

# Sheikh Ali Hussein

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East Africa: In 1966, the U.S. Agency for International Development built a residential school for the training of teachers in Somalia near the city of Afgoi on the Shabelle River, a dozen miles inland from the capital city, Mogadishu. The construction contract was given to a company in Nairobi, Kenya. There were no construction companies in Somalia or paved roads between Kenya and neighboring Somalia. Besides, anything of value would have already been stolen at gunpoint by bandits (*shifita*) so the necessary equipment—trucks, a bulldozer, a pavement roller, transmission wires, concrete poles, generators, stationary diesel engines, asphalt, toilets, plumbing, and so on—were sent by sea from Mombasa. There were no stores in Somalia: no grocery, no hardware, no McDonald's.

There in the bush, the Americans had Kenyans build single-story dormitories, residences, and classrooms for two hundred students and their teachers. The mosque and minaret stood higher than the bush and the campus buildings, as high as the water tower, but nothing could be seen at a distance because of the acacia trees and desert scrub that grow everywhere on the savannah plain.

In the center of the complex, the first mosque and minaret ever built by the United States government loomed over the dining hall and kitchen. The students' stone dormitory and their classrooms stood alongside the dining hall. At one edge of the campus, in the bush, stood the water tower and the electricity generator with its putt-putt diesel engines in the powerhouse, as well as the "houses," stone huts with tin roofs where the native staff and teachers lived. Segregated on the other side of the sandy campus were the houses of the Ameri-

can staff and the Egyptian sheikh, Ali Hussein. Built for the tropical desert, the houses were of stone and concrete. The sleeping rooms and bathrooms were separated from the living rooms and kitchens by walled gardens and perforated breezeway walls. Outdoor refrigerators burned kerosene. The water coming from a well a hundred meters deep, nearly saturated with Epsom salts, was good only for washing. Drinking water came from the refrigerator pans and from dehumidifiers after it had passed through filters in a huge ceramic pot and had been boiled.

When Pepsi-Cola opened a bottling plant, they found that many Somalis did not know how to drink from a soda bottle. There was no municipal water or sewage system in Mogadishu. Water had to be collected as rain in cisterns or trucked to the city from wells. The smell everywhere was of wood ashes, feces, urine, frankincense, myrrh, and decaying vegetation and flesh (just like my experience in India).

We had electrical power twice a day, dangerous 220-volt Alternating Current, from six o'clock to twelve o'clock, when there was enough diesel fuel and the generators were not being repaired.

Fresh chickens and eggs could be had from the egg-lady, who woke us at dawn calling "*Okoon*" toward the bedroom windows. Bottled milk tasting of the burnt-grass baskets in which it had been transported to the Russian creamery, along with smoke-flavored ice cream, was kept at the Italian shop in Mogadishu. There was also canning-quality fresh beef, sheep, and goat from the skinny animals that had been driven to market along the one road. Beef and veal cuts were pounded to tenderize them, or boiled, or baked for a long time, as were the roasts of camel from the butcher stall in Afgoi. Essentials of the American kitchen and canned goods could be obtained from the Wives' Club, which imported a box of goodies by sea freight twice a year. Fresh vegetables were seasonally available from the farmers on the river; that is, rarely. Every household kept a houseboy, an adult Somali man who cleaned and cooked.

The bush was all around us at the school. Ten- to twenty-foot-high thorn trees, nearly impenetrable brush, snakes, scorpions, wild dogs, leopards, and baboons were there to harm anyone who trespassed. When such dangerous animals were seen on the campus, a general alarm was shouted person to person, which was usually enough to frighten the animals away. Men and boys carried long, strong sticks for herding their domestic animals and for protection against "varmints." You learn to shake the scorpions out of your shoes.

Clearing land with the bulldozer, a workman disturbed a pair of black mambas, vicious snakes, killing one. When the principal, Victor Cocco (from Detroit), went to see the dead snake, its mate rushed to attack him. He killed it with a hoe, hacking it crudely to death and thus earning a lot of respect from the students. Nancy Hussey, a mother and housewife from Appleton, Wisconsin, once looked up from a sink of dishes to find a small cobra inside the kitchen windowsill. She grabbed a can of Raid™ and sprayed it as it struck the can, killing the snake. When Nancy put her baby outside in a playpen, a pregnant wild dog started lurking around. Nancy asked me to shoot it. Leopards are also known to enter through windows and carry babies away.

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At the time, the Russians were supplying and training the Somali Army, the Chinese were constructing roads and public buildings (such as the National Theatre), and the Americans were training and supplying the Somali State Police.

The contract to provide teachers for the National Teacher Education Center in Somalia was awarded to Eastern Michigan Teachers College, in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Dean of International Education, R. Stanley Gex, a teacher of teachers, hired my team on contract to serve as model teachers for two years at the school in Somalia.

It evidently seemed reasonable to planners in the U.S. State Department that the school would succeed in its mission of preparing school teachers, despite such dire conditions and a student body consisting of tall, graceful, handsome, angry young men of Hamitic ancestry, who were given to quarreling over every real and imagined personal slight.

When David Hussey, the physical education teacher at our little American college, tried to organize team sports among the Somali students, he was astonished to find that play always consisted of one-on-one, with one member of a clan against another member of the same tribe or clan. Preference must be given to one's betters related through their fathers. They could only pass the ball to someone with equal or higher status. Status had been won over centuries of warfare among the tribes, the clans being large families of remote cousins counting back several generations. Every Somali can enumerate his male ancestors and relatives, naming them and describing their relationship. When these relationships are too remote to be remembered, a fellow clansman is simply considered a distant cousin. Geneticists have pos-

ited that the original human stock that populated the globe consisted of a subset of this northeastern African population, the Somalis.<sup>1</sup>

Even in tennis, the matches were always within clans, among relatives. There was no football (that is, no soccer). Almost everyone was higher, better, and more deserving—or lower, worse, and less deserving—than someone else. American football, with its teamwork, was unthinkable. During the second year of operation, we planted cashew trees on the football field so that the cleared land might be of some use. They died, along with our work. The sandy regosol of the Somali plain absorbs much human organizing effort.

We provided an American model of cooperation and efficiency, but we could not make the Somali students behave according to Western rules of individual responsibility and democratic ideals. The nearest approximation of our civility and decorum came from the spiritual advisor to the community, Sheikh Ali Hussein, of Ain Shams University, Cairo, who was seconded to the college by the Mufti of Mogadishu. It was Sheikh Ali who preached a sermon everyday to every one of the Somali students and staff members who attended prayers in the mosque. It was he who kept the school on course, reinforcing the Islamic ethics each student had learned from their teachers at the *duksi*, the improvised classes taught by elder sheiks in every tribe. Indeed, the Somali sense of right and wrong, good and bad, is overpowering of the individual. It is delicate and not given to compromise. Sheikh Ali Hussein taught accommodation, give-and-take, and charity. It was he who changed the questions to fit the answers at hand. Unlike Sheikh Ali, not even one American staff member could speak Somali, and in those days, Somali was not yet a written language.

The one paved road in the country ran from Mogadishu, on the coast, to Afgoi, inland on the river, so that water from the river could be trucked daily to roof tanks in Mogadishu, and bananas grown in the river valley by Italian farmers could be sent to Italy. The farmers generously always made sure a stalk of ripe bananas hung in each house at the school. Italians had paved the road and built a pillbox for a machine gun to discourage the British from attacking from that direction during WWII. Somalis drove their animals to market in Mogadishu on the road, which was often populated with women carrying huge piles of hay and grass, with their camels, cows, steers, goats, fat-tailed sheep, and donkeys. Giant, scavenging Marabout storks stood near the road waiting for something to die. Vultures lurked in flocks beside the road. Speeding stake trucks and pickups loaded with people were a menace.

A colleague driving to Mogadishu accidentally struck a camel, breaking its leg. The enraged locals chased him all the way to the Marine guard at the American Embassy. American embassies keep Marine guards on duty at the front gates against such trouble. (A tragic event was when a young American wife from Grand Rapids, Michigan, taking two American children home one night, collided with a truck without lights parked on the pavement near a coffeehouse, killing them all.)

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One day while I was correcting English papers at home in our compound, one of the wives of Sheikh Ali, our neighbor across the road, started screaming from the harem, "*Hay-ya, hay-ya!*" Snake, snake!

I had never been invited to the Sheikh's home. Indeed, he had never spoken to me even though we lived nearly side-by-side, as if in a vacuum. Yet a woman in distress is a universal plight not to be ignored. I ran to the compound as a second and third woman joined in the screaming from inside the main building, "*Hay-yaaa, haay-yaaa!*"

I halted at the gate of the courtyard, realizing that I might be breaking several taboos by entering the house uninvited. When an Arab invites you to his home, he treats you like a king, but what if you intrude? I wasn't exactly being invited by screams of "Snake, snake!"

Then I saw it, the large black cobra coiled in a corner of the courtyard. It looked menacing and as frightened as the women, its head bobbing around, its tongue flicking, listening. The women had put on their black street clothes. They waved at me through the screened door to the living quarters, and they shouted, "*Yallah! Hay-ya!*"

Abdi, their black servant, was at the mosque with his master, Sheikh Ali. Abdi invariably held the Sheikh's big black parasol against the sun and carried his books for him as he walked to and from his duties at the mosque. Abdi would have killed the snake, I think, or he might have chased it over the road to my house. Abdi was never allowed to go outside to play with my children, even though they asked him to come out. He was usually at the mosque with Sheikh Ali while my children attended the International School in Mogadishu.

I thought about fetching my pistol, a Beretta 9mm, or my shotgun to use on the cobra. I carried the pistol in the glove box of my Volkswagen Beetle against unforeseen circumstances, but I knew to avoid firearms unless necessary. Fortunately, I never had occasion to use the pistol.<sup>2</sup>

There are varieties of cobra, one sort of which will spit into your eyes, blinding you. I hesitated again to try to kill the cobra. I recalled our neighbor, Nur, who lived in a grass hut, an *aqal*, with his wives and children in the bush near the main road. Nur came to our house daily for water, leading his camel. Gaf, the water bearer, had five-gallon tins hanging from his back. In exchange for water, Nur raked the sand around the house and tended the few flowers he planted there. One day while he was working, a cobra spat in his eyes. He ran screaming to my wife Jane, who took Nur to a neighbor, a nurse who washed out his eyes with the anti-venom she kept in the refrigerator for emergencies. The treatment was successful, but for weeks Nur wore a white bandage around his head to show he had been injured. Many Somalis believe that a clean white bandage cures maladies, and so bandages are worn long after a wound heals or a headache stops. A bandage shows pride that evil has been overcome.

The school had a resident "doctor," a male nurse trained in first aid whose job consisted of dispensing aspirin and bandages and escorting seriously ill students to the General Hospital down the road in the city. The Italian government had provided the hospital to Somalia, supplied with the necessary medical equipment and supplies. It opened with fanfare, but during the first night all the sheets, towels, and pillows disappeared. The patients' families camped out on the exterior walkways, building cooking fires on the concrete and tile floors, where they slept waiting for loved ones.

I hesitated to go into the courtyard of the Sheikh's house. "*Rujumu!*," one of the women inside the house shouted at me in Swahili. "Stone it."

A good idea, I thought.

"*Ittbach al-hayya!*" Kill the snake, *Cawar*. (The students called me *Cawar*, "One-eye," that is, Louche, sounding like the word "hour." The letter C in written Somali stands for the glottal stop, the first sound in *uh-huh*.)

The courtyards had walls of stone eight-feet high, perforated so that the constant warm breeze could flow through the buildings. I found a concrete block in a pile of trash and carried it up the wall to the top of the inside corner where the cobra was coiled below. Without stereoscopic vision, I dropped the heavy block right on the cobra, squashing it. It writhed in agony, and I looked at the house where the women had fled, expecting thanks or praise. Nothing. Not a sound. The women had retreated from the doorway.

I never heard a word of thanks from Sheikh Ali, or from anyone. How peculiar, I thought. I deserved at least the ululation of the sort I always got when I drove through the villages and fields along the river. Ululation is anonymous praise, and it is not done solo. All the women join in. Ululation always preceded and followed me there, telling everyone that the hero was coming. Everyone remembered the old rogue hippopotamus I once killed near Afgoi as a public service, by request, to stop him from chasing the women from their work in the fields and doing their laundry in the river. Hippos are territorial and a menace in tropical Africa. I once saw the dead body of a farmer trampled by a hippo into the mud of the field he was watering.

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Everyone felt thirsty much of the time in many parts of Somalia, and so it is not hard to imagine how thirsty an elephant gets there. One night a practical joker put a bushel of elephant turds on the tennis courts. I knew it was exactly a bushel of turds and I knew where to find elephants digging holes for water in the bottom of the river during the dry season. Like hippos, African elephants are not friendly; in fact, they are dangerous. The Somalis avoid them with panic. The turds on the tennis courts caused general excitement and a lot of speculation about where they came from and where the elephants that had left them had gone, and so on. We then had conversations in English about elephants. That is called the "Direct Method" of language teaching, the only method that works.

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As noted before, the Egyptian sheikh, Ali Hussein, was the spiritual leader of the school. Every morning, after no doubt blessing and saying goodbye to his wives, and/or mother, and/or sisters, and dressed in a long gray robe and white turban, the bearded sheikh walked in a stately manner to his office beside the mosque, accompanied by his little boy servant Abdi.

As Imam of the mosque, Sheikh Ali delivered a sermon daily to all the students after one of the five prayer sessions. Muslims are commanded to perform ritual prayer, *salah*, five times a day. It is a practice they surely borrowed from the Syrian Christian communities, the *Suriani*, because Islam grew in large part from Christianity. Muslims

and Christians still often worship together there. The Somali are Sunni Muslims and many of them are Sufi mystics and dervishes. *Sharia*, religious law, is not separate from daily life for them.

Sheikh Ali Hussein was not a friend. I never exchanged one personal word with him. A person to whom we seemed invisible, he appeared to hold us in contempt of a sort I had never before known. It was as if we Americans were tolerated as long as we brought the modern world—electricity and guns—to the edge of the world, but we were not a part of a life to share, which was inseparable from Islam.

One Sabbath we went away on a hunt. The Friday hunt was our way of seeing the country, learning about the people, and filling the larder (the kerosene-powered refrigerators). We went hunting regularly on the Sabbath to take a gazelle or two in order to provide fresh clean meat for the families and the unmarried teachers and their servants. There are twenty-eight sorts of gazelle living on the East African plain, all of them said to be delicious. They live for the most part in herds, following the rains to find grass.

As often as not, Ali Omar, a counterpart teacher at the school, went with us on our hunts. A short, broad-shouldered “Mohican” scout, with a rather pretty face and a direct, unblinking, kind gaze, Ali Omar could speak (in addition to Somali) English, Italian, Arabic, the Bantu languages of the river valleys, Swahili, and Chimini, the Farsi language of the coast. I never heard him speaking Galla, another Cushitic language like Somali, or Amharic, the language of the rulers of Ethiopia, but I would not have been astonished.

We hunted with great pleasure. It was a relief to load up a Land Rover and Jeep with food and ice-boxes and houseboys, and to pick up our guide and tracker Sidu, who knew, or pretended to know, the whereabouts of game and how to go into a region in order to see what was there. Sidu was a professional hunter who lived in a small village on the Shabelle River just ten miles from the school. His people were riverine Bantus, settled farmers who were looked down upon with scorn by the Somalis. The Bantu lived near their fields in clay-and-wattle huts in squalor, poverty, and disease. They were also gracious, affectionate people. They always jumped up and down when they saw us, and then they offered us tea that we always refused. We gave them cigarettes and candy.

On that hunt we came to a village and stopped to rest. A young man told us that one of the children had been attacked and killed by a troop of baboons raiding a garden. Little boys guarded the truck gar-



dens around the villages. They perched in tree houses and rang alarms when marauding animals approached by pulling strings attached to rattling tin cans.

Baboons live in marauding groups called troops. There is always a scout who makes sure the way is clear. He climbs a tree and directs the movement of the troop. Twenty to forty large dog-like beasts reduce a truck garden to waste in a few minutes. They are rightly feared.

The young man asked us to kill any baboon that we saw while hunting. Leaving the village, we saw a number of baboons crossing the unpaved track in front of us. We stopped and watched. I got out of the jeep with my shotgun, an Ithaca Deerslayer (a 12-gauge pump gun with rifle sights that could shoot a .69 calibre slug with some accuracy). Twelve baboons furtively crossed the track. Then a big old male, twice as big as the others, stepped out and looked up and down the track. He sat on his haunches and looked at us. I laid the shotgun on the open door of the Jeep, and I sighted above his head, and fired. The slug caught him right in the chest.

I paced it off: one hundred and forty-six long paces.

Two of my sons cut off his head and later buried it in our garden so that after the maggots had done their work, the boys could have the teeth.

That safari was otherwise uneventful. We decided against taking warthog, the wild pig that burrows in the ground. The hind legs and tenderloins are edible when braised long enough, but our houseboy servant Dahir was offended when we ate pork. Three large guinea fowl were all we had taken. It is hard to get close enough to guineas to shoot them. They live in flocks like turkeys. You must sneak up on them and then charge into their midst, firing away at the scattering birds. Looking for a downed guinea fowl in the bush, I once came upon a leopard watching a herd of sheep in the valley below. I froze in fright. He did not like my smell and he walked away. I ran the other way!

On our way back to the school we talked about the lack of meat at the college. The principal had cancelled a contract with a butcher who had been sending spoiled and inferior meat for the kitchen. Four large cooks, black men, prepared three meals a day for two hundred students. The meals were simple: bananas, bread, boiled meat, milk, tea, oranges, and rice or pasta sometimes. The students always tore open the bread, Italian panini, and scooped out the soft interior and threw it on the floor (in the heat of baking the weevils always fled to the interior of each small loaf), for the Somalis have an aversion to eating

insects. When Karen Blixen's Kikuyu workers were roasting and eating locusts, she asked her Somali foreman, Farah, if he would like some. He replied, "Madam, I eat not such small birds."

The students had had no meat for four days, and the idea arose that we should take back a gazelle in the interest of common sense and nutrition. So we made a detour to the river where we could always find waterbuck, dumpy large animals with long curved horns, the size of a small horse. We drove a few minutes, found a herd, got out of the Jeeps, shot a big male, dressed it out, quartered it, wrapping the meat in cheesecloth, and then drove back to the college. We gave it to the cooks, who with great enthusiasm boiled water in iron pots suspended with block and tackle over charcoal fires, chopped up the beast and fixed supper.

After prayers in the mosque, the students formed a line as usual, waiting to get their grub. They were dressed in soiled shirts and sarongs or black trousers, barefoot, hoping that there would be something better to eat. When the serving cooks told them that there was meat and broth, they cheered "Al-Hammdullilah!" Praise God!

That was a fast-moving chow line. Soon slurping and chewing were the only sounds. The students' concentration on the ingestion of protein was suddenly interrupted.

I don't speak Somali, but I can understand it, usually.

The sheikh in all his dignity stood at the door, his hand raised in admonition. He said that this was the flesh of an animal killed by infidels; that it was a mortal sin to eat this flesh and that no true Muslim would subject his physical frame to the spiritual contamination of such a sin.

Bowls dropped to the tables. It was as if the host had announced that they had been eating the flesh of a dog. Stunned silence.

The smell of that spicy broth filled the refectory. Hunger in the middle of its appeasement is less easily satisfied than before the satisfaction is begun.

Then suddenly Ali Omar hiked up his sarong, his face glowing with pleasure, climbed up on a table and spoke eloquently. He said that he was there when the animal was shot, that he had approached it while it was still alive, that he had pointed its head toward Mecca and slit its throat as he prayed. Therefore it was "*Hallah*," ritually proper to eat.

That was a lie.

As Sheikh Ali retreated, glowering at us, the students ate with renewed gusto, except for a few who had learned never to disobey authority.

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Ali Omar always spoke of the “foot-markers” (footprints) in the sand. How that brilliant man had learned his English was always a question to me. “But, *Cawar*, I just talk to the English. It’s simple,” he said. He went to the United States on a scholarship to take a teaching degree. He never returned to Somalia.

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At the celebratory dinner when we graduated our first class, the man who had been the first prime minister of Somalia, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, spoke in gratitude for our contribution to Somali life. He had recently been elected President of Somalia by the National Assembly. Sharmarke was willing to accept the status quo, the artificial boundaries of Somalia imposed by the United Nations, for the greater good. That is, he knew that modernity requires change, and the new borders with Ethiopia and Kenya implied a new identity for Greater Somalia.

At the dinner, introductions were made and short speeches given after an *al fresco* meal of *michoui*, roasted mutton, in the courtyard served on individual plates at tables set in the Western style with brand new plates, cups, and saucers from China, right out of the box with the paper labels still glued on them.

The students had applauded as the principal introduced each member of the staff at the head table. They gave me a standing ovation when, as I was introduced, Sheikh Ali Hussein stood up and, turning towards me, placed his right hand over his heart and bowed to me, to my embarrassment and delight. Then President Sharmarke proclaimed me a sheikh of the Darood clan, his own extended family, an honor not unnoticed by my colleagues and further cheered by the students.

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The following year was one of desperation because the autumn rains did not come. While accompanying relief supplies up-country on October 15, 1969, President Sharmarke was assassinated. The killer,

Abdilkadir Abdi Mohamed, a policeman of a rival clan and one of Sharmarke's bodyguards, was quickly executed by the police. The Somali's prayers do not include the Paternoster.

A week later the army and the police took over the capital city, dissolved Parliament, and arrested the members of the government. They changed the country's name to the Somali Democratic Republic.

The following summer, the United States and West Germany cut off their aid to Somalia, giving as cause the fact that ships flying the Somali flag had been seen trading with Hanoi during the Vietnam War. It was against U.S. law to give aid to any country that allowed its ships to deal with Cuba or Vietnam. The Somalis did not have a navy, not one ship, not even a pirate ship of the sort that later preyed on vessels off the Somali coast, although through the Agency for International Development, we Americans had built a fish-packing plant and provided several deep-sea fishing boats and maritime training and equipment to the Somalis in the same small ports where pirates lurk today.

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## Notes

1. L. Quintana-Murci, O. Semino, H. J. Bandelt, G. Passarino, K. McElreavey, and A. S. Santachiara-Benerecetti, "Genetic Evidence of an Early Exit of Homo Sapiens Sapiens from Africa through Eastern Africa," *Nature Genetics* 23 (1999): 437-441.
2. After a year of living at the school, we were urged to move to a rented villa in Mogadishu, where we had guards on the gate of the walled compound around the clock, 24/7. Nonetheless, the German consul, a neighbor, killed an intruder in his bedroom with a Walther PPK pistol.