Interviewing the Interviewer: A Conversation with the BBC Somali Service's Yusuf Garaad Sheikh Omer*

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The famous Thames River and the city of London are intimately linked. Much like Paris and the Seine or the Twin Cities and the Mississippi, London without the Thames is unthinkable. Though the river is no longer pivotal for the transportation of goods and people, life in this metropolis still draws on the many advantages of the waterway, particularly during the late spring, summer, and early autumn seasons of the year. With more than two millennia of history and as the one-time center of the now-defunct British Empire, London has been for a number of centuries—and continues to be—a leading global city. With a remarkable alchemy of mutating versions of tradition and modernity, London boasts some of the most urbane populations to be found anywhere. I came of age in this dense but civilized place—a place where, for instance, taxi driving is a distinctive skill that combines exceptional courteousness and thorough knowledge of the numerous grand boulevards and the labyrinth of ancient back streets.

Between April and September is a most splendid time to take a leisurely walk, particularly on sunny days. It was around noon on May 16, 2010, when I met Mr. Yusuf Garaad Sheikh Omer in front of the imposing gates of Bush House, the famous headquarters of the BBC's World Service radio programming. Yusuf is tall and slender, even by traditional Somali standards. He carries himself with a mixture of confident dignity and authentic amicability. A highly talented broadcaster and producer, he rose quickly among his peers to be promoted to head the BBC Somali Service, the second native Somali to achieve such an appointment and the longest serving. Over the years, Yusuf has

conducted numerous and memorable interviews with heads of state, prominent civic figures, leading scholars, celebrated poets, dramatists, entrepreneurs, students, and writers. Two years ago, I put to him the proposition that the time had arrived for someone to, as it were, "turn the table" on him and make him the subject of an interview that could range from family background and growing up, to the current stage of his life, to the work of the BBC Somali Service. After some initial reluctance from him, but insistence on my part, he agreed.

Yusuf and I took a stroll by way of the Strand, crossed the Waterloo Bridge, and found a quiet corner in the Café of the British Film Institute. Through the big glass façade and across the river one could see, on the left, the unmistakable tower of Big Ben and the majestic Houses of Parliament. On the right-hand side, the dominating St. Paul's Cathedral was in conspicuous view.

Ahmed I. Samatar: Welcome, Yusuf! Beginnings are unavoidable, so let us spend a moment on your family background. Where were you born? Tell us a bit about your parents and siblings.

Yusuf Garaad Sheikh Omer: Thank you, Professor Ahmed. I was born in the Hamar Jajab zone of Mogadishu on the night of June 26, 1960, the date British Somaliland became independent. My mother nicknamed me "Gaalo Errye" (the One who Chased the Colonials). Of course, Italian Somaliland had another four days before its own independence. For my mother, the day of my birth was also the day of national emancipation. My neighborhood was primarily the residence of the families of the members of the new police and the military. In a few years, I was enrolled in a kindergarten near our house. A while after, my father, a member of the national armed forces, was transferred to the town of Bulo Burti, many miles to the north of Mogadishu. I followed him soon and was registered in my first formal school. I studied there for five years.

AIS: What type of individuals were your father and mother?

YGSO: Both of them could be described as very religious. His military colleagues called my father Sheikh Omer because he led prayers and gave Islamic advice when others asked for it. My mother's father was equally pious and, therefore, brought up my mother to live the same way. In short, the basic ethics of Islam (e.g., truth and fairness) guided everyday living in our household. In addition, knowledge and its pursuit were highly respected and encouraged. My father, for instance, had a decent command of Arabic and Italian, in addition to Somali.

Moreover, he was competent in mathematics to such an extent that he would help me with my homework. His own schooling was mostly done in the form of adult evening courses. I also remember very clearly that he would tune in to radio broadcasting from such sources as the BBC and Dutch international programming in English from Hilversum, the Netherlands. He was a man with a curious intelligence who believed that the heavy burden of human (and Somali) existence could be made lighter by the cultivation of refined knowledge.

AIS: And your mother?

YGSO: Unfortunately, she was part of the generations of Somali women who did not get an opportunity to go to school. However, she took pride in the formal education of her children. But she reads the Somali language and the Qur'an. While my parents were not at all wealthy and we depended on the salary of my father, they created a secure pattern of life for us. In addition, we were brought up to honor the humanity of others and to be generous to those who had less.

AIS: Are they alive?

YGSO: Mother is and she has moved to Hargeisa to escape the murderous barbarism that had engulfed Mogadishu. As for my father, he died as a result of a car accident in 1977. He was buried with full military honors, including the draping of his coffin with a Somali national flag. That ceremony has left an indelible mark on my consciousness as a Somali person first.

AIS: What was his rank when he died?

YGSO: A chief inspector (*Sadex Xdiigleh*, as the Somalis will say). He belonged to the tanks division of the national army—he was among the earliest of recruits.

AIS: Back to your education: What happened after Bulo Burti?

YGSO: We moved back to Mogadishu and I finished my intermediate schooling at Mohamoud Harbi School, in the Wardeegley zone in the neighborhood of the Presidential House.

AIS: How good of a student were you?

YGSO: I had one year of a disappointingly poor performance in one examination during the Bulo Burti time. I was given the opportunity to

take the exam again and scored well. From then on, I have always been either the first or second in my classes, including the university.

AIS: In those pre-university years, were there individuals who inspired you or who you took as role models?

YGSO: There were many, many individuals. Thus, it is not easy to name all. Nonetheless, if you push, I would say that the person who had the greatest influence on me in my pre-university years was my older brother Ismail, who died a few years ago in Mogadishu of illness. He was about half a dozen years older and loved learning to such an extent that he would read anything he could get access to, regardless of the subject matter—a sort of a polymath in the making. He later focused and made a career in telecommunications. Though both of us were keen on advancing our geographical repertoire, we would explore other areas of study together. He was highly curious and always trying to solve intellectual puzzles. His death was a major blow and I have yet to recover from the sorrow. Every time I read, his ghost is always there. Beyond my brother Ismail, two teachers left a mark on me. The first was Mr. Mohamed Mohamoud, who taught me English language and literature at the secondary school. He already had attained a university degree. The other was Mohamoud Mohamed Jama, "Kayid." He was effective in teaching geography and was talented in the Somali poetic tradition. In the midst of a discussion, he would suddenly recite a relevant Somali poem or song.

AIS: How about during your university years?

YGSO: Before the admission to the university, like my cohorts, we were sent to Camp Xalane for national orientation and military service. During those months, I hated everything about the regimentation. Furthermore, as secondary graduates, we had little respect for the non-commissioned military instructors assigned to us. But in retrospect, I gained a lot of immediate and practical experience, such as careful listening and a rightful recognition of legitimate authority. After the period of national service, our group was sent to teach. Later, I enrolled in the University's department of languages. I decided to concentrate on the study of French. During the four years, I got involved in numerous activities beyond the classroom. I chaired some student committees, including the planning of guest speakers.

AIS: Did this experience give you an early taste for leadership?

YGSO: Yes, but, as you will know from your own background, recognition at that stage in life comes first from being a high-achieving student. If one could couple that with conspicuous performance in sports, one had distinctive standing among one's peers. I was fortunate to have both attributes. In athletics, I was particularly good at running the middle distance, such as the 1,500 meters.

AIS: So, in addition to regular school hours, you also became involved in outside activities.

YGSO: Yes, during the first two years of secondary schooling, I was an apprentice in a tailor's shop. In Forms Three and Four, I got a basic job at the national post office's headquarters. When I entered the University, I also started working at Radio Mogadishu as a junior broadcaster. The latter gave me both local and national visibility.

AIS: When did you graduate from the National University?

YGSO: 1986 and with a B.A. in Linguistics. After the completion of the degree, I applied for the position of an assistant lecturer. As long as one was a superior student and not a political dissident (or counter-revolutionary, in the language of the then military rule), such an opportunity was available. Soon, I was appointed as an assistant to an Italian expatriot academic. Within six months, I found this unpalatable. I moved to the International Committee of the Red Cross's office. I was given this responsibility: to link 250 Somali males imprisoned in Ethiopia since the war of 1977–78 with their families and relatives in Somalia whom they were trying to contact through letters they had written to them. This was an extremely difficult task. As you know, Somali cities and towns, let alone villages, had no home addresses where mail could be delivered. Thus, all one had to go on was the name of the addressee and then looking for someone who might identify him in the neighborhood of the city/town/village. To make the assignment more complicated, the prisoners were away for almost a decade and their references were dated. In any case, my assignment took me all over the Somali Republic. While working this way, I still worked off and on for Radio Mogadishu. All in all, life was good: remunerative working set-ups and a developing romantic relationship with, and marriage to, a young, gorgeous Somali girl. But the storm clouds of nationwide violent upheaval were gathering in the distance to worry those who were observant.

AIS: What do you mean?

YGSO: The armed resistance to the military regime of General Siyaad Barre was beginning to take its toll. By 1988, the bloody clash in Northern Somalia had turned into the direct bombardment of Burao and Hargeisa. Having personally seen the disaster in these urban areas, I decided that it was unwise for me to wait until Mogadishu imploded. Therefore, in 1990, my wife and I decamped to Rome. Within a month, while waiting for my visa, I was invited to go to Geneva to do work for a few weeks for the International Committee of the Red Cross. Afterwards, I secured an assignment with Sapienza University of Rome, in Italy, on a 100,000-word project that had to do with Somali literature produced by the now-defunct Somali Academy in Mogadishu. The hard copy document was being prepared to be computerized. The University staff was responsible for the technical part while I was asked to undertake the proofreading. I was paid by the word. I was not given an office for this and I had no private residence for I was sharing a crowded apartment with Somali friends who were, in essence, refugees.

AIS: How did you manage to do the assignment?

YGSO: I looked for anyplace where I could get a few hours done, such as coffee houses and public libraries. The pay was good: nearly $1,200 a month.

AIS: So you were beginning to get a decent income and a reliable rhythm of living?

YGSO: Yes! But later, as the civil war spread and deepened, more and more refugees arrived in Italy. Given the harrowing decomposition of Somalia and my earlier background in education, it dawned on me that both the new Somali tragedy and the challenge of living in Europe required that I enroll in advanced education. Consequently, I enrolled at the University of Siena in the field of anthropology.

AIS: Siena is one of the oldest universities in Europe?

YGSO: Correct! I was treated well and given a generous scholarship to pursue my studies. While finishing my courses at Siena, I applied for an appointment at the BBC Somali Service.

AIS: Why did you do this and when?

YGSO: Of course, Professor Ahmed, you remember that in the late 1960s and early 1970s you were a broadcaster at the BBC Somali Ser-

vice. The BBC is the biggest as well as the *most* prestigious of the world's broadcasting systems. Among the Somali-speaking populations everywhere, the BBC Somali Service has been the gold standard. When I was a young person in Somalia, I would always make a point to listen to the BBC daily programs, both in Somali and English. At 5:30 p.m. in Mogadishu was the closest I have witnessed to a broadcasting ritual. Most of adult life would come to a standstill, with attention fixed on the radio box. I was a devotee of the Somali Service at a very early age, for the high quality stood above all other Somali-speaking radio programming inside and outside of the Somali Republic. Distinctive were the richness and reach of world news daily coverage, the classical and when necessary inventive vocabulary, and, above all, the extraordinarily charming voices of the broadcasters that had a knack for mixing easy tonality and clear audibility fit for the type of program or news item. However, when I was at home, it never occurred to me that I could become part of the BBC and join its broadcasting staff. Rather, with the onset of the civil war, my escape into Europe, and university schooling in Italy, it became clear to me that work at the BBC could be a possibility. While in Italy, I inquired about an opening but was told by the head of the Somali Service that such an opportunity did not exist at that time. However, I was given a freelance opportunity to occasionally report on the overall conditions of, and important events that affected, the cascading Somali communities in the Italian peninsula. I was paid on an item/story basis, which did improve my modest income.

AIS: Do you remember the first story/program you filed?

YGSO: I think so. First, I ventured to cover the then developing and violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, especially the exodus of refugees into Italy—a story with some minimum resemblance to the Somali story. Also, at this time, the last of the regular Somali Airlines flights were landing in Rome's Fiumicino International Airport, loaded with refugees of all types, including senior state officials and businessmen. The one-way traffic became a source of raw materials for me. Their different and grim personal stories, together with the overall evaporation of Somali national institutions, provided me with numerous raw materials and angles to cover.

AIS: Tell us more about the BBC Somali Service. When was it established? Who were the first broadcasters?

YGSO: The Service was inaugurated in 1957, in the wake of the Suez War (with the British, French, and Israelis on one side and the Egyptians on the other). At this time, too, the British colonial possessions included British Somaliland and the Northern Frontier District of Kenya. In that same year, the Swahili and Hausa Services were opened. Some say that the Somali Service was the first act that led to the other two, but I have found no written document confirming the point. The first broadcaster was Haji Abdi Dualleh, who was brought in from Radio Hargeisa. He was a pioneer in style, precision, and professional integrity. The original duration of the whole daily broadcast was only fifteen minutes. A few years later, the time was extended to thirty minutes and then to two half-hour programs. Now, it has expanded to four transmissions.

AIS: We will come to the present later, but let's stay with the early history for a while. After Haji Abdi Dualeh, what, from your vantage point, are some of the landmark moments/happenings in the evolution of the BBC Somali Service?

YGSO: You are aware, Professor Ahmed, that the Somali Service is a small unit of the BBC World Service, located in Bush House. In my opinion, two moments have deeply affected the BBC World Service in the last fifty years. First is the end of the Cold War. This made it easier for the BBC World Service to recruit broadcasters from all continents and for its programs to reach many more societies. The second is the technological revolution that has been dramatically reshaping our concepts of time and space. Speed and "direct feed" have become part and parcel of contemporary coverage. Furthermore, digital recording has drastically improved the hardware of broadcasting. You will recall, Professor Ahmed, from your early incarnation as a junior broadcaster at Radio Mogadishu, in 1967–68, the bulkiness and relatively heavy weight of tape recorders to conduct interviews such as this. Today, in front of us is a pocket-sized digital recorder. As for the BBC Somali Service, my direct knowledge of the staff goes back to the mid-1980s. The only earlier broadcasters I have met personally are you, Abdillahi Haj, and Osman Hassan and his younger brother Mohamoud. From the inception of the vernacular languages, such as Somali, all chiefs were English; native broadcasters were designated as program assistants. There was a tighter supervision/control over production. In short, while programming was of very esteemed quality, there was little flexibility for creative initiative—that is, the routine was deeply

set. For instance, in the Somali Service there were no possibilities for direct and, therefore, live reports from the sites of the events covered in that day's news bulletin.

AIS: Since 1957, numerous broadcasters have come through the BBC Somali Service. Many of the names are part of the mythical lore of the Service. Yet all were not of equal reputation. I trust there are a few whose record of performance has made them major figures in the annals of the Service. Could you name the top five broadcasters of all time? I know this puts you in a difficult spot, but if you use such criteria as, among others, the quality of voice, richness and precision of vocabulary, inventiveness, and overall spirit of professionalism, is it possible to attempt a league table? I realize any answer would be based on somewhat subjective preferences.

YGSO: This is extremely hard, Professor Ahmed. There are many reasons for this. For instance, I am not familiar with everyone's record. Two, those I know now, but who left the Service long ago, cannot be easily judged within the circumstances of our era. Their age was naturally different from the present. Third, those I have come to meet, like you, are not the same individuals of twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago. Fourth, it is not easy to make a comparative judgment between someone who has worked at the Service for thirty years and one whose tenure was limited to two, three, or five years. Thus, the question you have posed is nearly impossible to answer. Nonetheless, this I will assert with confidence: Since 1957, in all the broadcasting systems that have Somali programming, the best translators, best newscasters, the best interviewers, the best presenters have been BBC men and women. There is no doubt about that in my mind. Even Radio Mogadishu in its heyday, and despite the wealth of the cultural universe that surrounded it, did not match the quality of broadcasters who had come through the Somali Service. Perhaps the limitation of the levels of technological sophistication or restraints on journalistic freedom had a lot to do with the resultant differential status.

AIS: We agree on the reputation of the BBC as an enviable model for the world's broadcasting systems. But now there is a new political order in Britain: the victory of the Conservative Party bent on draconian reductions of financial annual support for autonomous national organizations such as the BBC. The Prime Minister in the Coalition, Mr. David Cameron, has already articulated this point. Do you think that these deep cuts will diminish the BBC?

YGSO: Possibly!…though we are not sure exactly how much we will lose. But remember that the largest part of the annual income of the BBC comes from private domestic annual fees, through licensing, paid by the audience of its programs, including television and, now, electronic sites. The government contributions are primarily toward the BBC World Service. The Parliament mediates this in order to ensure that the party in government does not interfere in the editorial independence of the World Service. The Somali Service is part of the whole. Still, these are worrisome times and we are bracing ourselves for tighter budgets than we have seen before. Financial exigencies are always present in all of our operations, particularly at the present.

AIS: How long have you been at the Somali Service?

YGSO: I joined in 1992. I became head of the unit in 2000. I continue to occupy this position.

AIS: What are your primary responsibilities?

YGSO: My job description is partly management/executive, partly strategic planning, and partly production and supervision of programs. A sub-task that I must also pay attention to is the training of the broadcasting staff, including reporters stationed in various places in the Horn of Africa.

AIS: Do you do broadcasting yourself?

YGSO: Yes! I do it mostly for the Somali Section, but I also on occasion contribute to other broadcasts when they are dealing with Somali affairs. In the case of the first, when I am traveling, I try to send reports back, such as interviews with newsworthy individuals. With the latter, I have contributed to BBC television programs as well as the BBC French Service.

AIS: What are the challenges confronting the Somali Service?

YGSO: There are many. One of them is the constantly evolving technology. This affects speed, quality of recording, and the relationship between the reporter, the instruments, and the program. A second issue area is the budget. We have already touched upon that. A third challenge is the safety of our reporters, especially in zones where violence is routine. Included here is also the freedom for reporters to find the facts and then transmit them without fear or censorship.

AIS: Broadcasting is a crucial part of journalism. It is axiomatic that democratic societies are partly defined by the freedom and integrity of their mass media. What role do you think the mass media, and particularly broadcasting, should play in the revival of Somali national identity?

YGSO: This is not easy. Without exaggerating, I believe the BBC Somali Service is one of the few platforms where Somali national belonging is constantly sustained. In the wake of the continuing dissolution, the BBC has, by default, become the main arena of news and conversation that every Somali could plug in to. It has almost become, like the great *Fannaniin*, an institution owned by all, including those in the diaspora. Though the BBC Somali Service has no responsibility for the Somali national cause, it has become a sort of surrogate for a Somali national broadcasting service. Secondly, the BBC has always been and continues to be a broadcasting site for posing and discussing the often difficult and seminal questions facing the Somali people and the world. The only forbidden areas are indulgence in *ad hominem* personal attacks and the spreading of falsehoods.

AIS: In my time at the BBC, there were four of us regular broadcasters and the daily program consisted of two installments: thirty minutes in the afternoon and fifteen minutes at night. Now it is different. What is the profile at the present?

YGSO: The daily broadcast at present is two hours and thirty minutes, divided among four transmissions. The legendary late afternoon broadcast is now a full hour! That is the radio part, but we also have a website which covers, sometimes with accompanying photographs or videos, news about the Somali world. Insofar as the staff is concerned, we have about ten full time, supported by correspondents on a contract basis. These are stationed in such places as Mogadishu, Nairobi, Hargeisa, Garowe, Djibouti, Cairo, and Washington, D.C. In addition, we have freelance "stringers" in a number of places in the Horn of Africa, Johannesburg, Islamabad, and other cities.

AIS: Earlier you mentioned the BBC's commitment to seek the truth. Has such a posture brought problems for the Service?

YGSO: Yes, indeed! For instance, regardless of international involvement in Somali violent chaos, it is, in the end, Somalis who are killing Somalis and destroying the country: it is Somalis who are misusing, through pervasive corruption, whatever amount of aid that comes in; it is Somalis who are aiding manipulative foreign powers; and it is Somalis who are imposing religious intolerance. Thus, when the BBC Somali Service tells the truth about these occurrences, many people get upset. Moreover, I believe that, in general, Somali people do not like to be told the truth. Even in an election, when we broadcast the result and name the loser and the winner, the first might take it as a personal insult. Or, to put it another way, when a battle takes place and we report the damage it has caused, those who are deemed to be responsible for the destruction will immediately complain, and with great virulence. Recently, the Transitional Federal Government and al-Shabaab have each accused the BBC of being against them and in sympathy with the other! In fact, the anger on the part of al-Shabaab was so intense that they confiscated BBC relay equipment. Other zones of the country are not immune to this. They, too, also engage in expressing their disapproval whenever our reports cover unflattering but accurate events. In short, when the news is disagreeable or we refuse to comply with individual or sectarian preferences, we often receive scathing condemnation or outright hostility.

AIS: Yusuf, given your response, are you implying that seeking the truth of a matter, the credo of any serious journalism, and politics are antithetical?

YGSO: It is very likely. Accurate information (if not truth) and transparency often uncover what politics conceals. Our listeners rely on us to find the facts and announce the facts, which sometimes they might come to know before us. If what we report is false, it could easily be debunked. However, if one's reaction is only anger, then it is likely that one is hiding something. To repeat, legibility is the most important principle of a respected journalistic enterprise.

AIS: Today, there are, relative to earlier times, numerous broadcasting stations and websites available inside Somalia. Is this proliferation a blessing in terms of accurate information gathering, truth-telling, and educating?

YGSO: To be sure, there are limitations. But most of the reporters living inside the communities they report on and broadcast to know a lot about the immediate reality. This is very valuable. Of course, how much serious journalistic training they have had is an important point to consider. On the other hand, a bitter individual who locks himself/herself in a room in some distant land and then pours his/her clanistic venom into a computer is, as it were, a different kettle of fish. A few years back, I posed your question to a cohort of young men working for some newspapers in both Mogadishu and Hargeisa. I particularly inquired about the degree of journalistic freedom available to them. They said this: "If it is the case that one could get hold of a Land Cruiser, modify it to such an extent that one mounts a machine-gun on top and then drives in the streets with optimum freedom, then our type of journalism is as free as the drivers of the armed Land Cruisers." [Laughs]

AIS: That is instructive! Do you think independent broadcasting is the most effective mechanism to build excellence in national broadcast journalism or can a state-owned service accomplish the task?

YGSO: I believe independent broadcasting, at its best, is more suited to create an atmosphere of excellence. But state-owned organs could play an important secondary role. The latter is particularly the case when it comes to the promotion of national culture, education, and public health. One advantage of public broadcasting is access to reliable state funds, whereas the private is subject to the unstable vagaries of the market and the calculating self-interest of capital.

AIS: A final question: Do you intend to stay with the BBC for the rest of your career?

YGSO: Broadcast journalism within the BBC Somali Service has been a magnificent profession. It has given opportunities to meet with pitiful refugees, smart students, learned scholars, eminent artists, heads of state, energetic entrepreneurs, sportsmen and women, and countless others. To encounter these diverse and notable individuals, I have traveled to many parts of the world. Moreover, the profession at the BBC has afforded me the opportunity to witness, up close, some of the major events of my two decades. Put differently, the professional adventure continues to make the flow of quotidian time one of inter-

esting restlessness, occasionally interspersed with riveting and signal happenings. This is a rare privilege and I know I am a fortunate person. I look forward to many more years of being part of the BBC's Somali Service, as well as living in this, yes expensive, but all-encompassing and enthralling metropolis.

AIS: Thank you, Yusuf, and farewell!

*The interview was conducted in Somali and the translation was done by Ahmed I. Samatar.