

EDITOR'S NOTE

There are a variety of attributes that capture Somali culture, including a propensity towards divisively fissiparous tendencies. However, none seem so deep and durable as these two: millennial and constant hyper anxiety over scarce rainfall and subsequent shortage of fresh water and uncommon talent in poetic composition and artistic performance. The first underscores the ecological brittleness of the Sahel landscape; the latter points towards Somali aesthetic creativity. Historically known as a "nation of bards," iconic poets include 19th century individuals like Raage Ugaas, an erudite composer versed in local folklore, and 20th century renown figures such as Mohamed Abdille Hassan, Abdillahi Sultan "Timacade," and Abdullahi Maalin Ahmed "Dhoodaan." These stood as exemplars of bold nationalist perspectives, supremacy in vocabulary, and rich analogic thought and images. The gallery of towering dramatists and composers of first-class songs include Hussein Aw Farah, Ali Sugulleh, and Hassan Sheikh Mumin. Equally outstanding are some of the exceptional musical talents that have graced the Somali cultural landscape. Among the greatest of the latter cohort was the *Oud* (a string instrument common in the Middle East, North and East Africa, and at the heart of both classical and popular Somali music) maestro, Ahmed Ismail Hussein, "Hudeide", who died in London early 2020, after complications from COVID-19 – the killer virus ravaging all continents. He was 93 years old. I was fortunate to interview him in the summer of 2007, and immediately saw why Somalis everywhere found him enchanting: tall, a deep voice, a kind smile, careful movement, and a mixture of playfulness and seriousness of artistic purpose.¹

Early Life

Hudeide was the nickname associated with the port of Hodeida on the Red Sea coast of Yemen where he first arrived. After a very brief stay there, he moved to Aden, the bustling main port of the British colony of Yemen. This identity was given to him by other Somalis to distinguish him from his "local" age group. Hudeide was born in the port of Berbara on the British protectorate of Somaliland. In Aden, he started school. But soon, his musical predilections took over and he got attracted to the beat of the drum. This was partly triggered by watching and then following whenever a parade of colorful and

entertaining colonial soldiers, with their drums, was underway in the main streets of Aden. After a few years, a young Somali *Oud* player, Abdillahi Qarshe – the artistic pioneer and future godfather of patriotic songs – came into town. Hudeide was mesmerized by the skill and sound of this troubadour. At that moment, his interest became fixated on the instrument. Soon, he bought one and began to pick lessons here and there, followed, to the chagrin of his parents who were low-level workers in the British colonial administration, by his full absorption. In my interview with him in 2007, he told me that his parents died in relative old age still in great disapproval of his devotion to music.

Oud Virtuoso

By the late 1950s, Hudeide moved to Hargeisa, the cooler and small hamlet, which became the headquarters of what was Somaliland. Radio Hargeisa, the only existing station in the territory and established by the colonial authority, employed him. He became a member of the official band that was assigned to arrange musical scores for songs brought forth by distinguished composers and sung by elite singers such as Gududo, Farhiya, Bahsan, Mandeeq, Magool, Mohamed Suleiman Tubacc, Mohamed Ahmed, and Osman Mohamed. While he found himself in an archipelago of excellence, particularly among the senior ranks of the musicians, within a few years, he became most beloved of the players of the *Oud*. There were a number of unique dimensions to his profile that catapulted him to the forefront and kept him there for decades. Among those were: sheer dedication, a tight relation between his hands/fingers, the strings, his ears, and audacity for originality – all which combined to produce what became the Hudeide technique and brand of *Oud* playing. He inspired many generations and directly taught a few in the course of his long life.

Hudeide's other rare artistic gifts included the composition of ballads that immediately became household phenomena. His creative production had a wide band, which could range from the patriotic, such as the famous "*Haudo magaca*" – a moving nationalist composition urging Somalis of the Ogaaden region to exert themselves and join the new Somali Republic—civic criticism, love between brothers to peace on earth. In a poem, "*Uur Hooyo*" or "Mother's Womb," that famously expressed, in 1967, the natural love between male siblings, he says (translation by Professor Martin Orwin of the London School of Oriental and African Studies):

You, the abundant light
That my eyes graze on
Do not take me lightly
You who shared
My mother's womb

You born of my father's back
Who shared the breast
We weaned from the same
I shall never forget you

Two born of a father
Children who are brothers
Who, whatever occurs
Help and lend
Each other a hand

The soul is a pledge
At the time of my death
It's you who'll place me
In the grave, and your hand
Throw the final soil

My human inheritance
The one closest to me
The trials of the world
Have brought us apart

I cannot endure
Being on my own
I sway with melancholy
I am no better off
Than a lone son.

Diasporic End

In 1993, with the Somali Republic in the midst of horrendous civil war, Hudeide settled into the secure but melancholic condition of diasporic experience in London. Once in a while, he met with other noted artists in exile and living in different parts of the city. In addition to perform-

ing on special occasions and teaching a few keen students, he mostly kept to himself. In one of his last creative moments, he ruminated on what it meant to be a citizen of a new country (Britain) and the larger global society – a kind of a grounded cosmopolitan. Meditating on the ugliness of a world war, particularly a nuclear one, and its devastating consequences, the old *Oud* maestro turned himself into a warning poet. In *Dhulka* (Earth), he announced to the world (translation By Orwin):

The Earth, the earth, the earth, the earth
If the bombs explode
If they make of the earth
Pulverized stone
If trees become charcoal
If mountains glow
The spark, leaves and bark
Will no longer be seen
Nor any living creature

Male and female will not be spared
The one who asks
“Who did it?”
And the one who is asked
Will not be spared

Let us not be disinherited
Let us not all come to an end
Let us not die together

Don't make the trumpets sound
Don't bring the day of Judgment near.

Given the cruelty of isolation associated with COVID-19 virus, Hudeide died alone, and was buried in London. Despite the dreadful end, he left behind a reputation for the ages: durable and multifaceted talents, humane dispositions, civilized engagement with others, and universalist ethos. He was an artistic pioneer of lasting and distinctive gifts, and bottomless stamina. He gave us over 70 years of high-octane performances.

For a year of unusual global calamities, another unexpected and sorrowful tidings came from London — the death of Mohamed Bashe Hassan. Born in Eastern Somaliland around six decades ago, he was a man of multiple dimensions, including research and valuable writings (in Somali language) on myriad aspects of Somali culture and formidable forays in television journalism.

I first met Bashe in the summer of 2015 in the London studio of STAR TV. Though directly coming from his main daily work, and looked somewhat exhausted, Bashe's handshake was firm and his demeanor warm and welcoming. He was ready to conduct an hour-long interview with me. Before the cameras started rolling, he gave me a hint of the questions that he had prepared. I was immediately put on notice that Bashe was no ordinary Somali "journalist." I sensed in him greater intellectual sophistication and seriousness of purpose. His questions were in a different league than any I had, heretofore, encountered. Tough, rigorous, elaborate, fair-minded, deep, and articulate in ornate Somali vocabulary, Bashe entered my world as uncommon Somali. In the following few years, he set up with me a number of challenging one-to-one interviews (recorded in London and Hargeisa) on central topics for Somaliland as well as the region.

These recordings have become a source of pride for me. His smooth mix of probing intensity and intellectual ambition was the closest I had come to a high voltage seminar outside of the academy. Thus, with other equally civic-centered productions, Bashe became a most probing and distinctive interviewer among all Somali television journalists.

The other major encounter that I had with Bashe was during the preparation for the presidential elections in Somaliland in late 2017. When I was tasked to revamp the otherwise cluttered wish-list of a document that Kulmiye Party had already compiled, I asked Mr. Muse Behi, the Chairman of the Party and its presidential candidate, if there were individuals from the Diaspora he would like to nominate to be included in the Committee that I was about to chair. The first name that came out of Behi's mouth was that of Mohamed Bashe.

We convened the Committee during early summer of 2016, at the commodious Mansoor hotel in Hargeisa. For a week, we began our daily work at 8:30 in the morning and finished around 5:00 p.m. Bashe was remarkable: hyper energetic, studious, discerning, and convivial. He became one of the most productive among our team. When I composed the final copy of the English version of our vision and correlated public policy priorities, it was Bashe who translated the

document into cogent Somali. In all contexts, then, Bashe always rose well-above crude and small-minded tribalistic atavism and self-seeking and greedy egoism – among the supreme liabilities that continue to bedevil Somali politics everywhere.

Within a year after the victory of Kulmiye Party, Bashe became distraught over what he saw as mounting evidence for blatant betrayal of the vision, commensurate policies, and the expected standards of governance – all so overwhelmingly endorsed by the voters across Somaliland (over 80,000 votes over the formidable opposition, Wadani Party).

Bashe's dismay turned into a concentrated alienation from Kulmiye and Behi's regime. I recall inviting him to dinner in my hotel in mid-July, 2019. Once we settled in our table at the restaurant, I inquired about his wellbeing and in what activities he was involved. Suddenly, he sat up, straightened his back, cleared his throat, and looked me directly in the eyes. With impassioned verve, he laid out his full retreat from and renunciation of the Somaliland sovereignty project in which he had invested more than half of his whole life. Furthermore, and instructively, he announced to me that he was about to embark on a new venture: to contribute to an on-going effort to revive the now defunct union between Somaliland and Somalia. It was in the thick of this new and dramatic reversal of civic perspective that unexpected death came.

Other events of significance have taken place in the Somali territories. Perhaps the most potentially consequential was the hurriedly convened meeting in Djibouti city between the leaders of Somali and Somaliland. With combined pressures coming from the USA diplomatic mission to Somalia and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, the paramount objective was to re-energize the hapless dialogue between the two countries. In all the preceding meetings that took place in such cities as Djibouti, London, Istanbul, there were no significant accomplishments. There are multiple reasons for these long years of deadlock. The latest high-level meeting was no exception.

Successive leaders of Somalia never get beyond the predictable regurgitation of a flimsy and shallow plea for the reunification of the two territories. Such an appeal is always undergirded by two assumptions: 1) that Somaliland is a constituent region of Somalia, and 2) that

it is in the wellbeing of both peoples to return to the unionist structure. On the contrary, since 1991, when the reclamation of independence was declared to the world, leaders from Somaliland have unwaveringly asserted the fundamental point that any serious discussion *must begin* with: a) a recognition of the fact that Somaliland became an independent country in June 26, 1960, and b) the reclamation of that historical political identity must be accepted. These two divergent and foundational suppositions are the sources of the forlorn attempts thus far, and the consequent impasse. After nearly 30 years, then, leaders of unionist Somalis continue to *fail* in selling a project – that is, the resurrection of national unity – that the world wants; sovereignist Somalilanders, on their part, equally continue to *fail* in selling a venture that the rest of the world is not willing to embrace. Such is the costly and dragging disappointment, a condition that keeps both countries among the most wretched and corrupt in Africa.

To be sure, a revival of the Union fit for the exigencies of the 21st century is a monumental assignment. It calls for magical thinking and doing: magisterial, inspiring and corrective vision, will, tactical inventiveness, and exceptionally able and focused leadership. For Somalilanders, their program is even *more* daunting. To advance the cause beyond the now overworked trope of Siyaad Barre regime's cruelty and destruction requires, at minimum, a new narrative grounded in genuine historical facts and persuasive claims of distinctiveness, deeper civic belonging and judicious power-sharing among its people across the territory, and a sophisticated and competent international campaign. In turn, these must be expressed in disciplined magnanimity, coupled with an ingenious articulation of specific positive contributions that a sovereign Somaliland could make to the overall transformation of the region. In the end, then, and despite their seemingly contrasting purposes, both sovereignist Somalilander leaders and those of unionist Somalis, in their respective ways and territories, face an *identical* and supreme challenge: *the making of a nation*. On this universal project, Ernest Renan's pithy and penetrating insight, over hundred and forty years ago, is most instructive.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that, in truth, are but one constitute this soul, this principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. ... A nation is therefore a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and those one is yet prepared to make. It presupposes a past; it is, however, summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is an everyday plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.²

Lastly, we are delighted to welcome to the membership of the International Advisory Board, Dr. Brendon J. Cannon. His name will be familiar to those who read the Journal, since his work has appeared here. Dr. Cannon is Assistant Professor of International Security at the Institute of International & Civil Security, Khalifa University of Science & Technology in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He earned his doctorate in Political Science (International Relations) at the University of Utah, USA. He was previously the Director of Gollis University Research Institute in Hargeisa, Somaliland and Assistant Professor of International Relations at Kissi University in Nairobi, Kenya.

Dr. Cannon is the author of multiple articles, with publications appearing in such journals as *African Security*, *Defence Studies*, *Bildhaan*, and *Third World Quarterly*. His latest book, co-edited with Ash Rossiter, is *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities* (Routledge, 2020).

Notes

1. Parts of these notes were previously published in *Bildhaan* (volume 8, 2008), and *The Conversation* (2020).
2. Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation and Other Political Writings* (translated and edited by M.F. N. Giglioli), New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 261-262.

