

## EDITOR'S NOTE

There was a time when the Somali people had, among others, certain collective endowments: (a) notwithstanding a somewhat primal curse of environmental and material brittleness, they exuded a hardy sense of self-reliance and a strong faith in a better future; (b) a highly tolerant and flexible brand of Islamic practices that co-existed with older Somali/African ways of life and welcomed the diversity of world cultures; (c) a historical civic perspective with virtuous democratic aspirations and institutional design — a point, despite their substantial difference in theoretical and intellectual groundings, both I. M. Lewis' *A Pastoral Democracy*, published more than sixty-five years ago, and Abdi Ismail Samatar's 2016 volume, *Africa's First Democrats*, had agreeably underscored; (d) an enviable level of what the Renaissance Italians called *dignita* and a healthy degree of generosity recognized by other Africans and the larger world; and (e) a thriving cultural creativity that was manifested through exquisite poetry, drama, dance, music, song, and relatively unbogoted religious attitude and practice.

From the vantage point of the present, however, Somalis are a fallen people, acting in a ruined context. Almost all of the above listed virtues have been gravely eroded, if not vanishing in front of our eyes. What little that survives is, to put it bluntly, vandalized or covered with thick darkness and dross, in a milieu ruled by the chaos of appetites. Consequently, it is obvious now, at least to most keen observers, that a revival, if not resurrection, is essential if Somalis have any chance of becoming *social* again to recoup their self-worth among the world's peoples. To begin this urgent and monumental assignment requires shared acts of truth seeking, careful listening, studying successful societies, and rigorous and civilized discussions of daunting topics. To accomplish that, it becomes imperative to relearn a mixture of *reasoning intelligence*, *discriminating judgment*, and *mutual sympathy* — keys to the reactivation of citizenship and what Ibn Khaldoun famously called the spirit of "*Asabiyah*."

I propose that the time is now to begin an exploration of the concepts of *development* and *culture* that could advance the consequent pursuit of reawakening. In this context, I would like to acknowledge a person whose outstanding and continuing contributions are the antithesis of this age of dissolution and pervasive heedlessness. I refer to the eminent Bashir Sheikh Omer Goth. At least four of his attributes stand out in any crowd of Somalis: 1) he is a magnificent poet whose work

touches, as instantiated by the long and allegorical poem *Baabulow Libaax* in this volume, many aspects of Somali and human life; 2) he is a fluent writer in a number of languages, including Somali, English, and Arabic; 3) he is a paragon of the cosmopolitan public intellectual with considerable courage and heft; and 4) the call of learning is an essential part of his constitution. His superb biographical essay on the entrancing and peerless *fanaanad*, the late Halimo Khalif "Magool," published in the pages of *Bildhaan* in 2014, attests to his exceptional literary sensibilities to keep Somali poetic culture alive in these otherwise lean times.

## I. Definitions

### A. Development

I construe development, simultaneously communal and personal, as a Herculean and perpetual effort applied by human beings to transform their respective communities and society. In other words, it is an aggregate of human action existing in time, not eternity, and thus always impermanent. This relentless attempt must be applied in equal measure to the four paramount and highly interconnected dimensions of human existence: *environment, economy, politics, and culture*. For the purpose of these brief notes, I will focus on culture.

### B. Culture

Equivalent to what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein calls "form of life" — that is, sedimented habits and time-hallowed practices — this is the source of "tacit Knowledge" and therefore a store of insight and wisdom. At the core of culture is the formation of ideas or "habits of excellence," in the idiom of Ibn Khaldoun, and symbols that make possible the virtues of self-command, independent thinking, and robust inter-subjectivity. This is very distinct from enslavement to stagnant superstitions and prejudice that undergirds the mutilating grip of ignorance. Culture is also the realm of the aesthetic where artistic performance or virtuosity is supreme. An encounter with such displays of perfection has a number of somewhat contradictory consequences: (a) it shocks, which is induced by coming face-to-face with the intimidation of pure excellence that makes us silent or speechless and feel comparatively insignificant; and (b) it awes, which results in a feeling of

reverence as well as an inspiration by teasing our passions. Moreover, cultural work thus presented equips us to enter into the experiences of others and makes it possible to cultivate and compare sensibilities and tastes that could, in turn, trigger solidarity across human experiences. The production of culture takes place in multiple platforms. I propose a few below.

## II. Some Cultural Platforms

### A. Intellectuals as Cultural Producers

Edward W. Said, in his fabulous 1996 essay, *The Limits of the Artistic Imagination and the Secular Intellectual*, identified six primary roles for intellectuals. These three stand out for me: archival, interpretive, and moralist. The first is a source of counter-information that defies, if not tells the lie about hegemonic consensus and thus “privileges human agency and responsible choice.” *Interpretive* and epistemological denotes command over specialized languages (jargon) tied to a particular evasive power formation, or “corporate guild,” and then translates it (or reformulates it) into an idiom closer to reasonableness and open to a wider universe. This includes a decoding of the context by articulating enduring issues of war and peace, justice, freedom, human rights, and genuine development. Finally, *moralist* expresses out of the way claims and contends for principle, “where the prevailing climate counsels expediency.” I will add to the above the work of synthesis or the exercise in imaginative alloying. In the same spirit, Immanuel Wallerstein proffers that an intellectual operates at three levels: 1) as an analyst in search of *truth*; 2) as a moral person in search of the *good/beautiful*; and 3) as a political person, seeking to unify the true with the good and the beautiful. Ideas and knowledge, then, make a type of potent power that not only explains the world but can also transform it.

Given the above, I assert that a quick survey of the past quarter of a century yields the scantest of harvest among Somali intellectuals and fails to bring together the *truth*, the *good*, and the *political*. More depressing, a republic of letters, no matter how tiny, known for its learning, civility and generosity and so indispensable in our beleaguered age, hardly exists at the present.

## B. Music

As a major element of artistic creativity, music underscores the dual role of art as at once a release of the human imagination and an aesthetic refinement. In addition, and perhaps at its best, virtuosity could also be a response to the pressures of the quotidian moment. "Music," declares the unforgettable Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, "is hewn from negation ... It is but very small security against the void of negation that surrounds." Akin to other forms of art, then, one might propose that music, among the oldest components of known cultures, makes an appearance in the contemporary epoch in at least four guises. First, it is a continuation of age-old aesthetic appeal and love of harmony that strokes private and personal discernment. Imagine for a moment the explosive sensation and a sweetening of life that accompanies Gould's own performances, as he exhibits his rhythmic incisiveness on the piano. Or, in the Somali case, behold such masters as Hussein Bajuni, Hodeide, Ahmed Naji, Jiim Sheikh Muumin, Omer Duleh, Bashir Hadi, or Daoud Ali Mushaf playing classic tunes such as "*Beerdilaacshe*," "*Raxaye*," "*Subcis*," "*Guux*," or "*Jawharad iyo Luul*" on the oud! Here the coordination or intimacy between the ear and the fingertips is breathtaking. Second, music production acts as an adhesive that binds a particular community through collective taste and emotions. Third, it can function as a mechanism to spread one tradition to another. A well-known example is the fusion of African beats into jazz and blues, and rock and roll. Fourth, music is a carrier of the law of value through commodification in a historical social system whose logic and its survival are propelled by constant expansion, concentration, and private accumulation.

Though the personal and the communal may not be bereft of materialist value, they nonetheless touch upon passions that stir up and then hold together intense individual and collective sensations. In a moment of originality that privileges the exceptional power of music, Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes:

One of the great advantages the musician enjoys is that she/he can paint things that cannot be heard, whereas the painter cannot represent things that cannot be seen ... The musician's art consists in substituting for the imperceptible image of the object, that of the emotions which that object's presence excites in the beholder's heart. It will not only churn up the sea, fan the flames of conflagration ... but it will also depict the

desolation of dreadful deserts, dusk the walls of subterranean dungeon, appease the storm, clear and still the air and, from the orchestra, spread renewed freshness through the woodlands. It will excite the soul the very same sentiments which one experiences upon seeing them.<sup>1</sup>

Again, among the Somalis, the meager achievements of the past two-and-a-half decades are disheartening. The old virtuosos, defined as masters of supreme craftsmanship, or what Richard Sennett calls “skill developed to a high degree,” of the oud, the drums, and the flute are speedily disappearing. On the other hand, what there is of an attempt to make music in the present is dominated by pirated and chintzy imitations of past giants and accompanied by unsophisticated mechanical improvisations.

### C. Poetry

At its most supreme, poetry deals with the universal and even the saintly. In this sense, it is akin to divination or second sight. The epic and early 18th-century English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his *A Defence of Poetry*, tells us:

Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty that is the organ of moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, poetry can make us aware of the challenges of creating a community of values that compels involvement in the struggles for civic politics. This is what the late Abdillahi Suldaan “Timacade,” the supreme Somali poet of freedom and decolonization, and their acutely precarious nature, composed nearly six decades ago:

*Afrikadan is-wada daafacdee, dababka noolaysay,  
Dib baa looga joogsaday markay, debinta ruugeene,  
Laga durug dorraad galab kuwuu, dacasku saarnaaye,  
Dirqi bay xornimadaw heshaye, laguma diiqayne,  
Niikii aan u doog-dhaban biyaha, looma soo dar e',  
Daayeerna laas waa qota, doox hadduu tago e',  
Dudduntaan halkii lagu ogaa, doorsan weligeede,*

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*Daa'imo carruureena ways, daba gurguurtaane,  
Dadkan wada dallacay, dawladahan, dahabka shiilaaya,  
Da'deenmay ahaayeen kurwaa, loo dabbaal degaye,  
Doqonniimo Soomali waa loogu daw-galaye,  
Haddun bay u dooyaysan tahay, sheeyadi dilaye,  
Immikaa la doondoonyaa, Dir iyo Daaroodo,  
Dan Soomaaliyeed lama hayee, waa dabbaal kale e,  
Shacbigii dagaalka ugalaa, daadsan suuqyada e',  
Distoor iyo qawaaniin ayaan, cidiba doondooin e',  
Ninnaan dawlad baa Xamar fadhida, haw dabbal-degine,  
Iga daaya gabaygayu waa, iiga darayaaye.<sup>3</sup>*

Secondly, poetry can activate our place in the physical world and among other creatures. In other words, the language of poetry is often inspired by the presence of nature and other living creatures, such as mountains, rivers, lakes, flowers, trees, or a horse, lion, camel, elephant, bird, or gazelle. One can recall, from about forty-five years ago, the famous song, “*Indha deero lay*,” which captured the romantic spirit of a whole generation of Somalis. Equally captivating is this durable composition from the same era:

*Geelaa marku dararanyahay laba nin duugtaa.....*

*Dunindoo a jiilaal, marka ay dameeruhu ilmahooga diidaan,  
Isgaa wax daaqaba ugu nolol dambeeyee,  
Diihaalka gaajada isaaga u dulqaatoo, amar kaama diidee.  
Geelaa markuu dararanyahay laba nin dugtaa....*

Or this:

*Sidii ciir ku hooray meel cusob loo,*

*Cadaado u so baxdad tahay.*

Undoubtedly, poetic compositions turned into songs of this type sharpen our appreciation for the beauty and abundance of the physical world or sensitize us to the struggle against environmental pressures. All of the above call us back to nature.

Third, poetry propels us to free our imagination and it enriches our modes of expression; that is, the creation of new vocabulary through metaphor, the paramount tool in the craft. Metaphor, as a figure of speech, presents an opportunity to see one thing in terms of another. It is the capability to pick up semblances and differences. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of contrasts highlights the best of each. As an Arab classical poet points out:

فَالْوَجْهُ مِثْلُ الصُّبْحِ مُنْبَلِجٌ -- وَالشَّعْرُ مِثْلُ اللَّيْلِ مُسْوَدٌ  
ضِدَانٍ لَمَّا اسْتَجَمَعَا حَسَنًا -- وَالضِّدُّ يُظْهِرُ حُسْنَ الضِّدِّ

Fourth, poetry can replenish our spirituality by instructing us to talk about our lives; inspire us in how to conduct our times; make us conscious of possibilities; "...teach," as Giambattista Vico asserts, "the vulgar to act virtuously, as poets have taught themselves;" and help us come to terms with the ultimate, the diminution of time and the onset of death, as well as motivate us to think about our bequest to the future.

Despite the historical distinction of Somalis as a "nation of bards," very few acclaimed poems have appeared since the collapse of civic life. Sadly, Somalis have failed to retrieve their major sources of supreme imagination and have not unlocked the severely immobilizing contradictions of the present epoch nor have they produced a galvanizing *prefigurative mood* for a different future.

#### D. Religion

According to Emile Durkheim, religion is the organized effort to close the abyss between what we know or could decipher and the mysterious or the unknown. The first is identified as the profane universe of ordinary experience; the latter underscores the sacred, exceptional beyond human worldliness. Scientists such as Werner Heisenberg, in his *Physics and Philosophy*, have submitted that scientific work is the same attempt to connect the known with the infinite. Religion, then, links human beings to external power. It situates our engagement with the world and ultimately offers an anchor within the capriciousness of daily existence and collective endeavors. It might, in its ecstatic moments, even assuage some of the pain and humiliation of political

squalor and absence of development. This stabilization is primarily realized through ritual (e.g., Ramadan) best demonstrated through the worship of God. In the end, however, in turbulent and bewildering times, religion has often remained powerful enough to precipitate movements with immense social energy. These could either ignite progressive thinking and action in a creative alliance with reason and free thought, and thus become life-transforming OR deepen dark times typified by self-serving ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and regressive politics that inflict upon the believers repressive and costly backwardness.

Here, too, as the cases of Al-Shabaab and other prevalent versions of vapid political Islam demonstrate, existential danger, harsh curtailments of individual human liberty (particularly for women), suppression of artistic creativity, and an eventual closing of the mind seem to have become paradigmatic.

### III. Final Remarks

I return to the two concepts. *Development*, it seems to me, is a perpetual human challenge, akin to the mythical Labour of Sisyphus. Unless it condemns itself forever to a condition of degenerative wretchedness and self-humiliation, no society can escape this eternal and steep assignment to improve collective well-being. In other words, there is no immunity against the logic of the civic version of the Second Law of Thermodynamics that pertains to the constant struggle with relentless entropy — that is, the dissipation of energy, loss of form, and the consequent onset of disorder and decay. A critical difference among societies in meeting this challenge lies in the level and intensity of shared civic consciousness inscribed in their history, practical and institutional readiness, and dedication.

*Culture*, the making of human sensibilities, is pivotal to the establishment of collective identity, mutual understanding, and robust associative belonging. But when a culture is either made into a calcified artifact, deprived of investment for renewal, or intentionally degraded if not destroyed, that society is likely to enter a zone of emptiness, aesthetic impoverishment, disgrace and, eventually, impotent despair. Such a condition turns society against itself and its future. Art (or *Funm*), in Terry Eagleton's summation, "is a critique of alienation, ... an exemplary realization of creative powers, ... the ideal reconciliation

of subject and object, universal and particular, freedom and necessity, theory and practice, individual and society.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, *Funn* at its most precious best is a source of memory, excellence, joy, energy, and renewal that breaks the ever-present gray and chill of monotony and predictable ordinariness.

One long overdue approach for Somalis of the present epoch is this: a collective summons to civic repentance. This starts with, in my opinion, combining freedom of creativity, discerning retrieval, and intelligent innovation.

Here, then, it might be possible to finally dominate what Nicolo Machiavelli, in his *Discourses*, called “*fortuna*” and, subsequently, conscientiously recharge the ascendancy of citizenship. In her seminal volume, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt, speaks to the generational obligation at hand. She writes:

If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men and women. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, these are grim and most absurd of times among Somalis, and the demands of the interregnum amidst old and new superstitions could not be more forbidding. Consequently, all the more reason why the long-delayed communal debate over what it will take to reclaim ontological freedom, commensurately austere hope, and cultural creativity ought to begin now. This is the prescient message in the following lines from Goth’s composition of 1983, titled, “*Nin Dab Qaaday Ma Daalo.*”

*Ha yeeshee dayx nuurkii yeeshee dayax nuurkii*

*Daruuraa ka dhex muuqdiyo*

*Dab baan sheed ka arkaa*

*Durbaan baa baxayoon*

*Dawankiisa maqlaa*

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## Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origins of Language," in *The First and Second Discourses Together with the Replies to Critics and Essay on the Origins of Language*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 272.
2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence Of Poetry*, ed. Mary Shelley (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1904), p. 34.
3. Boobe Yusuf Ducaale. *Diiwaanka Maansada TImacadde*. Addis Ababa: Flamingo Printing Press, 2006, p.177-178.
4. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 369.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 55.

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