AIS: It was then the year 1960?

H: Yes.

AIS: Who was at Radio Hargeisa? This is the institution and the city in which you would settle, correct?

H: Yes. When I left for the new Somali Republic, I was already registered as an employee of Radio Hargeisa, and a member of its artistic group. Mohamed Hashi Abdi took care of the details. But my formal host would be a man by the name of Abbas Dooreh.

AIS: What form of transport did you take from Aden? A plane?

H: No, I took a boat to the tiny coastal fishing village of Meid. During those days, there was a cohort of young educated and professional Somali men who dominated social life in Hargeisa. To cut down on

their uppity prominence, they were exiled to the remote outpost of Dayaha, near Erigavo. Among them were Abdisalaam Haji Aden, Hassan Ali Henery, Ku Adeyeh, Nine, and others.

AIS: Who exiled them? The colonial British?

H: No. They were posted by the new Somali political and business leaders who became somewhat envious of this educated group's popularity among the denizens of Hargeisa. The assignment was for the cohorts to teach at the new intermediate school in Dayaha, and Abdisalaam Haji Aden was appointed as the Principal. At Meid, the customs officer sent them word that a young man of "maddening skill" in playing the oud had arrived. The Dayaha associates sent me a vehicle, a nice vehicle—a Land Rover—immediately. When I arrived, they requested that I arrange a performance. In a few weeks, I composed a play called "*Magaalo*," or Town. The day coincided with *Eid* celebrations. The event was supplemented with a fabulous football game the following afternoon. This was a success, so, after a few days, we decided to take the show to the tad bigger town, Burao, to the west. This was the first time in the modern history of Burao in which an artistic performance was brought to its citizens from further east. In addition, Burao lost a competitive football game to a team from Erigavo/Dayaha. Because of an ongoing but convivial rivalry, and in a well-understood friendly manner, we rubbed in both victories on Burao's folks. A good time was had at first. But the occasion did not end in complete happiness. After the professionals and the young people, who loved the *fuun*, began to fix their admiring and intense attention on me, a bit of envy rose among the other artists. Some even went to the extent of pouring ghee in my oud instrument! This is the time when I composed this verse:

Hadaanun ku cuslain xagaaga ciidlay
Ciirsilay anaa ka calool goay.

If I am not precious to you, Oh Ms. Nothing,
And your succor is no more, I, too, have given up on you.

I stayed in Hargeisa for a brief period and then I left for Djibouti, which was then a French colony.

AIS: This was when, and why?

H: I was just itching to see more places where *fuun* was popular. The year was 1961. At this time in Djibouti, the Afar community, though artistically not well organized, was the main political force. But the

opportunities were plentiful. I threw myself into the Djibouti artistic and cultural vortex. The local artists inquired if I could help compose songs to go with a play they were eager to create. I replied in the affirmative. A journalist who was present inquired if I knew the Afar language. I responded in the negative but immediately announced to all that this piece of wood and strings, the oud, had its own ears to hear and understand. From that day, we established a bit of a partnership. The Somali community also received me well. But after a few very popular political songs, which were identified with me, the French colonial authorities became suspicious and uneasy enough to, in time, throw me out of the territory.

AIS: Were there established artists at this time in Djibouti? If so, who were they?

H: There were a few. Prominent among the male singers was Mr. Said Hamarqoud. As for musicians, there was a young man by the name of Ibrahim Bay, who was part Somali and part Sudanese, and Nahaari's nephew. There were also a few Djibouti-Arab musicians.

AIS: How long were you in Djibouti?

H: I had spent about seven years in the 1960s. Later, I would live in Djibouti for another eleven years—all in all about eighteen years—longer than I had spent in the Somali Republic!

AIS: When did you return to Somalia? Was this before Djibouti's independence?

H: In fact, the French threw me out so I returned to Hargeisa, somewhat unwillingly. There, I put together a play with the title, *Macal Cune Ma Mouqandowne* (He who eats the sheep's dewlap can't hide). I drafted a number of schoolteachers to participate. Among them were Mohamed Warsame, Faisal Omer, Mohamed Mogeh, and Abu Shiraa.

AIS: Was this successful?

H: Very much so!

AIS: How long did you stay in Hargeisa?

H: About three months. The performance was recorded and the collection, I assume, is still in existence and available.

AIS: Who were the singers and the musicians in Hargeisa at this time?

H: This is the late 1960s. Among them were individuals of exceptional abilities: Maandeq; Magool; Iftin; Gudodo; Bahsen; Farahiya Ali; Young Hibo; Mohamed Suliman; Mohamed Mogeh; Ahmed Mogeh; Mohamed Yusuf; Mohamed Ahmed; Osman Mohamed; and Abdillahi Gujis. Musicians included Ali Fayruze; Mohamed Said; Mohamed Egeh; Mohamed Afweyne; Ali Deere; Abdillahi Hamari—the last an awesome flute player.

AIS: Compared to other Somali *Fuun* centers like Mogadishu and Djibouti, how good was the talent pool in Hargeisa?

H: Generally speaking, when it comes to rhythm and, therefore, music-making, I believe that the southern Somalis are by far superior. Just think of the fantastic Hussein Banjuni and Ahmed Naji Saad, if not the second generation headed by the breathtaking oud master, Daoud Ali Mushaf.[3] But when you compare poetic composition and *looq* (singing), northern Somalis and Hargeisa seemed more captivating. Hargeisa at this time was the headquarters!

AIS: What do you suppose are some of the reasons?

H: I am not sure, for I have not fully studied this distribution of artistic endowment, but I can offer a pet theory. Somali northerners have been traditionally mobile (i.e., nomadic). Consequently, their sense of the repetitiveness and musical synchronization had been a bit underdeveloped. For southerners, being more sedentary might have given them a more suitable context to practice and innovate. More seriously, this might be a subject of intriguing research for young Somali scholars.

AIS: In Hargeisa at this time, who were the reputable composers?

H: On the front row were such figures as the incomparable Hussein Aw Farah, Ismail Aw Ahmed, Yusuf Haji Aden, and Ali Suguleh.

AIS: In the 1960s, how would you characterize the relationship between *Fuun* and the politics of post-independence?

H: A few years after 1960, the nationalist fever, which was high, began to sag. One could feel a slow but creeping "cold" affecting the communal élan. It felt as if we had entered a post-honeymoon period in which what seemed like an era of limitless possibilities was quickly disappearing. One could hear some anti-regime *Heesoyen* (songs). The first of this incipient oppositional genre was composed by the renowned Huriyo.

AIS: What were the central points of disapproval by the artists?

H: In the beginning, the main issue was rather petty. It related to a perception among some that the distribution of national ministerial appointments overlooked some kin groups. But one could sense the potential for greater danger, the beginnings of the divisive manipulation of communal identity by individuals greedy for self-promotion. Still, this feeling was marginal among the citizens, and many of us saw it that way.

AIS: If, as you assert, "self-promotion" by the politically ambitious was tangential, why do you think the democratic and constitutional order lasted only nine years (1960–1969)?

H: You, Ahmed, and your colleagues who have spent years studying the evolution of contemporary Somali society are the appropriate people to answer that most difficult question. But from my perspective, I think it came down to a number of key elements: exaggerated expectations and a craving for unearned material privileges that began to blunt the daring and honorable creative mind and spirit. This was an early warning: if we, as people, didn't see decolonization as the opening chapter of a long journey of hard work and nation-building, the future would be a massive disappointment. But few were paying any attention, for the majority was intoxicated with easy pickings delivered by the new political order and, particularly, the arrival of generous aid from outside. All in all, a normalizing of a corrupt small-mindedness started to eclipse social *fuun* that had moved listeners into civic belonging and action. President Aden A. Osman and Prime Minister Abdirazak H. Hussein tried hard to resist, by their example in leadership, a rising *garaad xumo* (imbecility) that equated *raganimo* (manliness) with the looting of the commons. Aden and Abdirazak were defeated in the elections of 1967. The national leadership passed on, through constitutional means, to Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke and Prime Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Egal. This new regime was very tolerant of corruption in its highest ranks.

AIS: So, the military coup d'état spearheaded by General Mohamed Siyaad Barre took over the state, after the assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke in October 1969. What was the mood and reaction of the Somali artists to this unprecedented national occurrence?

H: A strange mixture of sorrow and total exhilaration! We experienced sadness because of the violent death of Abdirashid, but felt joy because of the end of a detested leadership. Once the "Revolution" set in, Somali *fuun* began to be the object of state attention and investment. For the first time, artists were given international exposure by being sent to perform around the Middle East, Asia, and parts of Africa. Moreover, new recruits were brought in, as well as new instruments. Most significantly, an impressive and modern National Theatre was built, through the generosity of the Peoples Republic of China, at the center of Mogadishu. Artists of all stripes felt proud to an extent comparable only to the sweet time of the coming of decolonization.

AIS: Why do you suppose the military order made these laudable commitments?

H: To be honest, this was not solely as a result of a mission of national cultural revival by the Somali Supreme Revolutionary Council (SSRC). I think a major impetus came from the influence of the SSRC's patron, the USSR. Culture as a source of propaganda—to give the new regime in Somalia an image of a cleansed nationalism—was a main objective, and the Soviets were masters in underscoring the deployment of cultural resources to consolidate the power and legitimacy of the SSRC. Here, I would like to add, however, that the Chinese functionaries we came to know were less instrumentalist; that is, they were not keen on manipulating the relations for the sole purpose of promoting the interests of the Peoples Republic of China. They were genuinely attentive to the improvement of Somali artistic facilities.

AIS: Is it possible to suggest that given the fact that the SSRC mandated the writing of the Somali language, and the *Fanaaniin* were the main custodians of Somali poetic creativity, the SSRC support was authentically developmental?

H: Perhaps, but there is more to this issue that you need to note. You see, within the first few weeks of the life of the SSRC, the esteemed composer, Hussein Aw Farah, brought forth a song, *Iysheeg maxaan qora, iysheeg* (Tell me what to write, tell me!). Next came the play *Afglaad agoontu miya*? (Is foreign tongue equivalent to knowledge?) by the equally glorious composer, Ali Suguleh. The real pressure for cultural renewal was coming from many artists, whether as celebrated individuals like Hussein and Ali or lesser figures who would emit a memorable line or two. Artists of all types had become sick of the

decay of civil life under the last civilian government. Once the change took place in late 1969, it triggered a national burst of creativity, and the SSRC was savvy enough to channel the intense feelings to suit the political moment. Consequently, the invitation was wide-open for composers, musicians, singers, and playwrights.

AIS: Many propose that from 1969–1978, Somali *Fuun* reached a new zenith. Is this a viable judgment?

H: Very much so! It was like no other time, certainly not since.

AIS: When did that momentum decline?

H: From my perspective, it was a problem of the leadership of the SSRC. Siyaad Barre's initial star as a substantial new leader dimmed at three occasions. First was the moment in the mid-1970s when the Somali Revolutionary Party (SRP) was created. Rather than being the dominant figure over the two-dozen or so military officers that made the SSRC, the SRP became a huge conglomeration that brought its own unmanageable dynamics and numerous interests—many difficult circumstances for any one person to control. Second, the day he signed off on the war with Ethiopia (1977), he took the regime another peg down. Third, when the Somali army was defeated (1978) and Siyaad Barre did not offer his resignation to the nation, his legitimacy evaporated. By the way, if after the defeat, he solicited the advice of the Somali people as to where to go from there, I am confident that the vast majority would have blessed him to stay on. This is one of those rare moments that presents a rigorous test of leadership.

AIS: Given the above and the onset of national disappointment, how did the *Fanaaniin* react?

H: The level of awareness of what was happening was, naturally, uneven among us. I, for one, decided to send a line to the Chief of the National Security Service (NSS). It went like this: *Awey doobegee xoorku doosha ka mariyey, iyo doogee warka nogu darayeen* (Where is that large vessel brimming with fresh milk and the lush grass they had promised)? Soon, the boss of the NSS sent a stern word to me to the effect that if I did not stop such mischief, they would see to it that my high reputation among Somalis would be ruined. This was bullying, not *hoogamis* (leadership), a foreboding signal (*calaamed*) of what would become the trademark of the regime's form of governance.

AIS: We now enter the decade of the 1980s. What were the memorable moments?

H: The overwhelming direction of *Fuun* composition became the lionization of Siyaad Barre. Increasingly, all institutions, including the SSRC, began to atrophy and their place was taken by an overblown Siyaadism. This profane personality cult drove many of us into internal exile. I, for example, decided to avoid reporting to work at the National Theatre and did not collect my paycheck for two months. My dejection became so acute that, in 1983, I once again moved to the now Republic of Djibouti. In 1986, Siyaad Barre visited Djibouti City to meet with then Ethiopian ruler, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Under the auspices of President Hassan Gulaid of Djibouti, the purpose was to reconcile the Somali Republic and Ethiopia. During one of the evenings, I had an encounter with Siyaad Barre. He inquired why I was living in Djibouti. I retorted that Djibouti was an old zone of comfort, the place that I had ventured from years ago to come to Mogadishu. He suggested that I return with him, but I declined. Nonetheless, I gave him some advice, including rescinding the ill-advised state policy of burning *qat* farms in the North. I told Siyaad that the armed resistance to his regime outside of the country was numerically tiny. However, any further alienation of the citizenry, particularly the destruction of *qat* farms, would create an exodus to dissent politics. My sense is that he was not listening. I think he internalized the sycophantic praise that became the routine of official symbolic production to such an extent that he saw himself as a paragon of truth and wisdom—*Aabihee garashda*—as his retainers or the tribalists in Mogadishu sang in those years.

AIS: I assume that the deepening of regime illegitimacy and worsening conditions of civic life became an unavoidable preoccupation among the artists. Would you comment on this?

H: *Wa ruun* (It is true)! Two series of songs stood out. One was called *Seenlay* (given the name of the letter S). Scores and scores of *Abwaans* joined the effort, with each contributing a line. This started with the song line, *Saxarlay ha fududan* (*Saxarlay*, don't be berserk). It reached the line, *dulku wa sanqadhaya, cagta saarimaynee, socodkayno xeel iyo ahaado Laba suul* (the land is making noises, we will not put on our full feet, our walk should be clever and light on the toes). The end point of *Seenlay* was the symbolic presentation of a *naxash* (coffin)—the death of collective history! For some, the composition conjured up the need for a mobilization of serious resistance.

The second was *Dalay*, whose impetus came from a poem authored by a man who was a member of the resistance group, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). In order to diminish the attraction of the poem, Siyaad Barre convened a number of major *Abwaans.* Those included Gaariyeh, Yum-Yum, and Hadrawi. The President gave them a mandate to respond to the poem effectively to such an extent that it would be "run out of public circulation." Gaariyeh, known for his mental quickness, was the first to pick up the challenge, right in front of "the old man." Gaariyeh said, "*Digdh, delka maansada*." During the long circulation in the Somali-inhabited lands, many contributed. This became a long composition, with multiple dimensions. Even I added a piece, with the concluding thought, *Ankatashuno* (Let's deliberate together). My key point was to ask the nation that we leave the captain of the ship of state to do his work while the rest of us discuss, without violence, what to do next. Of course, you know now that such advice was not adopted and soon everything deteriorated from bad to worse and then to the worst of times.

AIS: Who were the most significant *Fanaaniin* at this time—in the decade of the 1980s? Whose moon was visible?

H: For composers, one would be, first, Hadrawi. Then there were Gaariyeh and Yum-Yum. But, of course one would have to also mention the long celebrated (from the beginning, decades ago) personalities such as the mighty Ali Suguleh, so creative and versatile. Whatever the occasion or the issue, Ali always brought forth a notable piece. He was endowed with the gift of matching poetic expression and the topic at hand. In any event, by the last years of the decade, the speed of the cascading social and institutional decomposition accelerated, with armed opposition engaging government troops on a number of fronts. By early 1991, Mogadishu itself exploded and the end of Siyaad Barre's regime was complete.

AIS: But for you, the decision to get out of Mogadishu and the Somali Republic was made earlier, right?

H: Yes, as I said before, I left in 1983 for Djibouti.

AIS: Who were you working with in Djibouti at this time?

H: Everyone who was involved in serious *fuun.* You know, the Djibouti *Fanaaniin* and leaders have always been sweet to me—that is, cordial, hospitable and caring. At this time, Djibouti was already so different than Mogadishu: more peaceful, open, and congenial.

AIS: Who were the Somali cultural figures that received you so well in Djibouti? Could you name some of them?

H: There were a number of notable individuals. These included Mohamed Abdillahi Rerash, a man of intellectual distinction when it comes to Somali history and culture, the late Ibrahim Gadhleh, who was a master of Somali language and literature, Hassan Elmi, Aden Farah, Shibeen, and many more… .

AIS: How about the singers? Were there, at this time, Djiboutians who were recognized for the quality of their voices?

H: There were young and upcoming individuals but they were not regionally acclaimed persons yet.

AIS: The time from 1991 to the present, over sixteen years, has been described by some of us as the era of violent political squalor, with associational life and national institutions no more. What about *fuun*? What has become of it?

H: Somali *fuun* has had the same depressing fate—maybe even more difficulties! The supreme mode of the vast majority involved in *fuun* has been depressingly instrumentalist, a kind of, as Somalis aptly say, "working solely for one's stomach."

AIS: Are you saying that hardly anyone, in these sixteen years, has paid any attention to the national or collective agony?

H: Yes! Everyone witnessed the toxic developments and the subsequent demise of national identity. Yet, from my perspective, the national cause was deliberately cast aside. That is, *Iyado la arkayo aya laga daqa-aqy* (Everyone saw clearly but decided to walk away).

AIS: So, parallel to the death of national political order was the evaporation of national *fuun*?

H: Affirmative! You must realize that patriotism (a love of one's country, not chauvinism) and the awaking and flourishing of the spirit of *fuun* are directly linked. It seems to me that when one is destroyed, the other is drastically diminished. More than anything else, a *fanaan* is literally orphaned in such circumstances.

AIS: Now to some random and wide-ranging reflections. As you look back these past fifty or so years, since decolonization, and historically speaking, whom would you identify (according to your own taste and judgment) among the grandest of female singers?

H: There are many astounding women, and it is extremely difficult to name some and leave others behind. However, since you insist, I would name Maandeq and the late Magool. They were, to say the least, stupendous.

AIS: Could you comment on each?

H: Maandeq had, still has, the sweetest and most natural of voices; Magool, on the other hand, knew how to sing. The unrivalled raw talent was Maandeq's gift but Magool excelled in the sheer effort of projecting her voice. The first was natural; the latter worked ever so hard at it. Here it is also important to mention Shamis Abokor, Gududo. She was a pioneer and remains a monument among the *fanaaniin*. Moreover, there is the fantastic star, Asha Abdo. Besides in Somali, she could sing in Swahili and Arabic with equal gusto and effectiveness.

AIS: How about the male singers of national stature?

H: There are many here, too, and I am not comfortable in rank-ordering them. However, since you are insistent again (you are going to get me in trouble, Professor Ahmed!), here are a few names that are held in highest esteem among Somali communities around the world: Mohamed Suliman, Omer Duleh, Mohamed Mogeh, Mohamed Ahmed, and Shimbir come to mind. But Mohamed Suliman towers above all others in this way: he has the unique capacity to finish a long verse in a song without breaking his breathing rhythm. He has powerful lungs like the majestic Egyptian, Um Kulthum. In fact, you could light a matchstick and Mohamed Suliman, at his height, would not take a second breath until the whole stick burned out! Do you know how long that is? He is phenomenal!

AIS: How about the composers?

H: There are categories. On the composition of romantic songs, the late Mohamed Ali Kariyeh is preeminent. When dealing with weighty social and historical circumstances, Abdillahi Dhodan's command of Somali language and poetic insight is in the same league as the legendary poets, such as Ragge Ugas and Qamaam Bulhan. Of course, Hadrawi and Yum-Yum are also leaders. Ali Suguleh distinguishes himself in creative flexibility—he could compose to fit the moment and the type of audience. As I said earlier, the late Hussein Aw Farah, among the greatest, had a talent for anatomizing important political questions with a combination of stylistic elegance and profundity. And then, of course, there is Hassan Sheikh Muumin. Known for his ethical

sensibilities and principled perspectives on the issues of the day, he goes down as Somali modern culture's most discerning and merciless critic. He is not only a highly original dramatist, but he is also fearless. His play, *Nebi daayeer* (The Prophet Monkey), during the tenure of Prime Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, is one example of Muumin's fortitude. Also, he is the only one who has the gift of creative fertility to compose a major play of two volumes.

AIS: What about Abdillahi Abdi Shubeh? Where does he fit in the pantheon?

H: Oh, my God! He was the most impressive of the composers when it comes to *majaajil* (poetic comedy). It is critical to note that this talent is rare and the competence in the Somali language that goes with it is most demanding. At the same time, he was a most delightful human being.

AIS: Among the many songs that you have composed, which is the one you judge to be the most significant?

H: I think most Somalis in the know have already weighed in on this. They believe, and I agree, that it is *Uur Hooyo* (Mother's Womb). This was translated into English by the scholar of Somali language and literature, Professor Martin Orwin, of the London School of African and Oriental Studies.

Mother's Womb

You, the abundant light
That my eyes graze on
Do not take me lightly
You who shared
My mother's womb

You born of my father's back
Who shared the breast
We weaned from the same
I shall never forget you

Two born of a father
Children who are brothers
Who, whatever occurs
Help and lend
Each other a hand

The soul is a pledge
At the time of my death
It's you who'll place me
In the grave, and your hand
Throw the final soil

My human inheritance
The one closest to me
The trials of the world
Have brought us apart

I cannot endure
Being on my own
I sway with melancholy
I'm no better off
Than a lone son.

AIS: When did you compose this?

H: In 1967.

AIS: Why did you create it?

H: My sisters, who were still living in Aden, had requested that the radio play for me an Arabic song by the Egyptian Mohamed Abdulwahab that focused on the value of brotherhood. When I heard this, I tried to find a Somali equivalent but to no avail. Consequently, I decided to author a Somali one for my younger brother. I had contributed to his upbringing and, hence, we had become very close.

AIS: You have been in London for how long?

H: It has been twelve years since you helped me to immigrate from Djibouti and find refuge in the United Kingdom.

AIS: What about your artistic work? Are you still performing? Is there still more juice left, as it were, in your creative engine (laugh)?

H: (A chuckle.) But of course! I continue, selectively, to play the oud. There are many invitations that come my way, from many lands, for Somalis are extremely fond of a serious oud performance. Moreover, I teach lessons every week. Professor Orwin is one of my students! As you can see, these two ouds in front of you accompany me wherever I go. This one next to you is always by my side—it is my *qardhaas* (amulet)! Your readers might be interested to note that I composed, in 2005, a piece that addresses the well-being of the whole earth, not just Soma-

lia. Among the positive effects of an otherwise sorrowful diasporic experience is the potential to see oneself as not only a member of a new society (in my case, British) but, simultaneously, a citizen of the world. The piece is called *Dhulka* (Earth). It was translated by Professor Orwin.

Dhulka, dhulka, dhulka, dhulka

Qumbuladii haddii ay ku qarxayso
Dhagax la ridqay oo kaleetoo hadday ka dhigayso dhulka
Dhirtuna dhuxusha haddii ay noqonayso
ooy buuruhu dhalaalaan
Dhimbiil iyo caleen iyo dhuub iyo
Midna dhogor la arki maayo
Dheddigiyo labood, dheddig iyo labood
Midna dhaafi mayso
Dharaartaas wixii dhaca kii dhihi lahaa
Ayaa dhigay?
Iyo kii lagu dhigi lahaa
Midna dhaafi maayoo
Yaynan dhaxal wareeginaa, yaynaan dhaxal hamaaninaa
Yaynaan dhaxal wada dhimanin
Buuqiyaha ha kaga dhawaajinina
Qiyaamaha ha soo dhoweynina.

Earth

The earth, the earth, the earth, the earth
If the bombs explode
If they make of the earth
Pulverized stone
If trees become charcoal
If mountain glow
The spark, leaves and bark
Will no longer be seen
Nor any living creature

Male and female will not be spared
The one who asks
"Who did it?"
And the one who is asked
Will not be spared.

Let us not all be disinherited

Let us not all come to an end
Let us not all die together

Don't make the trumpets sound
Don't bring the Day of Judgment near.

AIS: In the diaspora, do you see much of your *fanaaniin* cohorts?

H: Yes, Fadumo Qassim, though much younger, is here and very attentive to my care. She is a charming singer and a compassionate person. Her son, Mohamed, is proving to be a talented musician. Maandeq lives in the city and I visit with her on occasion. Duneyo and Khadra Dahir are not too far, too.

AIS: What about the future of Somali *fuun*?

H: This is a horrid time and the future does not look good. The younger generations are caught up in the downside of the rootless diasporic situation. Though there are some already on the horizon who have good voices, there is little originality in either their compositions or tune-making. Perhaps this is one of the forms that the revenge of national destruction takes. It is cruel. For the *fanaaniin* of my generation, our hearts are heavy with sorrow that comes with the snap of our common history and, thus, the loss of rich cultural heritage and autochthonous social spaces for artistic inventiveness. But, I hasten to add, we have not given up. My teaching of the oud is one small initiative to counter the devastating effects of the defeat.

AIS: In these past sixteen years of national hard times, crystallizing in exile, are there any occasions that have given you uplifting memories?

H: Yes! You would remember these two: in 1995, you visited me in London. A small group of us, including the fabulous singer, Abdinoor Allaleh, spent a whole afternoon and three-quarters of the night going over some of the most alluring *Qarami* songs. I felt exhilarated playing the oud and recording those melodies for you. Do you have that disk?

AIS: Certainly! It is in my study at home and I listen to it very frequently. It was an unforgettable day and night.

H: The other occasion is my formal visit to Macalester College in July of 2004. You invited me and, in a full and lovely musical hall, requested that I perform solo for the large audience. I was touched by the dignity of the two nights: a well-behaved, enthusiastic, and mixed audience, and a splendid stage. This occasion reminded me of that lost

time when we Somalis were a people proud of the best of our artistic heritage and genius and, most importantly, knew how to honor the talented amongst us. Instrumentally playing the classic love melody, *Beerdilaacshe* (Liver slasher), by the magnificent Abdillahi Qarshe, brought unseen tears to my eyes. Oh, what two nights those were!

AIS: Last thoughts?

H: Ahmed, *fuun* is the mirror *for* and *of* society. At its best, *fuun* is divine—that is, beautiful and useful. It is the spiritual link between the human intellect and the surrounding reality. In this sense, *fuun* and politics are not strangers to each other. To be sure, in my opinion, *fuun* is more existential than politics and, therefore, deals with other spheres of human life, as well as touches rare strings of emotion and sentiments that offer visceral consolation. Moreover, even here, the artistic imagination not only sharpens our viewing of the world but also presents us with possibilities of how to understand, speak about, dream about, and conduct our lives. The images through which these are conveyed depend on, primarily, the capaciousness of the *fanaan's* endowment. However, *gololol* (metaphor, in the case of poetic composition) and *laxan* (with regard to music and voice) are paramount. That said, then, mature *fuun* cannot totally avoid politics, particularly in *Waqtiiga Culus* (the heavy times). Those who assert that literature, culture, and politics never mix or ought not interpenetrate (*Isgel*) are either *nacasyo* (idiots) or they have a hidden "political agenda" that they don't want others to know about. The first are ignorable; the latter are at once dishonest and pernicious—a view and its correlative actions that demand from us consistent *fojignaan* (alertness) against it. In short, *fuun* is suitable for expressing aesthetic beauty and giving voice to collective aspirations for development that brings forth *qayir* (transformation). The greatest poet of Somali society in the post-colonial era, Abdillahi Sultan, Timaade, typified both dimensions. In the case of the latter, he detected and warned us as early as the mid-1960s that a new craving for material things not earned was blunting, if not superseding, the daring, honorable, and creative mind and spirit of the Somali urban people. This was among the first signs of the now fully enveloping syndrome: psychotic and humiliating politics, torpor, and beggary. Timaade summoned a different vision: order, reverence and justice. So, despite the horror of the age, I believe a *fanaan* can help restore some of the depleted spirit of a community. This, might I declare, is the task waiting for the few that still survive from my generation and certainly

those who are coming after us. Perhaps you scholars and we *fanaaniin* could think of collaborating to both preserve Somali artistic excellence and work on the moral resuscitation of our *ummad* (people). I suspect that the wellsprings of scholarly talent and *fanaanimo* are not too dissimilar…

AIS: Not only are you a grand *fanaan*, but you have also spoken like a sage. Much obliged, Master Hodeide.

H: Thank you for the opportunity, Professor Ahmed!

Notes

1. I have decidedly adopted the anglicized spelling of names and places. The exceptions are moments when the title of a composition and/or its full rendition are at stake. In these situations, I have followed the Somali orthography. Here, "x" is a substitute for "h" and "c" stands for the common Arabic letter *'ayn*.

2. For some details on Qarshe's life, see Mohamed-Rashid Sheikh Hassan, "Interview with the Late Abdillahi Qarshe (1994) at the Residence of Obliqe Carton," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Vol. 2 (2002): 65–83.

3. I can testify to the judgment of the three southern musicians. Decades ago, when I was a very young radio newscaster at the national network in Mogadishu, I had many occasions to witness both Hussein Banjuni and Ahmed Nagi play a variety of instruments. They were enchanting, particularly with the oud.

Last December (2007), while delivering papers and presentations during the 30th anniversary of the Somali Studies International Association, held at the city of Djibouti, I had the rare privilege of being invited to spend an afternoon and part of the evening (over seven hours) in the company of Daoud and other artists in the home of Abdinoor Allaleh. Though I had heard others speak about Daoud with some awe, this was my first direct encounter with him. Abdinoor was kind enough to organize the affair. It highlighted what, in the form of a small private concert, was a gift recording of Abdinoor's singing of classical *Qarami* songs and Daoud's playing the oud. They were a superb combination. Daoud's abilities were stunning—he would play the instrument with such an exceptional vigor and tantalizing suppleness that one was made to think as if one was listening to a mixture of traditional oud and electric guitar. There is no question in my mind that he is a fantastic player and stands out among his generation. What a memorable time that was! The disk is now part of a collection that I listen to often and treasure. Finally, it is worth noting, too, that Daoud is also blessed with a clear, quasi-baritone and exquisite voice. To get a feel for both his oud mastery and voice, one should hear him and the legendary Maandeq singing together a famous song titled, *Daalo*.