

The Role of Somali Poetry for Somaliland Disarmament

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Abstract:

Somaliland, a former British protectorate in the colonial era, was the first Somali territory to become independent on 26th June 1960, and four days later united with Somali Italia in the south to form the great Somali Republic (ICG, 2003, p. 4). It reclaimed its independence from Somalia in 1991, but is not yet recognized by the International Community. It is called 'The nation of poets' and Hargeysa, the Capital, is widely known by Somalis as 'The mother of Somali Arts and Culture'. Although 'Poems' mainly used to be a sort of communication in rural areas, in modern times it also spread to the urban areas. Somaliland has achieved stability and some political analysts now describe it as 'a beacon of peace and stability in very turbulent region of Horn of Africa'. In 1994, Somaliland managed to disarm well-organized and powerful militiamen that had been loyal to their clans without external support.

Hence, this paper will examine the role of Somali poetry in Somaliland disarmament. First, the paper will begin with describing the 'oral society' of Somalis and how this has contributed and shaped their life-style and way of communication. In addition, it will also discuss what enabled and gave a big space to the poets and poetry on the pastoral and livestock herders community.

Introduction:

Poetry was one of the main channels that Somaliland's leaders used to convince the clans' leaders and the militiamen to put their guns aside and stop the 'Civil War' that had been ravaging the social, political and economical pillars of the country. From that time, the country has been a peace hub and has had well functioning governmental institutions. According to the Somali history, poetry had contributed to long-standing conflicts among Somali clans that have been going on for some time. Their 'Alternative Dispute Mechanisms' also used to be 'poems'. So, in reference to all the abovementioned characteristics of Somalis, this paper wants to focus on how Somali poetry contributed to Somaliland's disarmament process in 1990s.

The overall aim of this research will be to examine the exact role that Somali Poetry had played for Somaliland disarmament and how words were stronger than guns. The objectives of the research are to identify the factors that enabled the 'poets' to play that vital role. What made them powerful tools to enable peace building processes and the disarmament of the militiamen in Somaliland? Lack of academic work that has been done about this issue is one of the main things hindering the researcher who focuses on this topic. In addition, the researcher wants to contribute to the academic field in rarely focused area: poetry and peace building in Somaliland.

In significance wise, since this process is very unique in Africa, this paper will contribute to the academic field of Arts and peace building mechanisms. It is a tool that can be used to bring peace. It also indicates that 'peace from the bottom' is the best way that we can solve a conflict within the same community or even between different communities that belong to the same country.

This paper is structured as follows: the current introduction part in which I have already explained what I am looking at, how I am looking at it, why this topic matters, and the outline the structure of the paper. The second part of the paper will be focusing what is being said about the topic. Explanation about the project will follow. The analysis of the paper and conclusion will then follow.

Poetry: Effective conflict resolution mechanisms

The Somalis are always considered an 'Oral Society'. In nomad life, Somalis are and use to be pastoralists, the people move from a place to another place looking for livelihoods for themselves and for their livestock. Their media channels, therefore, were poems. Orality is one of the most powerful channels for passing messages among the Somalis. In addition, oral poetry is defined as 'The idea of pure and uncontaminated oral culture' (Jimale 2016). The orality tradition is the transmission of messages by word of mouth. As Vansina described poetry as follows;

“Poetry is of necessity memorized, if it is to be reproduced exactly. Variations do occur over time

when one word or group of words can be replaced by another which respects the metric form.” (1985).

In Somali society, Samatar stated that 'Poetic cursing' plays a very vital role in 'Pastoral poetry' and evidence of cursing there is aplenty in the history of the pastoral Somalis. (2009). Poetry is historically one of the most powerful tools that hinders conflict and peace among Somalis. Before the modern communication tools or media channels were discovered, it has been a communication tool that they used to send or achieve information about their surrounding environment and their life style (Bobe 2002).

Before the modern governmental systems which the colonial powers introduced to Somalis, they were structured by a clan system of administration. They have had Sultans, Kings and other form of traditional leadership structure. Although, they have been practicing the modern system more than half a century they still believe and adopt their clan-based systems. That system, therefore, provided 'Poets or Poems' a place to be used as a form of communication. In nomad life, the poets have had a huge impact on society. They were one of the leading and most respected parts of the community. They were and still are, after the religious leaders, the most effective source of information for the community.

As Bobe stated, in the ancient time Somalis had used poetry as a peace making tool:

“Possibly the most renowned example of poetic peacemaking involved the efforts of Salaan Carabay, a classical poet of the last century. Two lineages of the Habar Jeclo clan, the Reer Daahir and the Reer Axmed Faarax were embroiled in a longstanding feud and were preparing themselves to fight. Last minute efforts to mediate between them had been in vain.

As the warriors came together at the field of battle, a respected religious man by the name of Fiqi Xasan stepped between them to remind them of the disastrous effects of war between relatives, reading from the Qu’ran and simultaneously translating verses for his audience. The warriors paid him no heed, and a fighter named Ducaale Koore from the Reer Daahir seized Fiqi Xasan’s Qu’ran and threw it away, impatient for the battle to begin.

Instead, Salaan Carabay took Fiqi Xasan’s place between the two forces, inviting the religious elder to step aside so that he might address the warring factions in a language that they would better understand. Holding the warriors’ attention, Salaan first delivered his now-famous poem in the Geeraar style, Waar Tolow Colka Jooja (“Oh! Kinsmen Stop the War”). Impressed by their kinsman’s appeal, the forces disengaged and violence was averted.” (2002)

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widely known by Somalis as 'The mother of Somali Arts and Culture'. Although 'poems' mainly used to be a sort of communication in rural areas, in the modern times it also spread to the urban areas. Somaliland has achieved stability and some political analysts now describe it as 'A beacon of peace and stability in very turbulent region of Horn of Africa'. In 1994, Somaliland managed to disarm well-organized and powerful militiamen that have been loyal to their clans without external support.

After reading different books and reviewing what other academics have written about this topic, there is no similar research that has been done about it. There are some interviews that have been undertaken with some of the poets who contributed the disarmament. Primary data and secondary data are used in this research. In primary data, the researcher undertook interviews with some of the people who had contributed to the Somaliland's disarmament to get more relevant and clear information about 'The role of poetry in Somaliland's disarmament'. In secondary data, the researcher used citation from other academics' works.

The fire in the wrong hands

As Madar (2016) stated, Somali National Movement (SNM), the liberation movement that waged war against the dictator and military regime of Mohammed Siad Barre from early 1980s till beginning of 1990s and finally overthrow it, had taken power. Abdirahman Ahmed Ali known as 'Tuur' became the first president of the new Somaliland. Just one year after the declaration of Somaliland's independence reclamation, civil wars had erupted through out the main cities. Untrained and undisciplined armed militiamen had started robbery, violence and finally civil war. That war led the country to go through unneeded civil war between the clans. That brought the fragile governance and rule of law to be destroyed. The militiamen finally raided the president's residence in the capital, Hargeysa, and robbed the assets including the President's car.

In 1993, Borama reconciliation conference were held in Borama and a new president, Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, was elected by the clan representatives, but that did not change the situation, rather the new political oppositions defected from that conference; most of them were from the SNM political wing. The civil war continued and more weapons went in the militiamen's hands. Most of the military arms were captured from the overthrown regime led by Siad Barre. For the militiamen, having different level weapons enabled them to wage civil war against each other and the government (Madar 2016).

Somaliland's President, Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, introduced a new traditional way to convince the militiamen to disarm. As Madar stated, President Egal approached the traditional/clan leaders and the business people

As Bobe stated, poets did not just stop there, rather it has been continued to promote the cause of peace.

“Together with drama and song, poetry has helped to heal the wounds opened by the successive rounds of civil strife (1992 and 1994-1996) that have wracked Somaliland in the aftermath of liberation.” (2002).

The Eye Opener

During the period of war which SNM had been waging against the government, most of the people, including the SNM fighters, politicians and poets were keen to see Somaliland being liberated from the regime. They never thought about how the civil war would devastate the deteriorated life of the public and the destroyed cities, which later happened. During the war with the government (the war between SNM and the military government), every one witnessed his/her family member or colleagues dying in front of him/her after military airplanes, MIG-17, bombarded the cities. That was what psychologically affected everyone who survived that tragedy. They used to live, therefore, with hope that Somaliland will one day be stable and free from war and the noise of bullets, but it did not happen. Rather, the situation has been the opposite. When the SNM movement took over power from the military regime, practically every clan and every single person in Somaliland had their own weapon; the men in particular had at least AK-47s and pistols. That was one of the contributing factors to the civil war.

The civil war continued and most of the country intellectuals, including the business people, traditional leaders, religious leaders and the poets started a massive campaign to stop the civil war. That is when poets took their invaluable efforts to stop the war and convince the militiamen to put the guns aside and join the ongoing process of rehabilitation and the establishment of a national army. The poets, the women in general, were the most effective members of that campaign. Since nothing was left for the country and it was destroyed on every side, in terms of infrastructure, social and economical aspects, the women sold their gold to finance the ongoing efforts. Saado Abdi Amarre was part of that process and composed different poems.

The communities, mostly the women, grouped themselves and started monumental movement to get the militiamen disarmed. They have been using the old buses with rent fees. The women had been going regularly to the rivals and telling them to put down the gun. The mechanisms they have been using included both lectures and poetry, mainly the second one. Since the country was destroyed by the wars and added to the ashes, the women have been using old loudspeakers. The poem below was composed by Saado Abdi Amarre, poetess, to point out the exact situation in the country during the civil war.

*I drank poison by tasting the bitterness of war,
Taken by the flood without knowing how to swim,
Previous wars were nothing in comparison to this,
O Deeqa! What is the meaning of this war?
And why is this part of the town fighting against that one?
If strangers fight each other, they go far away from each other.
I am the one who is burning from both sides,*

*O Deeqa! What is the meaning of this war?
And why is this part of the town fighting against that one?"*

A group of women consisting of 30 members, including Sahra Abdi Amarre, were part of the initial stage of the disarmament campaign. Since the civil war erupted not only in the main cities of Somaliland but rather the rural areas, the poetry has been using as a tool to calm and pave the way to reconciliation; that is why more poets like Sahra have composed more relevant poems. The poem below is called, 'You understand' composed by Sahra.

*Hooyaallayey hooyaallayey, hooyaallayey hooyee -
Weapons' factories thud with a pounding rhythm.
Armaments spewed out to all the corners of the globe.
With no boundaries, no limits and with no restrictions.
Even Camel-herder slings an AK-47 on his shoulder.
You understand the extreme suffering this brings.*

*Black people, white people, non-believers, Muslims,
It's men who burn to annihilate the land,
They set up rockets and won't listen the argument,
While women plead for caution under the tree of peace.*

*They have exterminated camels, cattle, goats and sheep,
Wild animals – even the shielded tortoise – have all been slaughtered.
You understand how many people have been slain in open fields,
How birds have fled the countryside and migrated far away,
You understand how this is getting like Horishima,
You understand the destitution this visits on the world.*

*You understand war and injury it inflicts,
You understand how loved ones are struck down,
You understand how children are made orphans,
You understand how the elders are slaughtered,
You understand how the world straps on the gas mask,*

*You understand peace is a broad-leafed tree,
You understand peace shelters families and friends,
You understand peace brings prosperity,
You understand peace is a churn of frothing milk
You understand peace means marriage and love.*

There are also other poems composed by Sahra in which she has been telling the armed militia to put down the gun. The below poem are one of them;

*O' dahir you have been in the bush to get freedom,
Regret the civil war and instability you are involving,
Regret that you made your wives widows,
Regret that you caused more disabilities,
Let's enjoy our freedom that you fought for.*

Like Sahra Abdi, there were some other well renowned Somaliland poets like Mohamed Hashi Dhama known as Gaarriye, whose contributions to the disarmament process are highly appreciated. Mohamed Hashi composed one

of the most celebrated poems on the theme of reconciliation: *Hagar-laawe* (The Charitable) and ERGO. The poem has remained in common use up to the present.

During that campaign most of the militiamen were convinced to accept the call for disarmament. The campaign had three different and very vital pillars. The traditional leaders, the business people and the poets jointly led the campaign. Sultan Mohamed Farah is one of the leading traditional leaders who managed to convince their fellow clan militiamen to accept the disarmament with the help from the government and the poets (Madar 2016).

The armed militiamen did not accept the calls for peace from every side, but some of them were keen to accept, while others were not ready to accept it. That led the same militiamen to fragment into two parties; those who wanted peace and those who oppose it. The most effective part of the campaign that made them to rethink was the 'Poetry' and the 'Message' from the poets. Despite, the respect and the dignity of the poets/poetess in the community, how the poetry being presented to them and poetic mechanisms of reconciliation were the most hard-hitting part of the campaign.

Ali Abdi, a traditional leader whose contributions were part of the peace building and reconciliation process has stated that their efforts would have not made solid meaning without the poets' involvement. Despite the leaders' attempts were more effective, in some times they used to get help from the poets. Mohamed Hashi Dhama aka 'Gaariye' was one of the contributors of the peace process at that time with his well renowned poem of 'Ergo – laterally meaning ENVOY' in which he warned about the aftermath of the long-lasting civil war in the country; if the rivals would not obey his poetic mediation, this would be its circumstances.

Conclusion:

In reference to the findings of this paper, the Somali poetry has played a very vital role in Somaliland's disarmament process. During the desk-based data collection and the interviews I have done in this research, most of the respondents were fully aware of the role of poetry in the process. An obvious answer, as many respondents answered, would be that the disarmament process would have been nonsense without the support of poets and other artists. In addition, their poetic contribution enabled the traditional leaders and other local peace envoys, those who have been taking every step to disarm the militiamen in Somaliland and get them to join the national Army, to accomplish their mission. Since the Somalis are an 'Oral society' and historically and traditionally poetry has had an impact on their life cycle, it is the most effective way and mechanism of conflict resolution in the past and now.

This research, on the other hand, needs to be improved since its data is spread through out the country and more relevant respondents need to be interviewed. To make this research a bigger project, it also needs its human and capital resources to be employed.

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