

# Battling on Two Fronts: Introducing Maryan Omar Ali\*

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Ahmed I. Samatar

It is a bit muggy but still a gorgeous and clear morning in Toronto, Canada, in early August 2008. A brief and comfortable train ride from the center of the city, one of North America's most cosmopolitan urban concentrations, delivers me to the stop where Ms. Maryan Omar Ali, *Aryette*, was waiting for me to visit with her. After a few minutes of looking for each other among a throng of people in the arrival area—I have not seen Maryan for more than 17 years—we greeted warmly and then left the station together for the very short bus ride to the large building where her residence is located. Maryan, despite the passage of so many years and some testing health-related experiences, looked buoyant, tranquil, and eager to show me around and then engage in a thorough conversation about her background, passion for Somali literary aesthetics and production, and developments in her life in recent years. We arrived at her compact and neat apartment. Her mother, Sahra Omer Goud, whose strong and kind voice I have heard over the telephone on numerous times, was at the door with a genuine welcoming smile. Once I entered, I could smell the appetizing aroma of the legendary Zeila cooking—perhaps the most sophisticated culinary tradition in all of the Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa. As is customary, we took off our shoes and walked into the living room. Before we sat, I requested to go to the bathroom to put on a comfortable *macawis* that I had brought with me for the occasion. We washed our hands and began to devour a tasty lunch of spiced and grilled wild-caught salmon, delicious rice cooked with cloves, cumin, and cardamom and flavored with a dash of raisins, followed by lots of fresh salad and fruits. Soon, Maryan and I were sitting opposite each

other with the tiny but powerful recording machine between us. We were surrounded by numerous artistic artifacts, almost all Somali, and stacks of carefully labeled disks—a testimony to her well-established reputation, among those in-the-know, as a premier cartographer and archivist of types of Somali literary production. We agreed to divide the interview into three main parts: her background; her collection and knowledge of popular songs; and her courageous fight against an onslaught of breast cancer—an illness heretofore not publicly discussed by Somalis with the misfortune of contracting it.

**Ahmed I. Samatar:** Welcome, Maryan, and thank you for receiving me with such hospitality and enthusiasm. How long have you been living in Toronto and Canada?

**Maryan Omar Ali:** I have been in Canada since 1991. The first four, I was in Ottawa (the capital) and have spent the remaining years here in Toronto.

**AIS:** By far, the largest city in Canada and one of the most urbane in all of North America, what is it like to live here?

**MOA:** This is a charming city and, I do believe, Canada is perhaps the best country to live in. Among the more notable characteristics of Toronto is its immediate and rich global diversity. You can find every race, creed, and national origin here. Moreover, the country and the city are frontally proud of this evolving multiculturalism. It is very rare to feel like a stranger in Toronto!

**AIS:** Has this legendary Canadian welcome to new citizens been extended to Somalis too?

**MOA:** Definitely! The Somali immigrants/refugees arrived in big waves in the decade of the nineties. We were treated with unforgettable generosity. For instance, in the area of education, anyone who had an ambition for themselves or for their children was offered ample opportunities. Health care and housing were also immediately available. Perhaps the most concrete blessing for all of us was the optimum personal safety that comes from public laws observed throughout the society. Good laws, social justice, and peace go together, I think. Such a context allows one to pursue her lawful ambition.

**AIS:** Yes, Canada is a big country (the second largest in the world after the Russian Federation) with an attractive and varied landscape. Have you traveled beyond Ottawa and Toronto?

**MOA:** Unfortunately, not yet! I have read about the topography of the country and have seen, through television programs, how clean everything is. I am well aware of our Canadian world reputation as orderly, tidy, and civic-minded.

**AIS:** Now that we have established some of your estimations of Canada and Toronto, let's move on to your own life. How have you been?

**MOA:** My life has been highly satisfactory. I have had a job I liked and an environment that was pleasant. Unfortunately, however, I became very sick a few years ago. This condition changed my daily routine and the structure of my life. We will talk about this drastic development later.

**AIS:** Fair enough, but one further question on this topic: since you do not work, how do you conduct your time?

**MOA:** I have reorganized my day to such an extent that I spend a number of hours in the gym doing exercises to sustain a degree of fitness. In addition, another "positive" fallout from the status of my ill health is the new hours I have been able to dedicate to sorting out and labeling my large collection of Somali songs.

**AIS:** So, during your regular visit to the gym, do you see other Somali women exercising? The general assumption is that Somali men and, more so, Somali females do not take advantage of such facilities available in most neighborhoods.

**MOA:** This is a perplexing item. You see, the gym that I frequent is solely for women. Yet, all I see are women from many other backgrounds, except Somalis. When I am visiting Somali homes or run into people in the streets, Somali women tell me that they are planning to come and use the gym. However, I have not seen anyone there.

**AIS:** This sounds familiar. In the U.S.A., there is growing medical evidence that American-Somali women are developing serious weight problems to the extent that some are already experiencing obesity. We are glad you are taking a different approach.

**MOA:** Thank you, but one must realize that a significant part of this problem is the dramatic change that has taken place in the lifestyle and daily rhythm of Somali people living in the diaspora—particularly in the Global North, like North America. In the old country, there were few cars and no trains. Consequently, walking was the main form of performing errands and getting to appointments. The indirect value of

such circumstances included daily exercises. Here in Canada, almost everyone has more than enough to eat and easy access to transport. Moreover, many have taken to consuming a lot of sweets, such as ice cream! So, with quick availability of comfortable daily habits, many forget or are unaware of the downside of such acculturation. I, too, got into this rut. It will take my illness to compel me to change my ways.

**AIS:** You were born in Djibouti, in the late 1950s. This was still the time of French colonialism. Could you tell me about some of your early memories about Djibouti?

**MOA:** Unfortunately, there is not much I can recall. We left Djibouti when I was a small baby. My mother, Sahra Omer Goud, who was very involved in the nationalist activities of decolonization, was forced to leave Djibouti. She was a member of the active grassroots supporting Mr. Mahamoud Harbi, the leader of the pro-independence movement.

**AIS:** Where were you sent to?

**MOA:** We were thrown across the border, at Loyaade, inside the about-to-become independent Somali Republic. Later, however, I will come back for visits to Djibouti since many members of my family lived there. My travels into the city were always underground, but such visits kept me informed of the repressive conditions prevailing in French Somaliland.

**AIS:** The Republic of Djibouti became independent in 1977. In the eyes of many observers, the country has made notable success in the areas of law and order, social and political stability, and public facilities. However, there is growing concern over the intensity of *qaat* consumption and cigarette smoking, including their spread among young people and women. As far as you can recollect from your early years in Djibouti, was this condition conspicuously prevalent?

**MOA:** Yes, *qaat* chewing and smoking were, even then, visible economic activities and cultural habits. I think this was partly a way to shelter from, if not forget for a few hours, the lethal temperatures of the zone and partly a form of entertainment. But it is important to stress here that chewing *qaat* and smoking were primarily male habits. Few women, mostly very senior in age, dabbled in these activities. Today, the range and level of consumption are comprehensive. In other words, what at one time was limited to a few hours in the afternoon (or mostly the weekend) has now become *the* most common daily habit among most of the adolescent and adult populations.

**AIS:** In my visit to the area in late 2007, I heard often the argument that both the Ethiopian state authorities and the growers of *qaat* have been deliberately pushing *qaat* consumption among the Djibouti population. The main reason is that such an export item is a source of much needed hard currency for Ethiopia. What do you think?

**MOA:** It is very true! But it is not only Ethiopia; Kenya has the same objectives. Both countries see the Somali people in the Horn as a primary market of addicts for their *qaat* exports. This is socially, economically, and politically damaging to Somali people wherever they live. In Djibouti, for example, the most successful *qaat* importers have not only a high standard of material comfort but they are lionized by their respective communities. Among the most ugly sights in Djibouti (and it has its counter example in the rest of the Somali-inhabited territories) are the women who sit in spots in every street selling, through retail, small bundles of *qaat*. All in all, this is a form of cultural and economic defeat for the Somalis.

**AIS:** In North America, major illicit drug traders distribute their products into vulnerable communities through dealers and street pushers. Do you think the *qaat* business is similar to such an operation?

**MOA:** Yes, in general. However, *qaat* is legal.

**AIS:** What about your schooling?

**MOA:** I started elementary school in Hargeisa. It was called Rees School, named for one of the senior officers of British Somaliland. Because I was getting home-schooling at night, I was able to skip two grades, after the first year. Soon, I was in the intermediate boarding school for girls. In the midst of this, my mother moved to Jowhar, in southern Somali Republic. In my senior year in the intermediate school, I went to Djibouti for a holiday. There, I told my relatives that I was educated enough to get a paying job. My aunt (my mother's sister) laughed but since I was insistent took me to a gas station. She knew the manager and, thus, lobbied him to give me a job. That didn't work. A while later, my mother came to the border post of Loyaade and sent word for me to join her. We traveled to Jowhar together. In a few days, I was registered in a Mennonite Mission school. I was the only female student. In the midst of this educational trajectory, I heard that the newly created Somali Airlines was recruiting young hostesses. Without informing my mother, I put in an application.

**AIS:** How old are you then?

**MOA:** I think early in my teens. During the screening, I was told I was too young. Because I was so eager, I decided to monetarily bribe the person at the municipality office responsible for birth certificate records. This worked! A friend of my family helped me to dress in adult clothes and shoes. With these changes in place, I took the examinations. My English competence was good enough to help me pass that test. I also satisfied the other airline service-specific tasks. After some difficult conversations with my mother (she was adamant that I get, at least, a complete secondary education), she blessed me to become one of the first four Somali girls to be appointed as cabin crew for the fledgling Somali Airlines. A while later, I was posted to the headquarters office at Mogadishu Airport and then to the main ticketing office in Shabelli Hotel at the heart of the city. This was a lovely life, until the destabilizing political tension began to engulf the country. This condition was made worse by the fallout from the Ethiopian/Somali war of 1977–78. As citizens with some means began the exodus out of the Somali Republic, I consulted with my mother. With her blessings I went to Djibouti, where I quickly got hold of legal documents to live and work in the new independent state. I got a job with the just established Air Jibouti. The then Minister of Transport in Djibouti, Mr. Aden Robleh Awaleh, a man I helped in his participation in the anti-colonial resistance, was indispensable in securing this appointment.

**AIS:** Let's look into what you are most known for—that is, your reputation in collecting Somali popular songs/literature. What reasons and events made you become interested in this project?

**MOA:** I think this goes back to my early childhood years in Hargeisa. At that time, our home was neighbor to the residences of numerous *Fannaaniin*, including Hassan Sheikh Muumin, who would later become one of the all time great composers of plays and songs. During their rehearsal sessions, I will deliver tea and water, as well as run other small errands for them. Whenever an opportunity arose, I will sit by them and listen with mesmerized eyes. Here, too, I saw then-young female and male stars, such as Bahsen, Magool, Osman Mohamed, Mohamed Ahmed, and Mohamed Yusuf.

**AIS:** This sounds like a lovely and unique socialization for you.

**MOA:** Yes, I was very fortunate! The theater was also close by, as well as the residence of the eminent composer, Mr. Yusuf Haji Aden. The whole neighborhood became a second home for me.

**AIS:** When did you actually begin the task of collecting?

**MOA:** I first started to attend plays and then record them.

**AIS:** Do you remember the first one?

**MOA:** Yes, it was *Shabeelnaagood*, in 1968. The artists were generous enough to always give me a pass to attend their performances in the National Theatre in Mogadishu. When I left the Somali Republic for Djibouti, I had with me a large bag, which contained what was already a significant number of tapes. In Djibouti, I set my mind to become even more committed. I made a habit of visiting shops that sold Somali songs from everywhere, including those produced and recorded in parts of the Somali Republic.

**AIS:** But work of this kind is not easy. It is now nearly forty years since you began collecting. The assignment requires ambition, perseverance, energy, and monetary expenditures. How have you been able to sustain this four-decade-old commitment? Moreover, given the decomposition of the Somali national institutions and the destruction of what there were of libraries and archives, what is the source of your incomparable forbearance?

**MOA:** You see, Professor Ahmed, there is this basic rule: if you are deeply in love with something, you stay with it, through thick and thin, right? In my case, Somali musical and literary compositions were and are my most dearest love. When I started this, I used my first paycheck (about 400 shillings, around \$60) to buy a tape recorder. Fortunately, my mother was sympathetic enough that she let me make the investment. I believed then, as I do now, that *Sugaan* is a critical element of culture, particularly among the Somali people. It pervades Somali life, regardless of the region, the epoch, or the topic of concern. If one was eager to find out about the stage of Somali cultural development and salient national preoccupations, the best sources were the major plays and songs by the *Abwaans*.

**AIS:** Are you saying that, at their best, the Somali *Fannaaniin* and *Abwaans* are the eyes and ears of the society?

**MOA:** Of course! If the Somali people and, more so, the ruling elite listened attentively to the warnings of the *Abwaans*, I am confident that the country could have avoided many of the factors that contributed to the pulverization.



**AIS:** Somali scholars often think of themselves, perhaps pretentiously, as the brains, eyes, and ears of the nation. Are you saying that the artists are equal to them?

**MOA:** [Hearty laugh] Yes, and, I believe, they are *better* than you scholars! *Fannaaniin* live closer to durable myths, yet they are unafraid to peek into the future.

**AIS:** Interesting! Could you elaborate?

**MOA:** First, at the general level, I believe that a *Fannaan* and an *Abwaan* usually demonstrate a courageous allegiance to a vision of truth and delicate sensibilities that, together, define their sense of being in the world. Of course, the nature of this combination is brought forth through individuals and their particular styles. Moreover, a major *Abwaan* or *Fannaan*, when his/her life is no more, leaves behind an iridescence that glows for others in other times. To revise my earlier judgment, and in fairness, one could say the same about exceptional scholars—though I am not qualified to enter into their works.

**AIS:** That is remarkable. Do you want to say more on this?

**MOA:** *Abwaans* and *fannaaniin* are the creators and keepers of the best of the Somali tradition. They were a major element in the rise of collective consciousness and the efforts towards decolonization. With the dawn of independence, they kept a flickering vision of national unity and purpose among the people and warned of the gravity of the gathering menace that was to envelop them. But the tragic happening was that the ruling elite paid little attention and, thus, our material conditions deteriorated and the vicious and greedy struggle for self-interest became the paradigm of social relations. The artists found themselves increasingly marginalized, at times castigated or even forced into silence.

**AIS:** We will come to this point later, but for now let's stay with the value of *Fann*. In my last interview with the majestic Hodeide, he suggested that the source of the insights of scholars and that of the *Fannaaniin* are very similar. Furthermore, Hodeide proffers that the only way in which the Somali people could regroup in order to successfully address their continuing catastrophe is for the *Fannaaniin* and the scholars to collaborate in regenerating a strong sense of peoplehood. What do you think?



**MOA:** I am always very hesitant to enter in a discussion about politics among Somalis. Nonetheless, as a person with national feelings, I am in full agreement with Hodeide. The combined intelligence and wisdom of both could be a basis for a renewal of a spirit of collective belonging. Here, it is also important to remind you and other readers that there were/are some *Abwaans* knowledgeable about both the worlds of the scholar and that of Somali literary tradition.

**AIS:** That is a marvelous point! You would recall Abdillahi Sultan, Timaade, the greatest Somali poet of the last nine decades, whose memorable compositions in the early 1960s contained warnings about what he saw as a rising tug-of-war between the vile behavior, on the part of some, of “clanizing” everything to raid the commons and those who, on the contrary, insisted on civic integrity and competence.

**MOA:** Yes, Timaade was an oracle! The beauty of his aesthetic, morality, courage, and intelligent foresight were incomparable. However, I would like to bring your attention to one of Hassan Sheikh Muumin’s lesser-known plays, *Gaarabildhaan*. In this play of 1969, you will find songs of profound social illumination. One of the songs, “*Geed madi ah*,” sung by Hibo Mohamed, uses the image of a solitary tree—so depended upon by a community for shade-cum-protection from the elements—that is wantonly cut down to underscore the disaster that follows when the state becomes the antithesis of social and economic development. Within a few months later, President Sharmarke was assassinated and the military coup took place. In short, the superb *Abwaan* not only holds feeling and thought together, he or she has some of the power of a soothsayer (*Faaliyeh*).

**AIS:** In terms of your collection, is there a particular category that you have emphasized? How would you describe it?

**MOA:** My main approach has been to collect all types of popular songs. In a way, songs are like a historical document—a ledger, if you like. You can trace the lineaments of the social evolution of modern Somali society through popular songs. Also, I have been collecting plays and poetry. I have in my possession nearly fifty tapes of poetry. But I have not limited my work to gathering only. In fact, I, in addition, transcribe them. The latter is useful for someone who might want to sing one specific composition. Unfortunately, my illness disrupted this effort, but I have transcribed over 2,000 songs. This work includes the accurate

registration of the name of the composer, the name of the singer, and perhaps the *oud* player in the case of *Qaaci*.

**AIS:** In terms of quantity, how many songs are in your archives?

**MOA:** I would estimate over 9,000 songs.

**AIS:** What about poetry and plays?

**MOA:** I have collected some. However, most poetry and plays have come to me in incomplete portions. The conditions of some tapes, when they had come into my hands, were already bad. Poor sound recording or/and decomposition has been the big problem.

**AIS:** I know you have been busy in transferring the taped materials to digital disks. Could you comment on this effort?

**MOA:** After initial difficulties concerning both the nature of the technology in the last decade and my meager resources, it became possible for me to purchase a machine to undertake the transfer. The cost was about \$8,000; and I want to acknowledge here the crucial financial support that I had received from Professor Lidwien Kapteijns of Wellesley College. As you know, she is a significant social historian of Somali society who is also passionate about Somali popular songs and literary works. Since acquiring the right software and computer, the task is less arduous.

**AIS:** Many of the million or so who are part of the Somali diaspora-in-the-making are hungry for cultural items that could aid keeping identity alive. I assume you get countless requests for copies of the songs, poems, and plays. Tell me about this. Don't you get tired of people asking for free copies? I am subjected to the same pleading with regard to *Bildhaan* and my scholarly publications. Many don't appreciate the hidden cost of such endeavors!

**MOA:** Yes, I do get endless requests. But I have a few principles: first, I *never* lend the originals. Second, I don't sell copies. This is *not* a business for me. However, if an individual asks for a particularly important purpose, such as research, I do send a free copy.

**AIS:** Given the vastness of the collection, have you thought about a secure public repository for it, such as a library? It seems to me this is crucial in light of the destruction of Somali national institutions.

**MOA:** This has been preoccupying my mind for some time. In fact, part of my reason to transcribe is, someday, to have the disks and the written materials in a suitable library.

**AIS:** Now, I would like to turn to your personal aesthetic taste with regard to Somali songs—the words, the singer, the composer, the *oud* players. I want our readers to know a bit about your *dooq!* Let's begin with themes. Which do you prefer: patriotism, love, environmental, war, travel...?

**MOA:** [Laughs] As you say, there are different themes. However, and broadly speaking, I am usually taken by how a song captures the prevailing situation in the existence of an individual, a community, a country, or the whole world. If a person's priority is romantic, the songs that address the contradictions of love will be most appealing. The same holds for other moments.

**AIS:** So the feeling and circumstances set the aesthetic priority?

**MOA:** Exactly! I remember in my years in Mogadishu, one would be taking an evening walk along one of the main streets. The tea shops, full of men only, will have their radio sets blaring out weekly requested songs by Radio Mogadishu listeners. Since as women one could not go inside or sit outside with the male customers, one would stand in the alley and strain one's ears to catch if a song that you liked was playing. I have had such experiences on numerous occasions!

**AIS:** If, as you assert, a song is tied, in the memory of a person, to a particular moment or context, could you tell us about those songs that stand out for you, regardless of whether they are in your collection or not?

**MOA:** For me, the most appealing are those that speak to national issues. From the beginning, they touched my sense of patriotism and attachment to Somali society. But I have also been attracted to those compositions that dealt with romance between women and men. My specific criteria for preference, among these songs, were/are three: (a) melodious musical sweetness (*Laxan*), (b) rich and purposive verses that testify to a command of the language, and (c) sweetness of the voice. A song that combines these three characteristics is bound, in my opinion, to soar in popularity among mature listeners.

**AIS:** OK, but let me push you to name specific songs that you deem most dear to your taste.

**MOA:** Ah, Magool's voice and songs are the most distinctively magnificent! In the springtime of her performances at Radio Hargeisa, the most unforgettable for me are the songs she shared, in *daran doori* style, with other greats such as Osman Mohamed or Mohamed Ahmed. Other singers that I like most include Mohamed Suliman, particularly when the topic is patriotism. The early years of independence stand out for me as compelling.

**AIS:** You mean the honeymoon years of the early 1960s?

**MOA:** Oh, yes! Remember Mohamed Suliman's "*Dharaartan waxyeeladii dhaqdhaqay*" or Osman Mohamed's and Nooleya's "*Naa pal kaalayoo bal kaalay*;" and "*Daansho daanshoodoo Kudiirso*" by Dirie Baalbaal. And, of course, there were Mandeq's cluster of civic-spirited songs.

**AIS:** What about love songs?

**MOA:** For me, Magool's rendition of "*Kiidhaba Jacaylkuna*" occupies a unique spot in my aesthetic taste. Her voice and the simile of likening true love to a tree with deep roots that cannot be easily pulled up are a masterful combination for the ages. The words include:

Dhirta xididka Hoosaa dhulka Loogubeeraa  
Way dhici lahaayeen, dhismohooda weeyee,  
Dhismohooda weeyee  
Kiidhaba jacaylkuna halkii Kama dhaqaaqoo  
Dhidibaa u aasane.

Maybe you should sing, Professor Ahmed? I hear you have a decent voice. [Long laugh]

**AIS:** Really? I am not sure I can do justice to this. [Laugh]

**MOA:** Oh, come on—you can do it! I heard you had sung the same song over the BBC Somali Service.

[Ahmed Samatar makes a feeble attempt, and Maryan joins to encourage him.]

**AIS:** To go back to the *Fannaaniin*. Elaborate for me why Magool appeals to you more than any other female singer.

**MOA:** Her voice is clear, powerful, and flexible. The second person is Zahra Ahmed. For love songs, she is exceptional. Her voice is tender, undulating, and creates a feeling of sweetness and longing. Another *Fannaanad* worth mentioning is Bahsan—perhaps the most moving female voice when it comes to patriotic songs.

**AIS:** How about the men? Who are your favorite singers?

**MOA:** By far, it is Mohamed Suliman! He has been at it for nearly fifty years and yet the unique quality of honeyed suppleness has not changed a bit. It is a voice that is at once durable and enchanting. He is in a class of his own! There are other performers of special appeal to me. For instance, there was Abdi Tahleel, so fine a voice that it was sometimes mistaken for Mohamed Suliman's. Others I like include Ahmed Yasin (*Digfeer*), a member of the national military concert group. And then, of course, the entrancing Omer Duuleh I knew well; we were good friends for a long time.

**AIS:** I hear from many Somalis, including some of the senior artists, that the late Omer Duuleh, in addition to his unique talents of singing, *oud* playing, and composing, was the most humane and urbane of his generation. You think that is an accurate judgment?

**MOA:** Absolutely! He was, by far, a most generous, honorable, and congenial—traits punctuated by courteous playfulness. Here is an interesting fact about Omer's multiple gifts: in the early days in Hargeisa, when female singers were very rare, Omer would, in the plays, take up the female singer's role. His voice was at once mellifluous and adaptable, with a natural thin edge to it.

**AIS:** What about the southern parts of the country? Anyone that captures your sense of a beautiful voice?

**MOA:** Yes, there are outstanding figures that I would like to mention. For instance, there are the famous Hassan Aden Samantar and Abdilkadir Juba. Perhaps most distinguished are Ahmed Naji Saad (so good in Banaadiri style) and Fadumo Qasim Hilowle. In fact, I have in my collection some of the earliest songs by Ahmed Naji! In any discussion of this kind, even if partly based on personal preferences, it would be inexcusable to overlook the multi-talented Asha Abdow. The imperishability of her dulcet voice over many decades can only be matched by Mohamed Suliman.

**AIS:** Since *oud* playing dominates Somali musical instrumentation, who are the individuals that stand out for you?

**MOA:** Of course, Hodeide is the supreme master. But there are others, many who came of age under his influence, that ought to be singled out: Gobe, Daoud Ali, Omer Duuleh, and Jeen Haji. Perhaps the one *oud* player who could measure up to Hodeide, and in addition is tal-

ented in playing other instruments such as the lute and violin, was the striking Hussein Bajuni, who hailed from the most southern tip of the Somali Republic.

**AIS:** What about the current time? Are there any upcoming *oud* players of note?

**MOA:** I have not heard of one or seen any. That is sad, but I think a main reason has to do with the easy use of computerized sound in creating a tune. In other words, a mechanization of music setting seems to be supplanting the older process of craftsmanship. In the later context, the cultivation of the skill—that is the intimate coordination of the hand, the ear, and the head—requires years of apprenticeship, practice, and mixed with one’s own ingenuity. Another new and horrible habit in the Somali diaspora is the wanton license by the young “wannabe” *Fannaan* who pirates the songs of great artists, feeds it into a computer and plays the distortions in public as if it is his or her own creation. This transgression is an assault not only on the integrity of the original musician (particularly when they are alive), but misguides the youth who, otherwise, would have embraced the long exacting and hands-on cultivation of musical prowess.

**AIS:** So, in your opinion, those computer-driven replaying styles have yet to earn plaudits for its practitioners?

**MOA:** Yes! But, Professor Ahmed, such a judgment should not be taken as total rejection of the role of new technologies, like the computer, in sustaining and/or offering innovations in Somali musical traditions. Such closed-mindedness, I might add, will deprive us of many techniques that could improve Somali cultural production. I cannot over-emphasize, however, this challenge: we must devise ways to encourage and celebrate innovation and yet protect the distinctive genius of the originals. Perhaps, in the future, there will come about some version of copyright or intellectual property laws fit for the new Somali artistic time.

**AIS:** Is the main effect of the ongoing diasporic experiences, for Somali *Fann*, primarily negative?

**MOA:** Not necessarily. The outcome depends on at least two factors: (a) Whether those who are born or growing up outside of the old country make a serious commitment to study seriously; and (b) whether the older generation is willing to patiently offer to the young standards of excellence that are also open to new interrogation and interventions.

Remember the vicissitudes of transition are an essential element in every living Somali person's time—perhaps more so in the diaspora.

**AIS:** Could you move on to the composers (*Abwaan*) who are your top individuals in that part of the history you know?

**MOA:** I could name many, but I still start with Hassan Sheikh Muumin. He was my uncle, I knew him from the time of my earliest childhood to his death about two years ago. He was the one who introduced me to *Fann*. He taught me about Zeila's fabulous tradition of song and dance; he instructed me in patriotic songs; and he was the elder who gave me away in my first marriage. In short, Hassan was family!

**AIS:** I didn't have a sense of your closeness until I discovered the background to your co-authored article, on Hassan's work, in *Bildhaan*, "The *Hoobal* as Creator, Preserver, and Social Critic of the National Heritage," in 2002. What about him as a composer? What were his primary distinctions for those who are unfamiliar with his legacy?

**MOA:** I think there are three characteristics that make him unique in the pantheon of great Somali composers: awesome valor, breathtaking inventiveness, and unwavering patriotism. Moreover, he was a learned man in Arabic literature and Islamic philosophy. Remember also that he was a member of the national committee that shepherded the writing of the Somali language. In short, for me, Hassan was a saintly *Abwaan* who pressed into service his supreme gifts to put Somali collective consciousness under consistently critical and sophisticated examination.

**AIS:** Hassan, like the other hundreds of thousands, fled the violent mess and settled in Copenhagen, Denmark. Did you talk to him during this time?

**MOA:** Unfortunately, no! However, I have in the collection four cassettes of his recordings. The topics include an autobiographical sketch and reflection on the nature and role of *Abwaan* in society. In addition to Hassan, there are other reputable composers that I would like to identify: Sahardeed Mohamed (the composer of many of Magool's famous lyrics), Ali Sugulle, Hussein Aw Farah, and, a bit later, Kariye, Hassan Ganay, Daar, Hadraawi, and Yum Yum.

**AIS:** During our lunchtime, you made a quick reference to the standard of living of the artists. Would you like to elaborate on this?



**MOA:** In brief, I would say this: the material circumstances of their daily lives and their artistic faculties were a total mismatch. The first always threatened all of them with pauperism and neglect on the part of the elite and the public; the latter affirmed a rare blessing for the society. I think most people saw the whole artistic scene as no more than cheap entertainment to have a good time. This condition condemned them (except the most resilient) to behave like vagrants amenable to abuse, resignation, and isolation.

**AIS:** You say some were less vulnerable than others. How about the conditions of female artists? The general impression is that they, as a category, suffered more—including an unfair imputing of indiscretion in their personal character. In other words, performing artistically in public forums was seen as synonymous with social vulgarity—maybe even prostitution. What is your reading of this perception?

**MOA:** Yes, in the early years, the reputation of a girl whose singing voice was broadcast and, thus, who entered *Fann* was the height of shameful social scandal. This ostracism compounded their alienation. Consequently, the *fannaaniin* became their own community so as to protect each other. This is a main reason behind the concoction of nicknames for the early female pioneers, such as Magool, Mandeq, Bahsan, and Gududow, to cover their family identity. Now, there were segments of the Somali people (mostly the rising educated) who became aware of the predicament and recognized the value of their artistic work to the evolving production of Somali culture. But these were a minority until the beginning of the decade of the 1970s—a time that ushered in more stress on secular and modernistic values. Let me conclude by making this qualifier to an earlier point I made about the material poverty of *fannaaniin*. In the late 1970s, some, like Mohamed Suliman, began to take intelligent advantage of their popularity. They turned part of their talent into money-generating business and, in due time, became relatively prosperous through investing in Mogadishu's real estate.

**AIS:** We might be entering a new, more intolerant time to *Fann*, and especially the public appearance of female singers and actors! What about plays? Which are the ones you like most?

**MOA:** There are many, but the one I would like to get my hands on is Hassan Sh. Muumin's *Gaaraabildhaan*, less well known than now iconic *Shabeelnaagood*. Another play is *Galbeed waa la xoreeyay* (the Libera-

tion of the [Somali] West Lands) by Hassan Abdillahi, Ganay. Kariye's *Jacaylkii waalaye aynnu weerarka aadno* (Love has Gone Mad, Let's go on Attack) is also riveting. There are many more stellar plays but we will have to wait for another occasion to identify and discuss them.

**AIS:** In addition to your archival work, did you ever get the urge to compose?

**MOA:** Not very seriously, but, in 1974, I wrote a short story that I thought might be a script for a play. I presented it to an *Abwaan* I knew, by the name of Osman Aden Askeri. He liked the script, took some of the songs, and then gave the play the title *Wadhaf iyo Shimbiro War iskuma Hayaan* (The Sling and the Bird are Not Aware of Each Other). I was disappointed. Be that as it may, though I wanted to do more composing, I did not have the leisure time to concentrate. For such a task, you need lots of free hours and some independent means to support yourself. Later, the creeping chaos of national putrefaction engulfed everyone, including myself. Survival and, later, decampment became *the* priorities.

**AIS:** Do you know of any Somali women who have engaged in composition of plays or songs?

**MOA:** Yes, I have heard that both Sado Ali and Hibo Mohamed have composed some songs. I have also been told that Faynus Sheikh Dahir in Mogadishu had made some successful forays. Talented women composers were beginning to appear but the bloody times of the late 1980s to the present have derailed all that.

**AIS:** In 1999, a notable academic book appeared that you co-authored with someone else. The title of the work is *Women's Voices in a Man's World*. Your co-author, Professor Lidwien Kapteijns, teaches at Wellesley College. Could you say more about the nature of the collaboration and the volume itself?

**MOA:** Professor Kapteijns is more than a close friend; she is a sister to me. The first time I met her was in Djibouti many, many years ago. She earlier had made initial contact in the U.S. with a group of Djiboutian participants of an annual meeting of the African Studies Association. She inquired, after salutations in Somali (she spoke a bit already), if they knew of a woman in Djibouti that she would like to establish correspondence with. The young men looked at each other and, with a smile, replied that they had the right person for her. When the Djiboutians returned, they told me about Professor Kapteijn's query and

desire to learn more about Somali social history and literary traditions. I took the address and sent word to her, which triggered a flow of correspondence between us. After a while, she traveled to the Somali Republic and stayed in Mogadishu for two weeks. Later, she came to Djibouti and spent a month with me. Soon, we started to set up plans, met others (particularly women), hunted for materials, and immersed ourselves in extensive discussions on various topics of Somali culture. It was the beginning of a deep solidarity that flourishes to this day. When I resettled in North America, we began the project of systematic organization of what we had gathered. Dr. Kapteijns brought to the collaborative project her academic skills, English language competence, mastery of the broad contours of Somali history, and vigorous appetite for Somali language and literature. I made my contribution by way of my inner knowledge of Somali culture—especially in the demanding area of artistic life and work that has been a large part of this interview. The collection which we have been discussing earlier was a primary source for most of the volume.

**AIS:** The book is well regarded by Somalist scholars and general readers. You ought to be proud of it, I think.

**MOA:** Yes, we both are!

**AIS:** Many I have talked with make the point that *Fann* is crucial in life. What does *Fann* mean for you?

**MOA:** There are, in my opinion, two perspectives on this topic. One sees *Fann* as a source of passing time or fleeting entertainment (*madada-alo*). Thus, there is neither much attention paid to nor appreciation of the hard creative labor that lies behind the composition and the event. The second understands *Fann* as a precious marrow in the making of strong bones of a culture and national identity. Among the lasting indicators of the dignity of a society is the degree of excellence of its *Fann* production.

**AIS:** Do most Somalis realize this point?

**MOA:** Not very well, I must say. And at this time, savage particularism seems to permeate people's consciousness. This is one of the greatest consequences of the Somali condition.

**AIS:** Some assert that *Fann* and politics ought to be hermetically sealed from each other. Your thoughts on this, please?

**MOA:** No! I believe in this formula: a patriot is, by definition, political and an intelligent political person is usually a patriot. Here, I want to distinguish between mature political sensibilities and dishonorable scheming for exclusive power. *Fann* is the arena where the sparkle of language, artistic creativity, truth, and national yearnings converge. A *Fannaan* or *Abwaan*, depending on the nature of the talent, is a key force in the constitution of the spirit of a nation. You know this historical fact: in the time of decolonization as well as the first decade of General Siyaad Barre's military order, *Fann* played a pivotal role in mobilizing Somali communities everywhere. Aesthetic refinement and political awareness energized each other. Two sorrowful fallouts from the current national debacle are a rupture of that mutual infusion and the severe impoverishment of each. I shiver every time I think about this! If the current long and violent darkness is not to become a permanent condition, then a resurgence of the artistic virtues of rich intuition and bold imagination must rise again.

**AIS:** Deep thought! You have shared part of your vast knowledge of Somali *Fann*. Now I would like to shift to a more private development in your life—the battle with breast cancer. This is a frightening ailment that affects (and kills) many women in North America. Moreover, we hear from doctors in both the U.S.A. and Canada that among the populations of Somali women in both countries, cancer incidences are becoming more frequent. Nonetheless, few Somali women speak publicly about their experiences. In fact, as far as I know, you are the first to talk about this openly. Is there a reason for this?

**MOA:** Yes! I want Somali women who might be reading this interview (particularly the educated younger generation) to know that confronting such disease is neither unique nor something to be ashamed of. Moreover, if one catches the illness, an early detection and treatment is very critical.

**AIS:** How did you first find out about the disease?

**MOA:** One morning (mid-November 2004), sitting by the computer and working on the collection, I touched my left breast and felt a large lump. I became suspicious, so, with a bit of worry, I made an immediate appointment with my physician. When I visited with him, he examined me carefully and thoroughly. There and then, he decided to send me to a specialist. I arrived there a few days later and a mammographic detail was taken of the breast area. The doctor saw a conspicu-

ous growth. Soon, he told me that he will make an incision to take out a tissue and examine it. A few days later, the analysis came back and confirmed that the tumor was not only cancerous but it had expanded. The doctor judged that the condition was a “second degree” in the stages of the development of a tumor. In addition, he suggested that a significant portion of the breast would have to be removed as early as possible. In the midst of this devastating news was one positive item: the probability of survival was as high as 85 percent. The operation was set for January 5, 2005.

**AIS:** How long did it take?

**MOA:** About seventy-two minutes.

**AIS:** Did you stay in the hospital for long?

**MOA:** No. The whole procedure was done as an outpatient treatment. I returned home in a few hours.

**AIS:** How did you cope?

**MOA:** The hospital sent a nurse to help me for the two weeks that immediately followed the operation. She would visit everyday to examine the wound, clean it, and administer the medication. After the elapse of that fortnight, the nurse would come twice a week. This is the period when I started to go through chemotherapy—a treatment administered once every three weeks.

**AIS:** What was it like?

**MOA:** Excruciatingly painful, Professor Ahmed! The greatest source of agony was the big needle through which the injection was made. In fact, I think the real challenge is not so much the cancerous tissue but the intensity of the chemotherapy. Among other effects, one loses almost all one’s hair, in addition to a precipitous decline in appetite for food. I was hospitalized three times (the longest for two weeks) for the severe side effects of the treatment.

**AIS:** What happened next?

**MOA:** After the chemotherapy, I was sent to another unit for radiation. This treatment was scheduled once every four weeks for a period of six months. It took another year to complete the whole process.

**AIS:** Besides your nurse and your doctors, did you have any other people to support you?

**MOA:** My mother was always there. Her loving attention and that of other relatives continue to give me confidence and security. Furthermore, I had the considerate succor of friends, specifically Professor Lidwien Kapteijns who came to visit on a number of difficult occasions when I needed company.

**AIS:** How do you feel now?

**MOA:** Though I am taking some medications in the form of tablets, my doctors tell me that I have almost defeated the disease. My strength is back; I exercise; I watch my diet; and have a new zeal for living. However, I am also sobered by coming face-to-face with the fragility of the human body and life.

**AIS:** Any last words for Somali women?

**MOA:** Breast cancer is a major killer of women around the world, but it is survivable. My first advice is that every woman should make a habit of checking herself in her home every day. Second, a yearly visit to the doctor for a thorough physical examination is critical, including a mammographic display of the status of the organ. It is of utmost importance that a women gets in touch with her doctor as soon as she feels suspicious that something unusual is happening. Finally, the illness is not just physical; there is a mental dimension to it. The latter is a high degree of anxiety, including possibly acute depression. It is, therefore, vital to redesign one's rhythm of daily living by, for example, joining networks of social solidarity. Locking oneself from the rest of the world is a recipe not only for loneliness, but, in addition, such a situation undermines the body's struggle against the disease.

**AIS:** I am impressed by your strength and will to live. Thank you, Maryan!

**MOA:** Thank you, too! I appreciate the opportunity to share parts of my life story with the readers of *Bildhaan*.

\*The interview was conducted in Somali and translated by Professor Ahmed Samatar.