

# Hassan Sheikh Muumin: The *Hoobaal* as Creator, Preserver, and Social Critic of the National Heritage

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Let me spell out for you why they call me *hoobaal*  
Of our traditional culture I focus on our mother tongue  
My wealth consists of our rich orature  
And the words I create,  
Their meter, rhyme, and musical arrangement,  
Are my tools  
People are moved by the sound of my voice  
And my songs offer guidance to society  
My words are the first thing children learn  
And are continuously on people’s lips  
And all ears are tuned to hear them

(Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame “Hadraawi”)<sup>3</sup>

## I. Introduction

Hassan Sheikh Muumin is one of Somalia’s greatest modern songwriters and playwrights. He was born in 1930, in the northwest of what was then British Somaliland. Because his father was a great sheikh (man of religion), he received a classical Quranic and Arabic education. He also attended a government elementary school. He became a well-known collector and reciter of traditional oral literature, and composed his own texts, of which his plays are among the most famous. After Somalia achieved political independence in 1960, he worked for Radio Mogadishu and, after 1968, for the Ministry of Education, where he, among many other things, trained youth for national parades and performances. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Hassan Sheikh Muumin authored a number of plays, all, as is typical of Somali drama, including poetry, the most prestigious literary genre. These poems were set to music and came to feature the best known and liked Somali songs of the period.

It was especially through his plays that Hassan established his fine reputation as social commentator and critic. Deeply versed in tradi-

tional culture, and often turning to it for guidance and inspiration, Hassan nevertheless sharply criticized what he considered social ills, traditional or modern. He expressed the Cabralian<sup>4</sup> concept of “winnowing” traditional cultural values and practices in the opening of his first popular play. The song was memorized by many Somalis and became the standard opening of many dramatic performances in Mogadishu’s National Theater:

Night and day we fashion our words. We work behind the scenes to help our mother tongue advance. We help it develop, guide it, correct it. We don’t hold back, we work hard for it, we kindle the traditional wisdom. We winnow [the good from the bad], we provide for what it needs,<sup>5</sup> and we give it all we have. We guide the public, entertain it, and make it understand its general interests.<sup>6</sup>

Hassan’s sociopolitical commentary in this period was almost visionary, and few verbal performance artists had their finger on the pulse of Somali society like he did. Two song lines that gained almost proverbial fame are the following: “*Dhagax iyo dab laiskuma dhuftee, kala dhawraay, Waxa ka dhigan gobanimada qabiil dhexgalee, kala dhawraay*” (Beware of throwing a stone into the fire! And beware of bringing clan-nism into the [workings of] the independent [state!]). Throwing a stone into a fire would scatter the sparks and allow the fire to get out of control. In the same way, allowing clannist practices into the operations of the independent state would make it disintegrate. And this is, of course, what occurred in the Somali civil war. Equally important was his analysis of what was happening to the Somali family and family values.

Like most other Somali artists, Hassan was a man of the people. My own memories of him go back to when I was four years old and, together with his young son, participated in a play he was putting on, titled *The Garden of Freedom (Beerta Xurriyadda)*. This was in the very early 1960s, just after independence. I still remember the song I sang on that occasion: “*Cammuuddu qaali weeyoo, ciyaar ma geydee. Cadowga aan ka dafaacnee, caruurta wax bara!*” (The soil is of great value, not to be played with. We want to defend it against the enemy, so we must teach the children [how valuable it is]). I also remember how Hassan would take me by the hand, small as I was, and bring me to the theater with him. He encouraged me to author plays and to love songs. He taught me the dances of the old city of Zeila, the *seylici*. When I was older, I

indeed wrote a play, *Wadhaf iyo Shimbir War iskuma Hayaan* (*The Sling and the Bird are Not Aware of Each Other*), which was produced in 1978 by Osman Aadan Askari, with Hasan Aadan Samatar and Zahra Ahmed as key singers and actors. My love for Somali songs, which has inspired me to collect and transcribe thousands of them, owes much to Hassan's enthusiasm and initial encouragement. When I was working in Djibouti, much later, he would stop by my house with sheaves of paper, all covered with notes readable only to him, as, for his own purposes, he wrote Somali in Arabic script. His love of the Somali language in all its facets and expressions was contagious.

It was for his plays that Hassan Sheikh Muumin gained most popularity. After a short radio-play with the title of *Failing to Make Sure will Cost You Dearly*,<sup>7</sup> he authored and produced, in 1968, what is probably his most famous play, *Leopard Among the Women* (*Shabeelnaagood*). This play represents (and also satirizes) family and other social relations, especially the deceit of men and the gullibility of girls in matters of sex and marriage. His humorous and realistic representation of family life and gender relations allowed all Somalis to recognize themselves in his characters and their dialogues. While deeply grounded in Somali culture, however, Hassan nevertheless asked his audience to critically reflect on those Somali values and practices that were backward, superstitious, and inegalitarian. He also ridiculed those Somalis who, even with only a smattering of foreign education, gave themselves enormous airs and saw themselves as highly elevated above the culture of ordinary Somalis.

In 1969, Hassan authored and produced the play called *Glow Worm* (*Gaaraabildhaan*), which dealt with the theme of ambitious young men marrying "modern" Western women and despising and underestimating the Somali "homegirls." This was followed, in 1971, by a critique of the rich plantation owners in the interriverine area of the south, who, following in the footsteps of the Italian colonizers before them, exploited and oppressed the men, women, and children who labored on their plantations. Hassan called it *The Hell-Bound of this World* (*Ehelunaar Adduunka*). In 1973, he produced a play with the title, *The World Depends for its Protection on the Human Mind* (*Dunidu Maskaxday Magan U Tahay*). This play, too, criticized the abuse of marriage and championed the cause of women.<sup>8</sup>

Not all of Hassan's plays have been preserved. It is therefore imperative that we collect and preserve the audiotapes that may still circulate in Somalia and throughout the diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I present four of Hassan's songs, two dealing with women, and two with politics.

## II. Selections

### A. "You Know What Is Burning Me" (*Adaa Garan Waxay Gubee*)

Singer: Maryan Mursal

This song, from the play *Shabeelnaagood*, is sung by the young girl who has been seduced by Shabeel, the "leopard among the women" of the title, who went through a fake religious ceremony with her. When she discovers that she is pregnant, and he laughs at her plight, she sings:

Alas! Like a suckling lioness who has lost her cubs,  
Or like the mountain oryx with an arrow in its body,  
Last night, in great frustration, I fell down time and again,  
But you refused to give me what is my right  
You know what is burning me  
Acknowledge that you have done me wrong

Like a man who owned many camels  
But lost them to an afternoon raid by hostile horsemen  
And remained behind in an empty space  
His prosperity and the sour milk he used to drink, all gone  
His children hungry and his camel calves groaning  
So do I sit down despondently  
You know what is burning me  
Acknowledge that you have done me wrong

The home we prepared together  
The bed I spread for you  
The legal matter we settled  
Our acceptance and the oath we swore  
If you broke away from all these  
And left me all alone  
Then I grievously misunderstood you  
But *nabsi*<sup>10</sup> will get you for sure  
You know what is burning me  
Acknowledge that you have done me wrong<sup>11</sup>

**B. "How Disgusting is a Black Woman" (*Cakuye Naag Madow*)**

Singers: Hibo Mohamed and Mohamed Mooge

This satirical song is from the play *Glow Worm (Gaaraabildhaan)*, in which a Somali man temporarily prefers a foreign white woman to his Somali wife. In this song, he expresses his disdain for his wife and all black women like her. The play satirizes this attitude and, by the end of the play, the young man begs his Somali wife to take him back.

[She] You, fellow, are still supporting  
The disease that was left behind  
When the land was divided and exploited<sup>12</sup>  
The man who obtains  
The hidden blossoms of African soil,  
A black-skinned virgin  
Is lucky  
This is fate, this is fate  
And an unexpected scourge  
You, who live life without giving it thought  
Your frustration will never end  
It is useless

[He] You, unpleasant creature  
If you would not pressure me  
And hide the truth in mist, fog and smoke  
It would be obvious what the habits of the girls  
Who live in this divided land are really like  
How disgusting is the black woman who pesters men  
With anger and arrogance  
With regard to good manners and beauty  
They are impoverished  
How disgusting! A deserted place is preferable to  
A black woman

[She] Whether white or black  
Whatever the color of your skin  
You received it from the Righteous God  
I am surprised that you complain of your skin color  
And fall foul of it  
Is that not shameful to you?  
This is fate, this is fate  
And an unexpected scourge  
You, who live life without giving it thought

Your frustration will never end  
It is useless

[He] If [instead of] meat that is lawful  
You try to eat raw meat  
You won't be able to swallow it  
Someone who has found sweet well water  
Will not drink from the sea  
I am not worried about  
The decision I took  
With regard to good manners and beauty  
They are impoverished  
How disgusting! A deserted place is preferable to  
A black woman<sup>13</sup>

**C. "When the Fire Gets Cold" (*Dab Dhaxmooday*)**

Singers: Hibo Mohamed and 'Abdi Muhumad

The following song is from *Shabeelnaagood*. It is a direct criticism of the inefficient and corrupt civilian administrations that governed Somalia until the military take-over of 1969. Predating the military coup by one year, the song brilliantly captures and gives expression to the widespread popular discontent that existed in Somalia before the military coup and that caused many Somalis to initially welcome the military intervention.

[He] From whatever angle you look at it  
Life in this world depends on fire  
But if the fire itself gets cold  
With what can you warm it?  
[His refrain] That is an issue that is hidden from sight  
And does not benefit from haste  
Examine it calmly  
And tell me what you think might be its meaning  
[She] If someone is elected and is given a high position  
But fails to live up to his responsibility  
He is the fire that has gotten cold  
[Her refrain] It is a very old question  
Which makes one's head grow weary  
One must ask the people  
How the fire can be warmed

[He] If the stream from which one drinks  
And in which one swims  
Feels thirsty  
From which bank can one water it?  
[His refrain] That is an issue that is hidden from sight  
And does not benefit from haste  
Examine it calmly  
And tell me what you think might be its meaning

[She] If someone has lots of wealth  
With gold as a pillow  
But still feels that he does not have enough  
He is the water that is thirsty  
[Her refrain] It is a very old question  
Which makes one's head grow weary  
One must ask the people  
How its thirst can be quenched

[He] If someone is dying of a disease,  
Medicine can cure him  
But if the medicine gets ill  
How can it be cured?  
[His refrain] That is an issue that is hidden from sight  
And does not benefit from haste  
Examine it calmly  
And tell me what you think might be its meaning

[She] If religious sincerity,  
[Our] constitution and customary law  
Are covered up  
That is the medicine that feels sick  
[Her refrain] It is a very old question  
Which makes one's head grow weary  
One must ask the people  
How it can be cured

[He] People rub their bodies  
With a lotion rich in oil  
But if the oil gets dry  
How can one restore its moistness?  
[His refrain] That is an issue that is hidden from sight  
And does not benefit from haste  
Examine it calmly  
And tell me what you think might be its meaning

[She] Culture is a shelter  
Strongly rooted in the country to which it belongs  
But if its own people bury it  
That is the oil that has gotten dry  
[Her refrain] It is a very old question  
Which makes one's head grow weary  
One must ask the people  
How one can restore its moistness.<sup>13</sup>

**D. "The Single Tree" (*Geed Madi Ah*)**

Singer: Hibo Mohamed

This song is from the play *Gaaraabildhaan*. It addresses young people and asks them to put the serious problems that are befalling the country into a wider historical context, and not to be misguided by inferior leadership. In the first verse, the author refers to how Somalia's leaders are robbing the country of its wealth. In the second, it describes the consequences of not valuing the nation's reputation. In the third, it calls on Somalia's youth not to turn away from traditional values nor be misled by shortsighted and dishonest leaders.

If a single tree  
Whose blossoms and flowers people love and value  
And on whose branches is enough fruit for the whole world  
In an environment full of blossoms  
Was cut down by one shortsighted person  
How would that act be weighed?  
Who could determine what compensation should be paid?

If someone called meaningless  
A strong reputation that no weapon can destroy  
And no water can wash away  
In the end fate would teach him  
Whether he was a success or a failure<sup>14</sup>  
Don't ignore history  
It is indispensable

You, the youth of today  
Who suck the poisonous sap of the *dhunkaal* fruit  
And who find the *dacar* plant sweet  
You, the youth of today  
For whom honey is bitter  
Who distort the wisdom of our mother tongue

And our culture  
And you, the even younger ones coming after them  
Don't think that this is the End of Time!<sup>15</sup>

The *oeuvre* of Hassan Sheikh Muumin, as well as that of many other Somali *hoobals*, constitutes a brilliant and deeply significant social commentary upon Somali society in the period following the establishment of political independence in 1960 to the culmination of the civil war in the early 1990s. For many Somalis, this was a period of transition from a rural, often nomadic way of life to a sedentary, urban one. Like other verbal artists of this period, Hassan Sheikh Muumin articulated and commented upon the problems that young men and women faced in this new environment and new era, as they tried to reconcile traditional values and customs with emerging definitions of modernity and sophistication. Giving expression to the hopes and fears of wider society, *hoobals*, like Hassan, relentlessly criticized social and political evils, including corrupt and shortsighted political leadership, and the social confusion about proper family and gender relations. They diagnosed the rot that was eating away at society and tried to mobilize the hearts of all Somali individuals against it. In courage, talent, and untiring effort, Hassan Sheikh Muumin was among the greatest of his time.

There is an urgent need for fuller study and documentation of this generation of artists. This short text has highlighted the art of only one such creative artist, the rightfully famous Hassan Sheikh Muumin. The concerns that are central to his songs have lost nothing of their urgency today. If anything, they still await solutions. The question, therefore, is who will rise to his challenge? ●

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## Notes

1. The *hoobal* is the verbal and verbal performance artist, most usually someone who authors poetry, songs, and plays, and also acts and sings.
2. I am grateful to Hasan Farah Warfa, of Boston, and Mohamed 'Abdillahi Rirash, of Djibouti, for their helpful comments on the manuscript.
3. *Halkaraan: Maansadii Maxamed Ibraahim Warsame Hadraawi, 1970–1990* (Kleppe, Norway: 1993), p. 101.
4. Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches by Amilcar Cabral*, 1973, pp. 39–56.
5. Here the author refers to the need to develop, for example, the vocabulary of the Somali language, which received a formal orthography in 1972.

6. Compare: Hassan Sheikh Muumin, *Leopard Among the Women (Shabeelnaagood): A Somali Play*, translated, with an introduction by B.W. Andrzejewski (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 44–45.

7. *Hubsiiyo hal baa la siistaa* (1966).

8. See Hasan Sheikh Muumin, *Leopard Among the Women*, pp. 28–29.

9. If readers of *Bildhaan* have cassettes with any of Hassan Sheikh Muumin plays (except *Shabeelnaagood*), please e-mail Maryan at [milgo@sprint.ca](mailto:milgo@sprint.ca) or Lidwien at [Lkapteijns@wellesley.edu](mailto:Lkapteijns@wellesley.edu).

10. *Nabsi* is an old Cushitic concept, often translated as “avenging fate.” The underlying idea is that if you wrong someone, especially someone in a socially weaker position, it will come back to haunt you and you may become a victim of a similar injustice yourself. This is believed to be particularly true when a man rejects a woman’s love.

11. *Way sidii gool irmaanooy/dhashii kala go'doomeen/ Amase goodir buureed/ gantaali ay ku taal baan/ Xalay gelindhexaadkii/anoo gaydhamayoo/ hadba gebi ka dhacayaan/gar waliba ku seegee/ [Refrain] Adaa garan waxay gube/ garwaaqso waad igu geftaa// Nin geel badan lahaayoo/ guluf kala carraabay/gallad wixii uu haystiiyo/ gadhoodkii uu dhamayey/ gegi madhan ka joogoo/ dhallaan gaajo haysiiyo/ nirgihii ku gooheen/ ganuunsaday sidisii/ [Refrain] //Gurigii aan aloosniyo /rugtaan kuu goglaayey/ gartaan gebagebayniyo/ guddoonka iyo dhaartii /haddii aad ka gudubtood /cidla igaga guurtay/ garaad-xumoiI qaaddoo/ nabsiguna kuma gefayee/ [Refrain].*

12. This is a reference to the legacy of colonial rule.

13. *Hibo: Carro-edeg markii/ la cadaadin jiray/ cudurradii ka hadhay/ inanyohow cuskaday/ Ciiddan Afrikaadiyo/ cosobkan dihin/ cadrad gibilmadow nin helaa cawo lahee/ [Her refrain] Waa calaf, waa calaf/ iyo la ma filaan cudur/ Cunoow cay/ ciil ma koroow, koroow/ Waa cidhibla'aan// Mooge: Culuseey haddaanad/ I cadaadinayn/ ciiro iyo qiiq/ runta caad ku qarin/ caaddada hablaha/ carro-edeg ku nool/ cadho iyo qabbay ragga/ ku caddibaan/Camalsan, camalsan/ iyo quruxba waa ka caydh/ [His refrain] Cakuyeey/ caku naag madow, madow/ cidlaa ka roon// Hibo: Caddaaniyo madow/ qofba caynu yahay/ cidba midabka uu/ Caadil u gartaa/ cajabshee/ haddaad taadii ka cabanaysoo/ la colloow miyaanay/ ceeb kugu ahayn/ [Her refrain . . . ]// Mooge: Cad xalaal ahoo/ caydhiina haddaad/ cun tidhaa cunahaa/ dib u soo ceshee/ Biyo ceel nin helay/ badda kama cabbee/ Anna kama cabsado/ taladaan cuskadee/ camalsan, camalsan/ iyo quruxba waa ka caydh/ [His refrain...].*

14. Compare Hassan Sheikh Muumin, *Shabeelnaagood*, pp. 62–65.

15. Literally: “to be thankful or regretful.” *Geed madi ah yoo/ ubaxiiyoo mankiisiyoo /maalkiisa loo bogo/ oo midhaha saarani /dunida uu muggeed yahay/ Ardigu magoolay/ Maangaab hadduu jaro/ miisaanka saaroo/ Yaa garan magtiisa?// Magacaanay biri goyn/ biyana aanay maydheen/ maydhaamin kii yidhii/ inuu mahadin dooniyo/ inuu hadimo magansado/ labadaa midkooduu/ kala miiran doonaa/ Ha moogaanin taariikhdu/ Waa laga maarmaan// Dhallinyara maantee/ muudsaday dhunkaashee/ dacartu u macaantahay/ dhallinyarada maantee/ malabku u qadhaadh yahay/ murtidii afkeenniyo/ dhaqankay malmalayaan/ maatada kacaysaay/ Mahdigii ha moodina.*

*Mahdi* is an Islamic concept that refers to a “Rightly Guided Leader,” emerging to usher in the End of Time. This period will also witness the return of *’Isa* (Jesus) and the coming of *al-Dajjal* (often translated as the anti-Christ). Implied here is that the young people will come to realize the relevance of the old values and traditional culture.