

***Tacsi* for Maryan (Aryette) Omar Ali**

Lidwien Kapteijns

Inna lillah wa inna ilayhi raji'un
Maryan (Aryette) Omar Ali
— a life dedicated to Somali popular song

On December 7, 2011, Maryan Omar Ali, also known to people as Aryette, passed away in the McCall Medical Center in Etobicoke, Canada. She had struggled with breast cancer for many years.

Born in Djibouti before its independence in 1977, Maryan and her mother, Sahra Omer Goud, moved to Somalia when Maryan was very young. They lived and worked in, among other places, Hargeisa, Jowhar, and Mogadishu. Maryan attended school in Hargeisa and Jowhar (the Mennonite school). However, while she was still a teenager, she managed to join Somali Airlines, first as a stewardess and later as a cashier and office manager. For a time she also returned to Djibouti, where she worked for Air Djibouti. In 1991 Maryan came to Canada. She lived in Ottawa for four years and then moved to Toronto.¹

Somali popular songs were Maryan's life-long love. She had been introduced to the Somali theater and songs in Hargeisa in the early 1960s by her uncle, Hassan Sheikh Muumin. She grew up around the singers, spending much of her time with them in their work and living space. Maryan was among the first Somalis to see the social as well as intellectual and artistic value of the songs and plays, the social commentary and critique they embodied, and the ways in which they helped bring about political and social change. From the time she was a young girl until her death, Maryan cherished the songs; was a friend and support for many singers; and organized, documented, and studied the music cassettes she accumulated. She often told us that, had she had a voice, she would have been a singer herself and thanked God for having protected her from the hard life singers in Somalia have so often

faced. The singers are loved for their songs by every Somali, Maryan used to say, but they do not get the proper respect they deserve as our society's truest and most eloquent spokespeople, teachers, and critics; and they rarely get adequately compensated financially. Maryan also regretted that the intellectual property of artists has not been respected more in the Somali context and this contributed to her desire to document who created the words and melody of a particular song and which singers and musicians performed it. She felt strongly that artists deserve credit and compensation for their artistic achievements and hoped to see progress in this area.

Maryan never developed a taste for (post-) civil war songs, largely because the songs of the 1960s–1980s reflected her own deep commitment to Somali nationalism—a modern, authentically Somali and organically Muslim national identity—one that, moreover, allowed women the space to pursue their dreams. As a young girl who was free-spirited and very active (some people jokingly called her Maryan wiilo), she did not easily fit all the conventions of her environment. Though the nation was proud of its first generation of beautiful and highly professional stewardesses, pioneers such as Maryan did not always get equal opportunity or equal pay for equal work. Hassan Sheikh Muumin's lines from *Shabeelnaagood* captured its time eloquently: *Nagaadiga adduunyada qayb ku maleh naaguhu; xeerkii sidaa naqaa nimankaa samaystee*. However, in all the positions Maryan held, in Somalia, in Djibouti, and eventually (before her illness) in Canada, she won the full respect and friendship of her supervisors and fellow workers. She was known to all for her hard work, total honesty, loyalty, supportiveness to others, kindness, and generosity. To colleagues, friends, and family, Maryan gave even more freely of herself, even if this was at times at her own expense.

I owe my love and knowledge of Somali popular songs to Maryan, just as she developed a further interest in transcribing and documenting the songs, I believe, through her collaboration with me. I still remember seeing her in North America for the first time. She came with a huge blue aluminum trunk that was full of Somali music cassettes. We called it *doonida jacaylka* and it never ran out of new songs for us to listen to. "Ladan, come and sit with me." "Maryan, I am busy." "Let's listen to some songs." "But I don't understand them." "Then I will tell you what they mean. Now bring your tea and sit down!" The rest is history, as they say. I too fell in love with the songs and—over the years, in Ottawa, Toronto, and Wellesley—we spent months and months listening to them, transcribing them, making rough trans-

lations of them, and always also simply enjoying them. Eventually this also led to an academic publication, *Women's Voices in a Man's World* (Heinemann, 1999), whose second part deals with the love songs of the 1960s–1980s. However, Maryan cared most about the artistic beauty, linguistic brilliance, creative impulse, emotional power, and social message of the songs. The popular songs to which Maryan dedicated so much of her life have indeed inspired a whole generation of Somalis.

Maryan loved all genres of songs, from love songs to *nabi ammaan*. However, the *waddani* songs of the 1960s and 1970s were and remained among Maryan's favorites. Like her mother, who first actively participated in the struggle for independence and later represented the new Somali state as a member of many foreign delegations, Maryan believed in *soomaalinimo*, which she saw as a cultural, linguistic, and historical umbrella that could provide shade and protection for Somalis in all their diversity.

Having come of age together with the new nation and at the height of Somali nationalism, Maryan (as well as her mother) held fast to some of the central values of the 1960s. Their *ilbaxnimo*, or cosmopolitanism, was not only the simple elegance of living that was associated with Mogadishu in that period but also the *ilbaxnimo* of tolerance and mutual respect—the philosophical principle that gives others the space to be themselves, that respects and accepts all kinds of people and that, eventually, measures them only by the quality of their *dadnimo* and *soomaalinimo* and never by some aspect of the identity or background into which they were born and over which they had no control. The clan chauvinism and divisiveness that came later were always alien to them.

Maryan did not like Somali clan politics and stayed away from it in word and deed. She despised any form of clan chauvinism and clan-based divisiveness. When, at the height of the civil war, Somali *fannaan* made that mistake and lent his or her artistic voice to a program of clan hatred, she too was disappointed, because, before the civil war, Somali artists had been the voice of the nation *par excellence*. However, if anyone dared to criticize a singer for having shown such clan bias, Maryan would defend that *fannaan* fiercely. She found such accusers hypocritical; how could Somali artists alone be held to a standard that the large majority of political leaders and many intellectuals and common people had failed to meet? Maryan felt strongly that the work of an artist's lifetime should not be denied just because he or she, like too

many other Somalis, was temporarily swept up in the hate-speech of the civil war. Thus she always was a passionate advocate for the Somali *fannaaniin*, these national figures who as ordinary human beings with extraordinary gifts always were both powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

Until the very end, Maryan had not only her mother by her side but also a group of Somali women (and men) who lived in or near their apartment building and made helping Maryan and her mother part of their daily routine. Many of them were close and distant relatives with roots in the Borama area (such as Safia Jama) but there were many others as well, including Hooyo Sahra's life-long friend Khadiija Islaw. In them Maryan and her mother are truly blessed.

Maryan never complained about the illness with which she struggled for so long. Both she and her mother found strength and forbearance in their faith. They answered all expressions of sympathy and sadness with the words: *Ilaahay mahaddii—waa wixii Rabbi qoray*.

We will miss Maryan. *Allah ha u naxariisto*. We will keep her in our minds and hearts and try to live up to the standards of *dadnimo* and *ilbaxnimo* she held up for us.

Notes

1. Samatar, Ahmed I. (2011) "Battling on Two Fronts: Introducing Maryan Omar Ali," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*: Vol. 9, Article 8. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol9/iss1/8>.