

Towards a culture for peace

poetry, drama and music in Somali society

Maxamed Daahir Afrax

“Somalis are born talkers. Every elder is expected to be able to hold an audience for hours on end with a speech richly laced by judicious proverbs and quotations from famous poems and sayings.” Professor I. M. Lewis

In Somali society poetry, oratory, theatre and song are the dominant forms of cultural expression. Somalis’ thoughts about the last two catastrophic decades have been recorded in poems, drama and song, as well as written literature.

In the dialogue-based, problem-solving forum of a peace meeting, poetry and oratorical eloquence can affect the emotions and outcomes of negotiations and their influence has been seen in internationally-sponsored peace processes such as the 2000 Arta conference.

In a society where skills of oratory are highly respected, speeches and verbal agreements can carry more weight than written peace accords. Somali oral culture is a very powerful tool to promote peace and conflict resolution.

Oratory

In pre-colonial times Somalis valued highly the skill of oratorical eloquence. Successful orators would show their ability by making extensive use of oral literature such as poetry, proverbs and words of wisdom. Speeches needed to be formulated in poetic form or augmented with quotes from famous poems, as well as proverbs and allusion to commonly known stories.

This cultural tradition continues, despite the huge changes in Somali ways of life and the social upheaval caused by two decades of war. The talent for oratory is still esteemed and in

local and internationally-sponsored peace conferences elders, poets and other participants have used it to appeal to the hearts and minds of participants to secure a positive outcome. Oratory and poetry, by men and women, were creatively used in the series of peace meetings that ended hostilities in Somaliland in the early 1990s.

Oratorical interventions made at crucial moments saved the Arta Conference from collapse more than once. At one point the talks in Djibouti were endangered when two major clans refused to reconcile their differences and threatened to withdraw from the process. Sultan Axmed, an elder from the Yebro (an ‘outcaste’ group) delivered a moving and humorous speech laden with poetic quotes, proverbs and allusion to known narratives.

Sultan Axmed directly addressed members of the two rival clans, threatening to unleash *Xanfaley*, a curse in the form of a ‘magic wind’ that the Yebro are renowned for, to ‘sweep away’ anyone who dared to withdraw from the talks or become an obstacle to peace. This changed the whole atmosphere. The entire hall burst into laughter and Sultan Axmed received a standing ovation. Tension was diffused and the representatives of the two defiant groups withdrew their threats.

Poetry

The 19th century English explorer Richard Burton famously described Somalis as a ‘nation of poets’ in his classic work *First Footsteps in East Africa*. Poetry has traditionally been the principal medium through which Somalis define their identity, record their history, express their innermost feelings and communicate their views.

Somali poetry includes both a rich folklore heritage such as work songs (*hees-hawleed*) sung to accompany everyday tasks like watering camels, and a classical form of poetry (*maan-so*) composed by poets. Within Somalia's oral culture, poetry is especially powerful in influencing people's attitudes and Somali history provides ample examples of poets who used their art both to fan the flames of war and to bring peace.

The early 20th century poet-warrior Sayid Muhamed Abdulle Hassan is a case in point. A symbol of proto-Somali nationalism for the twenty year war that his dervish movement fought against the colonialists, he is considered by many Somalis to be the greatest ever Somali poet, and he used his status to rally his followers.

Many Somali poets have also used their art to promote peace, as the following line from a classical poem illustrates:

Hawo iyo hilow gacalo iyo, hurud nabdoon baa leh
"The pursuit of pleasure, love and tranquillity are attributes of peace"

This poetic viewpoint is consistent with some well known Somali sayings:

Ha dagaalin: minaad raydo reerkaaga waaye; minii lagaa raayo ruuxaaga waaye

"Do not fight: if you win, you pay with your stock; and if you lose, you pay with your life"

Dagaal waa ka-dare

"War is worst"

Nabad la'aan waa nolol la'aan

"No peace is no life"

An example of a poet as peacemaker is the early 20th century poet Salaan Carrabey, who used poetry to separate the forces of two related kin groups, Axmed Faarax and Reer Daahir, that were on the brink of war. Following a failed attempt at mediation by a religious leader, Salaan Carrabey asked that he 'speak to them in a language they could understand' and recited a poem entitled *Waar Tolow Colka jooja* – "Oh Clansmen, Stop the War".

The influence of the poet and his poem proved stronger than that of the Sheikh and *Qur'anic* verses. The forces disengaged and the fighting was averted. Below is an extract from this famous poem. The English translation is Martin Orwin's:

Oh Clansmen, Stop the War

*You killed Rabjaan in revelry
And in transgression of custom
And up to today a stick has not been broken for him
And we remember well-known Jaamac
Who was the first in oratory for us
We know about what happened in the past
No one is more close to each other than us
And yet there is anger between us
If you devour each other
I won't respect you
It's as much as I'll join forces with one side
And join in the attack on the other
It is as if my fingernails are
Cutting up my stomach
And I shall die of anger
And grief and rage
My power will diminish
So say together "I seek protection from God"
Oh Clansmen, Stop the War!*

Poetry remains very influential in Somali society both in the country and among the diaspora, but it is changing under the influence of new forms of media, communications and other cultures.

Drama and music

Poetry has been the basis on which other forms of oral cultural expression have developed, such as Somali theatre which emerged in post-independence Somalia as an important art form in Somali urban life. Somali theatre, which incorporates drama, music, dance, visual arts and short-lined modern poetry, became the main medium of expression for artists prior to the civil war and played an important political role.

A play called *Gaaraabidhaan* (Glow Worm), staged in 1968 by the late playwright Xasan Sheikh Muumin, is believed to have inspired the military coup led by Siyaad Barre in 1969. Similarly, *Landcruiser*, a play by the late poet-playwright Cabdi Muxumed Amiin, staged at the National Theatre in Mogadishu in 1989, attacked the deeds of the Barre regime and is popularly believed to have hastened its downfall. After the playwright was arrested, a song of the same name articulating the play's central idea became an instant hit, catching the growing mood of popular opposition to the government.

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In the early 1990s some Somali artists gave their support to particular factions fighting the civil war, thereby exacerbating clan chauvinism. However most of the better known Somali poets and other performing artists inside and outside the



*Come out of my country
You've spilled enough blood
You've killed too many people
You've caused a ton of trouble.*

In another song K'naan expresses his outrage against the brutalities of the warmongers:

*See they rack bodies not grain
Chop limbs not trees
Spend lives not wealth
Seek vengeance not truth
Moisten pain not plants
Sharpen feuds not minds.*

country have devoted their art and lives to the pursuit of peace and justice, denouncing the civil war and promoting stability.

Examples include the famous poets Mustafa Shiikh Cilmi (now in Sweden), Cabdi Dhuux Yuusuf (in Mogadishu), Cabdulqaadir Cabdi Shube (in Puntland); the musicians Axmed Naaji Sacad (in Yemen), Mariam Mursal and Fatima Qaasim (in the UK), Saado Cali (in the US); and the late poet-playwright Cabdi Muxumud Amiin who delivered five collections of poetry during the civil war and produced a play called *Qoriga Dhig Qaranka Dhis* ("Put down the Gun, Build the Nation") staged in Mogadishu in the late 1990s.

In contemporary Somali society poets continue to be highly esteemed figures. In the second half of 2003, for example, the Somali poet Maxamed Ibraahim Hadraawi, the most famous living Somali poet, who spent five years in prison and a decade in exile during the Barre regime, travelled the length of the country preaching peace and non-violence.

On his long journey for peace, Maxamed Ibraahim Hadraawi's 'peace caravan' gathered support from many Somali civil society organizations and ordinary people. The reception given to Hadraawi took him and his fellow travellers by surprise. People welcomed him as a beacon of hope and a desperately needed spiritual leader who could fill the huge leadership vacuum. However he had no political ambition, agenda or vision, but simply sought to promote peace as a virtue.

Another interesting artist that represents an evolution of an oral artistic tradition is the young Somali-Canadian rapper K'naan who found worldwide fame with the release of his album *Nagala soo Baxa* – "The Dusty Foot Philosopher". K'naan tirelessly delivers powerful messages promoting peace in Somalia through his lyrics. In his most famous song *Nagala soo baxa* ("Come out with it") he directly challenges the Somali warlords:

Poetry, drama, music and oratory have been major factors in the success of important political movements and events in Somali history: the nationalist movements that led to independence in 1960; the early years of the military revolution of 1969; the overthrow of that military regime; or the Peace and Reconciliation Conference in Arta, Djibouti, in 2000, which led to the formation of the first Somali Transitional National Government.

During the Arta Conference, for instance, many poets and performing artists were mobilized, including from the Djibouti artistic community and the diaspora. During the six months of the conference they engaged in artistic productions that promoted peace and reconciliation, which were broadcast on Somali-speaking media channels in Somalia and around the world.

The effectiveness of these cultural forms as tools for promoting peace is underscored by two important factors: that Somalis are united by a single language; and Somalis' renowned love of oral literature. Over the past two decades Somali artists have proved their commitment to promoting peace in their country, producing a huge body of literature on the theme.

If members of the Somali cultural community are supported and encouraged to be better organized and to produce new work, or even reproduce and disseminate their existing work in support of peace efforts, such initiatives would have better chances of success.

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