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à la coopération nationale
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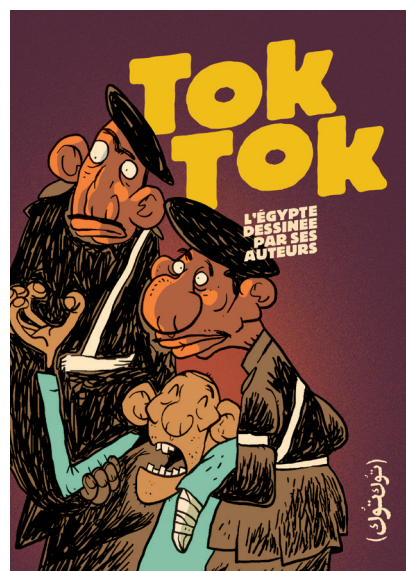
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Transitioning from Oral to a Written Culture: The Impact of Hargeysa International Book Fair

Much more than just a book fair: the HIBF engages in transforming the society in Somaliland, sharing knowledge and democratic values, and stimulating the literary production in a country with a recent writing tradition.

by Jama Musse Jama

This article focuses on the various stages of transitions the Somali society has gone through in relations to arts and culture and our efforts over the last fifteen years to help our society transition from oral to a written culture through the launching of Hargeysa International Book Fair (HIBF) in 2008. In order to better understand the historical contexts and conditions in which we started HIBF and operate, the first part of this article provides the necessary background, followed by analysis of the state of Somali literature and the transformation we have witnessed. Lastly I conclude with some reflections on the impact of these efforts, HIBF and what I foresee both for Somali literature and in the wider African context.

Historical Background: the Emergence of a Literary Production

The Somali communities in the Horn of Africa are predominantly pastoralist nomads herding sheep, cattle, camels and to a lesser extent agro-farming. Primarily, the Somali's means of communication is by word of mouth, anchored on a rich amalgamation of traditions and language. Somali poetry occupies a distinctive position in their cultural life. Because of its powerful appeal, the most important events in life are preserved through poetry. Additionally, poetry is reinforced by a rich story-telling and musical heritage, which is centred on folklore. Evidently, oral tradition as the sole instrument of preserving the historical past is of a limited capacity and the writing of the Somali language has taken centuries to realise. As a language, Somali has over the periods been written using different scripts, however uniformed orthography was only achieved in the beginning of the early 1970's, barely 46 years ago when using the Latin script, the Somali Republic officially adopted the Somali orthography and the Somali language as medium of instruction and governance. The new orthography ushered in a new dawn of enlightenment for the Somali people, and there was a massive state effort undertaken not only to systematically transition the society from oral to writ-

ten but also to stimulate literary production. Unfortunately, this golden era was short lived and did not fully bear the desired fruit, but it did produce a small group of literary giants who, up to this day influence the Somali language and literary production including Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, Aw Jaamac Cumar Ciise and Shire Jaamac Axmed as well as foreign scholars of the same era including B. W. Andrejewiski, Lee Cassanelli and John Johnson.

The Military Repression and the Diaspora

By the early 1980s, the Somali military regime began using coercive methods to oppress all forms of art including theatre productions, music, and poetry for expressing negative sentiments against the regime. This effort was sustained and relentless, annihilating the creativity and trivializing the artistic and cultural production by using them exclusively for the regime's propaganda, and therefore hindering critically minded literary production within the society. During this period, a regression occurred, people left the cities, back to nomadic area and returned to their rich oral traditions, primarily poetry to convey messages, share sorrow, pain, mockery of the regime and generate support for the resistance. The total disintegration of the Somali state with all its institutions constituted the heaviest blow to the development of the Somali culture in all its forms. In particular Somaliland, where the major cities were destroyed physically in 1988 and the capital Hargeysa was completely levelled to ground through aerial bombing.

The turbulent political changes in the region over the past three decades have greatly affected the Somalis in almost all aspects of their life; the literary and artistic fields being the hardest hit. For the surviving artistic and cultural producers, many were exiled in far away countries, became refugees, and for the few who remained or returned, they lost everything. In Somaliland efforts to rebuild the country commenced in earnest. However the priority was not given to theatres, museums, cinemas, or printing houses and the concept of publishing industry remained completely missing. Despondent,

the few artistic and cultural producers sought other means of surviving. With the exception of poetry, all other forms of arts and knowledge production ceased once again. Coincidentally, during this turmoil, various external Islamic actors invested in the spreading of a very strict and conservative Islamic identity using significant funds and efforts. The investment paid off, finding a disbursed vulnerable community, with little previous Islamic knowledge, this resurgence of a sense of identity, greater purpose and belonging during a time of great loss, confusion, violence and uncertainty was instrumental and knowledge production from primarily Saudi Arabia was adopted. Despite the new adopted Islamic identity, locally and the international disbursed Somali's continued to engage in oral traditions as they struggled to build new life and homes.

The Origin of the Hargeysa International Book Fair

I was one of the fortunate who being in Italy found both the time and privilege to fully become conversant with the world around me and the drastic changes being brought about by the dynamic development of science and technology. I was imbued with the deep conviction that only by moving from oral culture to a culture based on reading and writing can the Somali society recover its identity, preserve their history and keep pace with the rapidly changing world. With likeminded individuals, a journey to revive that which has been lost began in Europe, documenting in written form our oral poetry, indigenous knowledge, and humankind-generated knowledge and artistic expression including traditional dance, folklore, work songs, traditional games, etc. we felt were essential for the future young generation to build upon the new way of thinking and the progress. After many years and effort in the diaspora, this culminated in the inception of the Hargeysa International Book Fair in 2008, in Somaliland; but our aim was much more than what the name simply suggested - an exhibition of books for mere commercial purposes, for our society had no money and did not even value books. Having declared independence following the collapse of the Somali Republic in 1991, Somaliland was trying to construct both its institutions and a broken society with no external help or finance. Art, culture and books were certainly not a priority, and to most seemed even a little crazy, but we strongly believed that in the short term, arts and culture could help with the recovery and healing of our society and in the long term be truly instrumental in the cultural transformation of the semi-literate Somali society. We wanted to stimulate the revival of all forms of art and human expression, including painting, poetry, story-telling, theatre and music, but most importantly to create a platform where authors and other artists meet their readers and the general audience. To that end, our core aim was promoting a reading and writing culture, tolerance, freedom of expression, democratic values and inter-generational discussion through literature and discussions. As such our activities, besides the exhibition of books which is an integral part of the programme, continued to grow on yearly basis and now embrace a wide range from poetry recitation, painting, panel discussions of crucial issues, documentary film screening, music and theatrical performances, short intensive training on creative writing, photography, film-making and dancing plus many others.



Spreading of a Literary Mission

Although our main focus is on the Somali language, literature and culture, we have learnt to grow with the needs, struggles and complexities of our society, and to help shape and direct towards an inclusive openness and tolerance that was always inherent to the Somali people. That is why we annually choose a pertinent theme to be central to all the events of the Book Fair programme. Over the past decade we have chosen important themes such as freedom, censorship, collective memories, citizenship, journey, imagination, spaces, leadership, connectivity, wisdom. These ideas and concepts were picked each year to manoeuvre growing society challenges, generate discussion and knowledge production in a safe environment. Moreover, recognising the vital role of the youth in the accomplishment of our literary mission, we have, shortly after launching the Book fair, begun to support the formation of Reading Clubs in all the major regions of Somaliland. Later, the opening of public libraries in those regions complemented this move. Current-



ly the reading clubs are in full swing and their managing committees annually attend the Book Fair to showcase the progress of their work and prospective future plans.

As Somaliland progressed from humanitarian to developmental stages of post conflict recovery, our themes have evolved from focusing on current issues to more philosophical and/or future orientated themes. Additionally it became apparent that, a yearly event was not sufficient space (physically and otherwise) for Somaliland as we attempt to rebuild the arts and cultural sector. As such, we were able to secure and establish the Hargeysa Cultural Centre in 2014, a permanent space for arts and culture and a home for the book fair. Securing a permanent premise and yearlong presences opened new opportunities for institutional building and carrying out a wide range of activities in the fields of arts and literature. We have been building and expanding constantly to accommodate our growing activities and demand for different spaces for different art forms. Currently our compound accommodates a library, a theatre,

a main hall for plenary sessions, art gallery, administrative offices, and rooms for holding training courses on music, photography, painting, and creative writing. There are also open public spaces, garden and coffee shop to provide a holistic environment for creativity and peaceful escape in the busy city centre.

Translation as Activism

Over the years, particularly after the inception of the Book Fair, we have struggled to find sufficient books in the Somali language, therefore our institutional publishing arm *Ponte Invisible* started publishing five to six books on an annual basis to fill this gap. This also meant that as part of the book fair, we would actively seek new content and writers each year

Moments from the edition 2018 of the Hargeysa International Book Fair.
© HIBF

by holding a competition, as well as getting seasoned writers and linguists to offer mentoring and classes to help develop new writers. Connected to this, we also became actively involved and invested in the art of translation. We felt that translating from Somali work/art into a foreign language enabled the outside world to know and understand the scope and beauty of the Somali culture; while translating from a foreign language into Somali opened new vistas for the Somalis to get better acquainted with culture of other societies and experience a reality that is different from their own. To this end, we translated into Somali and published bilingually the literary works of such prominent world writers as Anton Chekhov's "selected short stories", George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Charles Dickens' *The Signalman*, Edith Nesbit's *The Marble Finger*, Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* and *The Happy Prince*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Body Snatcher* and others into Somali. Likewise we translated into English and published the poems of Mohamed Hashi Dhama "Gaariye" (*Gaariye: Biography And Poems*) and Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame "Hadraawi" (*The Poet And The Man*), just to name two of the most popular contemporary Somali poets.

Sharing Knowledge and Exchanging Visions

Such undertaking, we believe, also brings together far-flung societies of different languages and cultures, thus fostering the essential principles of peaceful co-existence and mutual cooperation. In the same vein, we also invite some of the seasoned and well-established intellectuals, writers and artists from Africa in order to exchange experience. We are keen to maintain such relation with our like-minded organisations in Africa and beyond. Moreover, among the prominent features of the Book Fair is that we annually invite an African country as a "Guest Country" to showcase aspects of their rich culture and arts to the Somali audience, but to also expose the public and following of these artists in their home countries to Somaliland. This engineered cultural exchange has proven to be enormously important and most welcome by the Somali society at large and representatives from guest countries, and we have so far hosted Kenya, Djibouti, Malawi, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Rwanda. For 2019, we are looking forward to welcoming Egypt.

As Hargeysa International Book Fair grew and became more successful, we have also partnered with other African literary events including StoryMoja (Kenya), Kwani? (Kenya), Writivism (Uganda), AMLA Network (Continental level), Music In Africa Connects (South Africa), as well as non Africa based African literary network including Africa Writes (UK) and African Book Festival (Berlin). Most notable of our partnerships, is our long history with the annual Somali Week Festival held in the UK, which enables us to bring representatives of our local Somali productions including books, music, paintings as well as their producers to the UK to participate in their week long events and get international exposure to the Somali Diaspo-

ra community and their host countries. These initiatives and partnerships have been vital for granting access to locally produced knowledge to a wider market, which they otherwise find inaccessible due gatekeepers despite being the subject of that knowledge production. With these specific efforts, we hope to inspire a circulation of people (artists, writers) within Africa, which can be extremely difficult, sometimes even more so than an African getting a visa to a European country. Connected to this is also finding a more efficient way of circulating the works of Africans within Africa as part of book productions and access to works. We need to champion and ensure that the work and intellectual rights of African writers producing in Africa are valued, ensuring they have access, platforms and vibrant local markets to showcase their work, rather than being punished and stigmatised for producing their works in Africa. Evidently, there is still a long way to go, however more than ever, there is a need for physical and sometimes imaginary spaces for artistic and cultural production in every society.

Hargeysa International Book Fair has been a manifestation of the need of institutional cultural enablers rooted in the African context instead of simulating the West where literature production are in sync with the commercial side of art production. It is quite evident from the forgoing statements that in the Hargeysa Book Fair as well as in the activities we practise in the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, our aim is far from commercialisation. We are simultaneously building the environment to generate, promote and share knowledge with a society that is not always ready to receive or embrace art in all its diversity. As such, our efforts as our guests from the various parts of the world bear witness to, is a genuine literary process with the ambitious aim of effecting a radical cultural change in the Somali community for the next decades to come by providing the proper space for the artists, intellectuals, poets, thinkers, social activists, community elders and religious scholars to engage, navigate and debate together.

Overall, it has been a very exciting and challenging journey for us, one in which we have achieved many milestones, emerged as a national and international voice and champion for Somali literature, arts and culture, but most importantly, one in

which we have garnered the support of our community as whole, with an active audience of over 10,000. But, mostly I am proud that we were able to revitalise the remaining Somali legends and give them the space and resources to impart their wisdom, skills and share their work with the public and young creative thinkers. As there are still no schools that offer arts and culture, this is the closets avenue to support and develop young producers. Somaliland as a country with its people has experienced so much change and progress since the establishment of HIBF, and we have shared these experiences and have tried to always ensure that the space for Somali arts and culture continues to grow in influence, through winning acceptance and participation.

*
Such undertaking, we believe, also brings together far-flung societies of different languages and cultures, thus fostering the essential principles of peaceful co-existence and mutual cooperation.
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Although it is the success and influence of HIBF and our activities inside Somaliland that ultimately indicate whether we are making progress towards our founding aims and goals, yet, we could not have achieved this remarkable success without the high profile enjoyed by the HIBF outside Somaliland. This profile has largely been enhanced by the work of our attending guests, networks and partners who write about HIBF. In this regard, I am pleased to end with a quote from renowned journalist Michela Wrong, expressing her views and personal assessment of the Book Fair for *Foreign Policy* after attending the 7th HIBF: «This event, the Hargeysa International Book Fair, has transformed during the seven years of its existence from a two day experiment of book presentation, music and readings for children into a weeklong cultural celebration, attracting as many as 1,200 professionals, university students, high school pupils, unemployed youth to its event. Arguably the Horn of Africa's most lively intellectual forum.» Also the Nigerian writer, Dr. Ndibe Okey, after attending the 8th HIBF writes «It was impossible to witness the Hargeysa International Book Festival without being powerfully moved and convinced. Like me, Professor Niyi Osundare was deeply affected. At one point, he whispered to me, "These people know that culture matters. That literature matters. That memory matters".»

Finally Professor Ahmed Samatar, attending the 9th HIBF, in his editorial of *Bildhaan* (2016), writes «This annual event exemplifies the multiple and glorious efforts of the people of Somaliland to not only build their country, in the wake of the dissolution of the union with Somalia more than 25 years ago, but to offer the denizens of the Horn of Africa and beyond an ambience where peace and order, freedom of expression, intellectual imagination, and democratic politics are a lived experience.»

Despite the pleasure we are naturally bound to feel at receiving such warm compliments, we are, nevertheless, under no illusion about the formidable challenges and the enormity of tasks lying ahead of us, but we are certainly better equipped and have more partners and supporters than we did in 2008, so I am excited about the future of Somali literature in particular and African literature as whole.

Jama Musse Jama

is an ethnomathematician with a PhD in African Studies specialising in Computational Linguistics of African Languages. Dr. Jama is known for his research on traditional African games and their potential for use within formal education. He is the founder of Hargeysa Cultural Centre and the influential Hargeysa International Book Fair and in 2018 he was one of the hosts of the 13th International Congress of Somali Studies International Association in Hargeysa. He is now the formal President of the Somali Studies International Association (twitter.com/jamamusse).

Da una cultura orale a una cultura scritta: l'impatto dell'Hargeysa International Book Fair

L'articolo propone una riflessione su alcune fasi fondamentali attraversate dalla società somala in relazione ad arte e cultura, soprattutto alla luce dello sforzo realizzato con il lancio dell'Hargeysa International Book Fair nel 2008.

A livello linguistico, l'ortografia somala è stata uniformata solo agli inizi degli anni '70, dando inizio a un'era nuova, purtroppo breve, di impulso alla produzione letteraria.

Dagli anni Ottanta, il regime militare somalo ha iniziato a usare metodi repressivi per opprimere ogni forma d'arte, dalla produzione teatrale alla musica, con uno sforzo incessante, complementare all'uso della cultura per la propaganda di regime. Le persone lasciarono le città, tornarono nelle aree nomadi e alla loro ricca tradizione orale, producendo messaggi di critica e resistenza. Molti furono esiliati e divennero rifugiati; chi rimase perse tutto.

L'autore è uno dei promotori dell'Hargeysa International Book Fair: manifestazione nata nella convinzione che l'arte e la cultura, già nel breve termine, potessero aiutare a ricostruire la società ed essere strumento di trasformazione culturale. Dopo aver dichiarato l'indipendenza dalla Somalia nel 1991, infatti, il Somaliland ha avviato un lento processo di ricostruzione del proprio tessuto sociale e istituzionale. La fiera del libro di Hargeysa si è quindi proposta come una piattaforma di scambio, in cui autori e artisti potessero incontrare il pubblico, promuovere la scrittura e la lettura, la libertà di espressione, i valori democratici e il confronto intergenerazionale.

Col tempo, ci si è resi conto che non era sufficiente una manifestazione temporanea, e dal 2014 si è creato stabilmente l'Hargeysa Cultural Centre: uno spazio permanente dedicato alle arti e alla cultura, nonché una sede per la fiera del libro. Attualmente il Centro ospita una libreria, un teatro, una sala convegni, gli uffici amministrativi, una galleria d'arte, stanze per corsi di musica, fotografia, pittura e scrittura creativa.

Negli anni, l'impegno si è concentrato anche sulle attività di traduzione: dal somalo nelle lingue straniere per far conoscere la cultura del Paese all'estero, e viceversa per introdurre la letteratura straniera nel Somaliland. Le *partnership* con altre simili realtà, africane e non, aiutano lo scambio di idee e la circolazione di artisti e scrittori nel continente. Con un pubblico attivo di 10.000 persone, i risultati e i riconoscimenti internazionali già ottenuti, la sfida resta impegnativa e riguarda il futuro della letteratura somala e africana in generale.