

Interview with the late Abdullahi Qarshe (1994) at the Residence of Obliqe Carton in Djibouti

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mrsh: Let us start with the basics. When and where were you born?

aq: I was born in Moshe, Tanzania, in 1924.

mrsh: People know you as Abdullahi Qarshe, but what is your real name?

aq: Oh, yes, that is true. My real name is Mahmud Muhammad, and Qarshe was the nickname of my father. He was a businessman and trader in the livestock business in East Africa. He was regarded as a frugal man and was fortunate in business. We were five brothers and one sister. We lived in a big house on the outskirts of Moshe.

mrsh: Tell us more about the background of your family and the reason your father moved to Tanzania.

aq: My father emigrated from Sanaag region in what was at that time called British Somaliland. In those days, emigration (*tacabbir*) was popular. Men used to travel for work and a better life, but it was not an easy task. Those who emigrated to East Africa, my father included, went through southern Somalia first of all, then proceeded to Tanzania. They had to travel by road or foot through harsh and unfriendly territories. Some of the migrants died along the way, and my father was one of the fortunate who survived.

In the Sanaag region, my father's family lived in the Maydh district. They were involved in the fish industry and the exportation of livestock and animal hides, as well as timber, to the Gulf countries. My family was also a religious one, as they were the "keepers of the shrine" of Shaykh Ishaq.

mrsh: So your family were the *murruud* (keepers) of the shrine. Likewise, I come from a *murruud* family and I am familiar with the system.

aq: Yes, we were the *murruud* of Shaykh Ishaq, therefore we were very well respected because of this role and position. With regard to Tanzania, my father died in 1931. My mother refused to marry my father's brother, who lived in Tanzania with us, so she sold all the family property so we could move back to Somaliland. First of all, we arrived at Aden, Yemen, and remained there for some time. Then we traveled by boat to Maydh, then from there by road to Cerigavo. We lived there for two years, then we returned to Aden, which eventually became our permanent home.

mrsh: What was your first engagement, meaning did you follow your father's footsteps and enter business or did you go to school?

aq: My first engagement was to study the Quran. While we were in Tanzania, there was a Quranic teacher who gave me private lessons in Quranic studies at home. During the two years that we were in Cerigavo, I was sent to a *madrasah* (Quranic school). Apart from the Quran, I also had my first experience with Arabic language there.

When we settled in Aden, I entered a *madrasah* that was established by the Somali community. I was not really interested in continuing my Quranic studies, but my mother shuttled me to many *madrasahs* to reignite my interest somehow. I do not understand why I was bored, because I was not only a good student but a popular one as well. I even became a classroom assistant (*kabiir*). Another of my father's brothers, who resided in Aden, married my mother and thus became our guardian. He was a very good man who commanded the respect of all the Somalis of Aden. I believe this was related to the title of *murruud* inherited from my father.

After I lost interest in religious studies, I was attracted to the secular British schools in Aden. I requested that my uncle take me to one of these schools one day. However, when this day arrived, we left the house and walked some distance, but I felt that my uncle had other plans. On our way, various friends of his offered him a ride but he refused, saying that we were not going far. Suddenly, he stopped and faced me, and said, "Abdullahi, I really want you to study religion and I do not approve of you going to the British schools. If anything happens to me, then you will be my successor. This is what I wanted to tell you along the way today." Then I replied, "Why did it take so long for

you to tell me this?" Thus, I respected his wishes and entered a *madrasah* where I finished the thirty parts of the Quran.

mrsh: So you read the whole of the Quran? Amazing! This is the first time that I became aware that Abdullahi Qarshe, the composer and musician, read the whole of the Quran!

aq: Indeed, not only did I read the whole Quran, but I also studied Arabic grammar, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and other Islamic subjects, as I was supposed to be heir to my uncle, the head of our *murruud* family. One day, my elder brother called to advise me that my previous conviction to go to school was better for me than following the *murruud* way. I went to a British school for a while, particularly night school. However, again I became completely bored with formal learning and I became more enticed by music. So instead of spending my time on learning and schooling, I spent many hours watching Indian movies, primarily to listen to accompanying Indian songs.

mrsh: Was that, then, the beginning of your career/interest in music, or what Somalis more generally call *fenn*?

aq: Yes. Also, my interest in music came about because of another event. During the Second World War, the British authorities in Aden established a radio station. Among the foreign languages broadcast were Hindi, Arabic, and Somali, which were given half an hour air-time. Both the Hindi and Arabic programs included music, but the Somali broadcast did not. A newsreader called Mahdi Eleeye read the news that was followed by classical Somali poetry (*gabay*) and took the remainder of the time. When Arabs visited Somali cafes, they would ask them, "Don't you have your own music?" As I said earlier, my taste for music was first inspired by Indian music, and later I realized that broadcasters in the Arabic department were also using some aspects of Indian music and incorporating it into their melodies. Hence, I thought of doing the same, but at that stage I could not play any instrument. As far as singing was concerned, I used to sing religious songs at some gatherings, so I knew that if I could play the lute, I could sing along with it. One day, I saw a man in the market selling a lute and I wanted to buy it. Once I acquired the money for one, I approached the seller and out of the corner of my eye noticed another young man who also coveted the instrument. I pleaded with him to let me buy it. He was kind enough to do so and, thus, I took immediate possession. Now, where could I put this lute? I could not take it home since having one, according to my family, was tantamount to blas-

phemy! An idea came to mind: I put it in a box and approached a family friend and told him to pretend that it belonged to him. This was so that he could leave it in my home, and if anyone discovered the lute, then I could not be blamed. This friend did exactly this. Then, when the time for my departure to Somaliland came, he collected the box and brought it to me at the port before I embarked on my journey to Hargeisa.

mrsh: So what followed?

aq: I arrived in Hargeisa and stayed with a family friend called Mahmud Abdi Arale. Abdi Sinimo's *belwo* was already making an impact on the urban population. However, there were only a few musicians and they were either Arabs or Indians inspired by the new Somali genre of the *belwo*. There were two main characters: Ina Beenaale, an Indian, and Abdo Yusuf, a Yemeni. They played basic instruments, the most important being the violin. They invited me to join them, so I did, but I was not yet really proficient in playing. We tried to create softer lyrics than classical Somali poetry and accompany it with music. In the beginning, it was not easy, and our band consisted of a mixture of clapping, the tambourine, and drumming. For instance, we wanted to inject some music into Elmi Bowdheri's famous love poetry, and formulate songs. Where the alliteration was not feasible, we added Arabic or Hindi lyrics. At this stage, I wanted to earn some money and make use of the educational skills I acquired in Aden. Thus, I applied for a clerical post in the British colonial administration and succeeded. As a result, I was transferred first to Burao and then later to Berbera. It was in Berbera that I started to focus more on practicing my lute, after I met an elderly man named Bakri whom I asked to teach me the basics of the instrument. We agreed that he would teach me in exchange for a daily portion of *khat*. Ina Beenaale and Abdo Yusuf were not willing to do the same. I suppose they were afraid that I would steal the limelight from them, since I was the first would-be Somali musician and composer.

mrsh: What was the first piece of music that you composed?

aq: At this stage, I was not in a position to write music, so I used the melodies of old songs. However, the first composition I wrote was for the song "*Ka Kacay! Ka Kacay!*" (Wake up! Wake up!). This was 1948.

mrsh: This must have been a crucial period of the mobilization for independence in Somaliland, when the territory entered a new phase of national consciousness.

aq: You're right. There was the wind of change of nationalism, which as a political force inspired many people, including the educated few. Political organizations, such as the Somali National Society (SNS) and the Somali Youth League (SYL), were formed and were popular. The SNS established branches in the main towns of the protectorate, such as Hargeisa, Burao, Borama, Erigavo. It started as a welfare organization and later developed into a political party, the Somali National League (SNL). At this time, the *belwo* became very popular, to such an extent that the religious establishment became very nervous about it. For instance, one night we were practicing and playing songs in a private house in the Zakata Lire quarter of Hargeisa. When dawn broke, a well-known religious personality called Shaykh Ali Jawhar made the call to prayer and followed it with a warning directed at us to stop these "songs of innovation," as he called them. When this story entered the city, the public's disgust with us grew even more. They changed the term *Belwo* into *Balaayo* (evil).

mrsh: Were there not any sympathetic groups?

aq: Some of the more educated appreciated the fact that the *belwo* itself had developed Somali literature and art in general. Among them was Yusuf Haji Aden, a teacher who had already contributed several nationalist songs. He suggested the change of the term *Belwo* to *Heello*, so as to rid it of the evil stigma. Yusuf Ismail Samatar, another teacher, supported our cause.

During this time, the former District Commissioner of the National Frontier District (NFD), Mr. Reece (also known as "*Kamakama*" by the Somalis), was transferred to Somaliland. His arrival coincided with the building of the first churches in Hargeisa. I had heard that Reece had been an oppressive colonial character in the NFD. I did not know how it came to me, but I decided to compose a song, which became the well-known song "*Ka Kacaay! Ka Kacaay!*" (Wake up! Wake up!):

<i>Ka kacaay ka kacaay ka kacaay!</i>	Wake up, wake up, wake up!
<i>Ka kacaay ka kacaay ka kacaay!</i>	Wake up, wake up, wake up!
<i>Ka kacaay ka kacaay ka kacaay!</i>	Wake up, wake up, wake up!
<i>Ka kacaay ka kacaay ka kacaay!</i>	Wake up, wake up, wake up!
<i>Ka kacaay ka kacaay ka kacaay!</i>	Wake up, wake up, wake up!
<i>kalhore nujabnee</i>	We have been defeated before
<i>kaftankii ma jiree</i>	This is no time for joking
<i>Koroley la gubyay</i>	Koroley has been burnt to the ground
<i>kufaceen la dilyay</i>	Our people have been killed

kufriigii badayay.

And the infidels have increased in number.

mrsh: What other songs did you compose after that?

aq: “*Ka Kacaay! Ka Kacaay!*” was not so serious. I think the first one I wrote was “*Garta naqa*” (Sort out the Claims):

Gadh baan leeyahay oo

I am a grown man

Guddida ma galee

But I am not consulted by the elders

Gugaygu ma weynee

I am still young

Garta naqa.

Make your own judgment

Labada gelin gaalaa i dirata

Morning and afternoon I serve the infidels

Habeenki ma gam'ee

And at night I remain sleepless

Garta naqa.

Make your own judgment

Wax kaa gooni ah oo

Something that is a part of you

Aan jidhkaaga gelayn oo

But yet detached from you

Aan kaa gaabinayn

And that cannot be reconnected

Garta naqa.

Make your own judgment

Gabadha cishqiyeedi baa i gel oo

I'm overwhelmed by the love of this woman

Wax ba ku gudban ee

But I am barred from her

Garta naqa.

Make your own judgment

Haddaan guursan lahaa

If I married her

Gob weeyaan

She would be a most suitable bride

Haddana ma geeye ee

Yet she is out of reach

Garta naqa.

Make your own judgment

These songs were composed in 1948. As I mentioned earlier, I was working as a clerk for the British Protectorate police force from 1948 to 1949. The police force had a musical group called Band Boys, in Mandera. I was interested in becoming involved in this group and I asked another clerk, a friend of mine who was working in Mandera, if we could swap our posts so I could work there. He agreed. I wrote a letter to the authorities regarding this transfer, which was accepted. Some people thought I had been transferred as a punishment for my song “*Ka Kacaay! Ka Kacaay!*” In reality, however, it was I who had asked for the transfer.

mrsh: While you were in Mandera you composed a love song, didn't you?

aq: Oh, yes. The song was for the girl I married and who became the mother of my son. However, she remarried later on, so I prefer not to revisit this song.

mrsh: I remember the song myself. It started like this:

<i>Intaanan dhiman dhahay dhahay</i>	Say it, say it, say it, before I die
<i>Aqalkay ku jirto iyo agta u dhowee</i>	The house she lived in and its surroundings
<i>Maandheera oo idil way udgoontahay</i>	And the whole city of Mandera exude a fragrant smell
<i>Udgoon dhahay dhahay.</i>	Say it, say it, all are fragrant.

The girl you sing about, wasn't she the daughter of Abdullahi Abi Farah?

aq: Yes, she was. We agreed to marry each other, but then I realized that she was promised to another man. Also, financially I was not ready for marriage. When I heard that her family had set her up with another man, I rushed to my kin members in Hargeisa for help, so that they would approach her family for her hand on my behalf. Among the prominent members of my family were two civil servants, Mahmud Abdi Arale and Ali Said Arale. They particularly questioned my eligibility for marriage. They asked me how much money I had. I said, "One hundred dollars." They laughed at me and said that they could not possibly approach her family if I was in this sorry state. I said to them that I had already made my own decision. I would propose directly to her family myself and either be accepted or rejected. If I were rejected, then they would be humiliated. After a heated debate, Mahmud Abdi Arale interjected and said that Abdullahi would fulfill his threat and bring shame (*ceeb*) if they did not comply. So the next day, they accompanied me to her house with the dowry and the marriage was agreed and completed. However, I still had to meet the expenses of the second stage, when the bride moves into a house with her husband. I was lucky because at that time I recorded some songs with a company in Aden, which was owned by two Somalis and an Arab. They suggested that I become a shareholder, but I retorted that I required the money immediately for my marriage expenses.

mrsh: What were the songs that you recorded for the company?

aq: I really do not remember, but they were some of the oldest songs that I recorded. In London, one day, a Somali woman played these songs for me on a gramophone. I asked her if she knew the singer, and

she replied “yes.” I told her that the singer was me, but she insisted that the voice was that of Abdullahi Laangadhe (Abdullahi with the limp). Then, I told her that that was my old nickname because of my leg injury.

mrsh: By the way, what happened to your leg?

aq: People often say that an evil wind affected it, but in fact it was the result of a mosquito bite, which happened to me in Tanzania about two years before I returned to Somaliland.

mrsh: When did you marry and did you have any children?

aq: I had a boy in my first marriage. His name was Artan. I took the name from the play called *Cartan iyo Ceebla* because he was born when my performing group was involved in this play.

mrsh: Back to the world of music and songs. Now we have Abdullahi Qarshe, married in 1950 and working in Mandera. What followed next?

aq: While living in that village, I composed several songs and some of them had no names. Soon, I resigned from my job and decided to return to Hargeisa. I got a job at Radio Hargeisa, where I had a dual responsibility: I was an administrator as well as a news broadcaster. In addition to that, during after hours, I used to write music and play with available musicians.

mrsh: Let us now focus on the plays that you either produced or co-produced. What was the first play in which you participated?

aq: I forgot to mention something earlier. When I was at school in Aden, I asked my teacher if I could join the end-of-year play. He said that, unfortunately, there was no character with a limp for me to play, so I was a little disappointed about that. However, he said that if I was interested, I should hang around the rehearsals.

The first play in which I performed was in Buraao, and was written by Yusuf Ismail Samatar. Somaliland plays used to originate in schools at the end of the school year, not from professional groups. Samatar pioneered a new genre in the production of the play. He incorporated Somali, Arabic, and English into a play he wrote. The Arabic part was about revenge. The English part commented on the British authorities and the public. The Somali section was a critique of those who were anti-*belwo* or anti-*heello*. Samatar included some of the administrative clerks of the protectorate in his play, and a prominent character was an interpreter who could not speak English properly. For example, he did

not competently convey the wishes of the public to the authorities, nor those of the authorities to the public.

Afterwards, the Somali civil servants' official Union Centre became the new location, a kind of salon, for exchanging ideas on production. I produced a play called *Waano Aabbe* (*The Advice of a Father*) and I was not satisfied with the acting, but otherwise it was a decent creative effort. Thereafter, I thought of forming an artistic group, so subsequently, I created *Walaalo Hargeisa* (The Hargeisa Brothers).

mrsh: When was *Walaalo Hargeisa* formed? Tell me a little about its background.

aq: It must have been the beginning of 1955; and the group was drawn from ordinary artists and civil servants. Of particular note was an Indian artist who played the flute with extraordinary flair.

mrsh: He must be Mr. Rao?

aq: Yes, it was Rao, an artist of the highest order, who was my right hand. *Walaalo Hargeisa* became a talented and select group of artists who were to raise Somali modern music to new heights.

mrsh: If we look at many of the lyrics of that time, they sound rather frivolous. For instance, let us take the line: "*Silsilad gubatay, Siraad xaa-jay, Sariirta ma noo goglaysaa*" (A scattered and broken necklace, you, Sirad Haji, will you prepare the bed for us?).

aq: True, the early songs were too playful, but still amusing — for instance: "*Sidii Talyinkii, Tacliin badan ee, Maryama tiiyar ee, Take my self!*" (Like the Italians, one so educated is she, Maryama the teacher, Take my self!). Another example is: "*Naftaydana hoo, Naftaadana keen, Ha la isku tumee, Tib ii keen!*" (Take my soul! And give me yours! Let them be as one, to crush them together, bring me the pestle!). In addition: "*Hablaha dhaanka wada, Ma a dhuuntaa, Mid uun dhexda ma iska duubaa*" (Shall I lie in waiting for, one of the girls collecting water? Shall I snatch one and wrap myself around her like a snake?).

The next two examples are more serious: "*Guduudo Carwooy, Gugii la arkaba, Allow yaa gashaanti kaa dhigaaa*" (By every year that passes, Dear God! If only you could be made young again!); and "*Sidii cir ku hooray, Meel cusub loo, Cadceeddi u soo baxda ayaad tahay*" (You are like lush nature, showered by rain and graced by the sun).

mrsh: After forming *Walaalo Hargeisa*, what was the first play that you took part in?

aq: It was called *Soomaalidii Hore iyo Soomaalidii Dambe* (*Somalis of the Past and Somalis of the Present*), and it coincided with the handing over of the Hawd area to Ethiopia in 1955. The play was a lamentation of this dreadful event and other similar happenings in Somali territories still under colonial occupation. It started with a man who carried a message about Italian oppression in the south of Somalia to a woman, married and living in Berbera. The message contained a request from her family in the south for her help. Subsequently, she convinced her husband to let her leave and aid her people. When he asked her about the welfare of their children, she replied that the fate of the country was more important. The essence of the play was to inform the audience about how the Somalis in the past fought for their country.

The play had only one song, called “*Taah*” (Sighing), which goes as follows: “*Intay adiga iyo arliga tahay, Asaanay laabi labo ahaanayn, agtayda ha marin, ishayduna ayaynu ku arkin, Ha ii iman*” (When it comes to you and the country, My heart cannot be divided, Do not come near me, And let not my eye fall upon you, Stay away from me!).

mrsh: Obviously, as a group (i.e., *Walaalo Hargeisa*), you were largely defined by the historical and nationalistic era. Did this mean a neglect of other themes such as love and romance?

aq: We thought about a plot that could combine love and Pan-Somali sentiments. We wanted to take such a performance to Mogadishu, Aden, and Djibouti. So the group produced a play called *Cartan iyo Ceebla* (*Artan and Ebla*). Muhammad Said Guronjire (another major figure of our group) and I composed new songs and music. We benefited from already existing songs, such as “*Jowhara Luula*” and “*Daawac*,” whose style we mixed with the new compositions.

mrsh: Was the idea for *Cartan and Ceebla* borrowed from the Arabic love story *Layla and Majnoon*?

aq: No, not at all. It was an original Somali play and had nothing to do with that.

mrsh: Can you capture for us the main plot of the play?

aq: A man is in love with a girl whose family had already made arrangements with another suitor. Subsequently, the girl became possessed with demons and the family tries every doctor and remedy to cure her. One day, an old woman visits the family and declares that the girl is not sick but merely in love. It was a story intertwining tradition, parental powers, and individual autonomy.

The next play was called *Isa Seeg (Mutual Miss)*, and was of a greater complexity. It had seven new songs; among them were “*Nugul*,” “*Damaq*,” “*Dankeli*,” and “*Wadaaq*.” The characters included a man in love with a woman who, in turn, was smitten by a man who, in turn, was attracted to another woman. It is a play full of pretensions and deception. The play attracted a lot of praise from the public. One of the memorable lines of one song was: “*Wiilooy, Warsamo ku weheeshanayee, Wiilooy, Ha is cunsiin waraabaha*” (Oh tomboy! Warsame is your companion. Oh tomboy! Don’t let the hyenas eat you!).

mrsh: I thought this was a political play.

aq: There was a lot of metaphor that could be interpreted as political. For example: “*Laba darran, Dooro la yidhi*” (Between two horrible options, I am condemned to choose) was understood as a reference to the Djiboutian election of 1958, when the public was asked to vote “Yes” for continued occupation by France, or “No,” which meant independence. Among the main actors were Mohammad Ahmed, Omar Dhuule (both playing women’s roles), Ahmed Ali Dararamle, Hasan Geni (who took the part of a maid), and Abdullahi Jama Magalo (who played the father of the main female character). Mohammad Ahmed and Omar Dule assumed those roles because the public did not yet approve of female actors.

The next play was titled *Kibiroow! Kab iga Xuur! (Oh Ingratitude! You have turned Me into a Pauper!)*. Despite the absence of any *gabay* or *geer-aar*, I think that this was probably the most important play that Hargeisa Brothers ever performed. The story goes like this: The wife of a working class man with a limited income comes under the influence of a businesswoman. This businesswoman often brings her a variety of clothes and other items and persuades her to buy them. Eventually, the wife becomes fed up and tells the woman that she cannot afford to buy any of her wares since she and her husband have a low income. The businesswoman then says, “Don’t worry. I will lend you what you need and you can pay me back later.” The wife buys more clothes. The husband complains to his wife about her profligate and consumerist expenditures, and tells her he will not pay any more. The businesswoman tells the wife that if her husband cannot give her what she desires, he does not deserve to be her husband and she must leave him, demand a divorce, and have her dowry paid in cash. She suggests that the money of the dowry could be invested in the *khat* business.

The businesswoman also suggests that the woman could attract other men after her divorce.

The play depicted how a poor but decent family was corrupted and then destroyed by the influence of an intruder who used self-serving intrigue and deception.

mrsh: Now we approach 1960. So what followed?

aq: In 1960, we produced a play that we already discussed, *Gardiid waa Alla diid* (*He who Refuses Justice, Refuses Allah*). This play coincided with the 1960 election for independence in Somaliland. The play predicted the outcome of the election and what political parties might win. In fact, we put forth that the SNL/USP would win the majority of the seats and the results confirmed our intuition.

mrsh: Were you and your fellow artists, the Hargeisa Brothers, supporters of those political parties?

aq: Oh, yes, *Walaala Hargeisa* were fully involved in the political process for independence. However, there were other artists, such as Osman Mohamed (“*Ga’anloo*”) and Ali Fayrus, who supported other parties such as the NUF (National United Front). Among the songs in this play were “*Aan maalno hasheena Maandeeq*” (Let us milk our she-camel Maandeeq), “*Waa Mahad Alle*” (Thanks be to Allah), and “*Geeskii Afrikaa gabyoo, wuxuu yidhi*” (The Horn of Africa Recited Poetry and Said).

mrsh: Was this play written by Balaayo ‘As (Barkhad ‘As)?

aq: No, it was written by Sahardiid Mohamed, who also composed some outstanding love songs.

mrsh: When Somaliland achieved its independence on June 26, 1960, followed by the July 1 union of Somaliland and Somalia to make the new Somali Republic, what was the state of the arts in Somalia?

aq: On June 27, 1960, the majority of *Walaalo Hargeisa* and I hired a car and went by road to Mogadishu to take part in the momentous 1st of July celebrations. At that time, in my opinion, there were no artists of our caliber in the South. Only small groups of traditional dancers participated with us in the celebrations.

mrsh: What about artists such as Ali Malehan, Hilole Maalin, and Dalays?

aq: These artists were there but their production skills were not as sophisticated as ours, nor did they compose the same standard of songs and music as we did.

mrsh: During the 1960s, two of your songs stood out. One was “*Lumumba Mana Noola Mana Dhiman*” (Lumumba is neither Alive nor Dead). The second was “*Dugsiyada Ogaada u Aada*” (Be Alert to Education and Go to School!). Could you remind us of some of the lines of the first song?

aq: Oh, yes: “*Lumumba mana noola mana dhiman, Labada midna ha u malaynina, Inu maqanyahay ha u moodina, Laba midna ha a malaynina*” (Lumumba is neither alive nor dead, Don’t think that he is either, for his spirit is with us, Don’t think he has disappeared. Don’t think that he is either, for his spirit is with us).

mrsh: How did this song come to you?

aq: One day, I came out from my house and saw a crowd listening to the radio in front of a tea shop. The news was about the crisis in Congo in 1962. The U.N. forces had just intervened in the civil war, ostensibly to save the Prime Minister of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, who was arrested and later assassinated by his opponents. “*Lumumba mana noola mana dhiman*” had a kind of Pan-African sentiment because of Lumumba’s nationalist vision and courage.

mrsh: Could you remind us of some of the lines of the song that underscores the importance of learning?

aq: “*Aqoon-La’aani waa iftiin la’aan, Waa aqal iyo ilays La’aan, Ogaada ogaada dugsiyada ogaada, U aada u aada dugsiyada u aada, Walaalayaal u aada dugsiyada u aada, Indhaha aan ku kala qaadne, ifka ugu ilbaxsanaane, Ogaada, ogaada dugsiyada ogaada.*” (Ignorance is darkness. It is a house without light. Be aware! Be aware! Be alert to education! Go! Go! Go to school! Go to school, my people! Go to school! Let us open our eyes to the wonder of knowledge, and let us be the most educated and civilized!).

mrsh: I cannot recall the name of this other play, but it was about the Northern Frontier District of Kenya. Do you remember it?

aq: It was called *Indho-sercaad (Elusive Reality)*. This was a most important political play, with rich melodies and lyrics, performed by *Walaalo Hargeisa*. When we played in the capital, Mogadishu, it attracted huge publicity and audiences. For example, the first Prime Minister of the Republic, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, requested that we perform the

play one night for the diplomatic community in Mogadishu. The Commander of Police, General Mohamed Abshir Muuse, invited us to do the same for the police force. It is often said that this play was a source of inspiration during the war between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden territory in 1964.

mrsh: Had the standard of Somali plays and songs improved when you moved to Mogadishu? If so, what was your role in this?

aq: Immediately after the July celebrations, I moved to a hotel in Mogadishu. I had little money and was waiting for some return on my recordings to pay for my expenses. A group of artists from Mogadishu, including Abdi Muhumad Amin and Ahmed Naaji Saad, who had already established a musical group called *Kaah*, asked me to join them. So I did, and subsequently moved from the hotel to private accommodations. Later, we all became members of Radio Mogadishu dramatic arts group and produced more songs and plays together, with good instruments and recording equipment. When I wrote the Lumumba song, many people who didn't know me became more interested in my work.

mrsh: So the Lumumba song raised you to new heights and status?

aq: Remember, I was not only a musician, but I had been a known administrator and broadcaster in the British Protectorate of Somaliland. I could have pleaded for my job back, but I didn't ask the new government and no one offered to reinstate me.

mrsh: The lyrics and accompanying music for the national flag, "*Qolaba calankoo waa cayn*" (Every Nation has its Own Flag), must be your most important nationalistic composition. True or not?

aq: The music for the flag was meant to be the national anthem. Although it was not adopted officially, the song remained in the public domain as the national anthem. The great composer, Hussein Aw Farah, my co-producer and one of the founders of *Walaalo Hargeisa*, wrote the lyrics and I composed the music. We started working on it in 1955, after we saw the new national flag. The color and design of the flag was the idea of a man called Awale Libaan, who sent his idea, in 1954, to the committee that was overseeing the design of a new flag, who then accepted it. In 1960, on the eve of Somaliland's independence, a British band arrived from Aden to rehearse for the celebrations. I was asked to produce a tune that was fit for the occasion. I played "Every Nation has its Own Flag" for them. Then the conductor

said, "Do you have anything else?," so I played the tune of another song called "*Dhulkayaga*" (Our Land), and they chose this one for the occasion.

mrsh: Regarding your only trip to London, when was it and what were the reasons for it?

aq: I traveled to London in 1961, and the main reason was medical treatment for my leg. First, the Soviet embassy in Mogadishu suggested that I go to Moscow. However, perhaps the Somali Government was not in favor of that, so they found an alternative, and I was offered a one-year music scholarship and medical treatment by the British Council in Britain.

mrsh: During that year in London, did you compose and play any music or meet any foreign artists?

aq: In 1962, there were disastrous floods in East Africa, particularly in Somalia, and there was a charity organization collecting money in London for this emergency. I participated with other artists to raise money in aid of the victims. On another occasion, I played at the BBC World Service's Somali Section, at Bush House in London, in celebration of the second anniversary of the Somali Republic. This was arranged by the Somali ambassador and the staff of the Somali Section.

mrsh: What other places have you visited?

aq: Many. I visited China, Sudan, Yemen (many times), Egypt, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Italy, France, and Nigeria.

mrsh: You mentioned earlier a connection between Somali and Indian music. You have visited and performed in China, and China built the National Theatre in Mogadishu. Is there any affinity between Somali and Chinese music?

aq: Definitely. There is a hint of Chinese melodies in Somali music. Some female members of our later *Waaberi* group, such as Hibo Muhammad, Fadumo Qasim, and Dalays and Maryam Mursal, sang several Chinese songs in Beijing when we were on tour there. Similarly, the Chinese orchestra played a Somali song by Huriyo in praise of Mao Tse-Tung, for which I had written the tune. However, Chinese music is more multidimensional — they even play classical European music, which we don't.

mrsh: Did you write a tune for a song in praise of Chinese foreign minister Chou en-Lai when he visited Somalia in 1962?

aq: That song was written by the incomparable Ali Sugule.

mrsh: The Somali people and others regard you as the “Father of Somali Music.” Is this how you see yourself?

aq: No. There was always music: for weddings, lullabies, watering animals, working, dancing (*shurbo*), night dancing (*sacab habeenkii la tumo*), exorcism (*saar*). All these existed, so one can only say that there were no musical instruments to accompany them. One cannot say, therefore, that I am the “Father of Somali Music.” Even modern music was in the air at the time of Abdi Sinimo, who is widely regarded as the genius who formulated and organized it into the *belwo* and thus took well-deserved credit and honor for it. Perhaps, I am the first Somali to set Somali songs to the music of the lute (*kaman*).

mrsh: Did you ever meet Abdi Sinimo?

aq: I met him in Djibouti in 1956, when we performed our first play.

mrsh: What did he look like?

aq: We sat together and conversed about how the *belwo* emerged. He was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, but on the slim side. He was brownish in tone and you could tell he was an artist by the way he walked. He used to go to the barber and have his hair cut, all except a bit on the crown of his head.

I asked him how the *belwo* came to him. He said that once, whilst he was driving his truck, he came into a desert area. The truck ran into some difficulty and he had no spare parts. Other trucks approached to help, but they had no spare parts either. This situation, in which people are eager to help you but are unable to, gave rise to the *belwo*. Abdi Sinimo told me that in the solitude there was something of inspiration, and he just started to sing the following lines: “*Balwooy, Hooy belwooy/Waxaa I baleeyay baabuur/Waxaa I baleeyay Borama.*” (Abdi Sinimo was going in the direction of Borama and came from Djibouti. He envisaged his friends in Borama having a nice time.) As we know now, these few lines gave rise to the modern Somali *heello*.

mrsh: You recorded an interview for the BBC Somali Service while you were in Britain in 1962. In this interview, you said that Somali music does not need many instruments. What did you mean?

aq: What I meant was that the music that needs many instruments is often one that has a written form like Western classical music. In written music, each musician plays a certain tune in order to produce an orchestra. On the other hand, Somali music is not as yet written. There-

fore, it is more beautiful when played with basic traditional instruments, such as the lute. Numerous instruments could result in cacophony. But I believe that there are many musical sounds in the Somali language, some very ancient. If the tragic collapse of the Somali state did not happen, perhaps we might have finally written our music and preserved many musical sounds.

mrsh: Do you actually write music?

aq: No. I tried several times. While I was in Britain, I took a course on the theory of music.

mrsh: Who do you think is the best Somali musician, in your judgment?

aq: I think it is Mohamed Saeed (*Gu'roon-Jire*). We started writing music at the same period, and there was a healthy competition between us. He produced delightful melodies and played the lute with exceptional magnificence.

mrsh: What about lyric writers and playwrights?

aq: With regard to the lyrics, it must be the late Belaayo Cas or Barkhad Cas, as people now like to refer to him. He was a supremely original as well as a firm nationalist. His lyrics were largely about Somali nationhood and the struggle for independence. As for playwrights, I can say Husein Aw Farah, my co-producer, was the best of our generation. Ali Sugule was impressive as well, but his plays were mainly limited to politics. There are many songwriters, playwrights, and musicians of later generations whose work I have not followed systematically. I am sure there are stars here too.

mrsh: There are legendary women singers such as Magool, Maandeeq, Hibo Muhamad, and Marian Mursal. Why don't we have women composers of music and songs?

aq: This is a good question and maybe they did not try. I am sure that if they did, they could write music or play instruments like their male colleagues.

mrsh: Let us focus for a moment on 1969, when the military junta seized power in the Somali Republic. You wrote songs to welcome the change but you also had a political opinion. Can you enlighten us on your view on this?

aq: I was in favor of the change and I fully supported it. For example, I put together a song for that historic moment, starting with: "*Baga,*

Baga, xoogayaga waan u baahnayne бага бага, Hadii uu baarlamaankii bagu-ugaha ka dhigay waan u baahnayne бага бага, Bishaara bishaara bishaara bilatayee oktoobar, Bilkheyr dhaha bilkheyr dhaha” (Let it be, let it be, We needed our armed forces, Let it be, let it be, If they abolished the corrupted parliament, Let it be, let it be, Good tidings, good tidings, good tidings, October has begun, Celebrate the good news, October has brought a change, Celebrate the good news).

But, as you must know, this joy about the military take-over, which I shared with many Somalis, did not last. My last songs prior to the collapse of the Somali state were all banned from being broadcast by Radio Mogadishu. Among them was “*Ma Allaah baday suuqa madow, Ma Allaah baday*” (Did Allah condemn us to this dark alley, did Allah condemn us?) I realized, like many others, the destruction that the military caused the society, and the song was a reflection of such an agonizing realization.

mrsh: Siyaad Barre escaped, in the belly of a tank, from the presidential palace in Mogadishu on January 27, 1991. Where were you at that time?

aq: I was in my home, which was only a short distance from the presidential palace, Villa Somalia. The fleeing Siyaad Barre and his bodyguards passed in front of my house. Many friends took refuge with me, so my house was akin to *Abu Sufyan’s* abode. I think people knew that if they came there, they would probably be safe. In my house there was the engineer, Saeed Antaana, who had the keys of the main studios of Radio Mogadishu. He also belonged to Siyaad Barre’s kin, which was, at this point, the target. The United Somali Congress of General Aideed sent a cohort to my house to take Saeed Antaana to open the national studios. I told them that the man was under my protection in my house, and therefore I would not allow them to take him. They said, “Abdullahi Qarshe, we know you and no harm will be done. We only want Saeed to open the studio for us.” They did what they promised. After few days, I left Mogadishu and arrived here in Djibouti.

mrsh: This is exile. How are you coping?

aq: First, the Djibouti Government promised accommodation and support, but somehow this did not materialize. Later, some members of my extended family group started to collect contributions, which turned out to be a significant sum to support my needs. This was not

my preference. I would have liked to have been helped by Somalis in general rather than relying on a kin donation.

mrsh: Doesn't this show the denudation of Somali nationalism (*Soomaaliniimo*) at this historical juncture?

aq: Very much so.

mrsh: What are your plans now?

aq: I have sent the family to Hargeisa and I am preparing to go to London. With regard to the general question, the Somali people are now passing a critical stage in their history. This is a time of destruction and flagrant abuses. The consequence is less interest in nationalist songs, the mainstay of my creative imagination. It is so disheartening that the evil vanquished the good. Now tribalism or clanism (*qabyaalad*) and the explosion of the gun (*qarax*) dominate the Somali social scene. In a situation like this, we must seek refuge in Allah. My two most recent songs take this direction. The following is a prayer for peace and harmony: "*Roonoow Rabbiyoow Rahmaanoow, Soomaalida u roonoow*" (O, benevolent and gracious God, extend your mercy to Somalis). It is a song about peace and harmony.

mrsh: Given your outstanding contribution to Somali literature and arts, and in conjunction with the independence movement, have you been nationally honored?

aq: Yes, in 1959, even before independence, I was awarded a medal together with other artists, at the Mogadishu celebrations. Moreover, the military regime also awarded me medals on a number of occasions — a silver one, a gold one, and one of copper. But more importantly, for me, I have treasured the love and support extended to me by the entire nation. Such is the greatest ambition of any artist. ●