



**AN INTERVIEW WITH ABDULAHI A. AHMED “Somaliyow”
OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**

By WardheerNews
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Editor’s Note: *Libraries serve as community cultural centers, preserve historic artifacts, oral histories, and a place where students and individuals gather to study, research and explore. Despite the increased traction in the digital age and the perceived obsolescence, libraries still remain and play a key role as learning and cultural centers. Thus, WardheerNews.com is pleased to bring to its readers an interview with Abdulahi Ahmed (Somaliyow), a librarian at the Library of Congress, the world's largest library. Abdelkarim Hassan conducted the interview for WardheerNews.com.*

WardheerNews (WDN): Abdulahi, we are delighted to welcome you to WardheerNews; before we delve into the interview, could you please share with us a brief background about yourself?

Mr. Abdulahi Ahmed: I was born and raised in Jamaame, Somalia where I attended my primary education at Jubba Mennonite Mission School. Jamaame is a small agricultural town on the banks of the Jubba River. It was a place where everybody knew each other and you never locked your doors. I have also lived in Kismaayo and played professional soccer for the Port of Kismaayo team (DEKEDDA).

After a brief stint of working in Saudi Arabia, I decided to pursue a more rewarding career, so I immigrated to The United States of America and obtained a Master’s degree in International Commerce and Policy from George Mason University. In conjunction with my studies, I did a year of study abroad at the Institute of Economics of Beijing China, Institute of International Economics in Geneva, Switzerland and Oxford University England. I joined the Library of Congress in 2003.

I authored two books, about Somali culture, *History of Somali Plays and Arts with Mohamed Sh. Hassan in 2011* and *Somali Folk Dances in 2014*

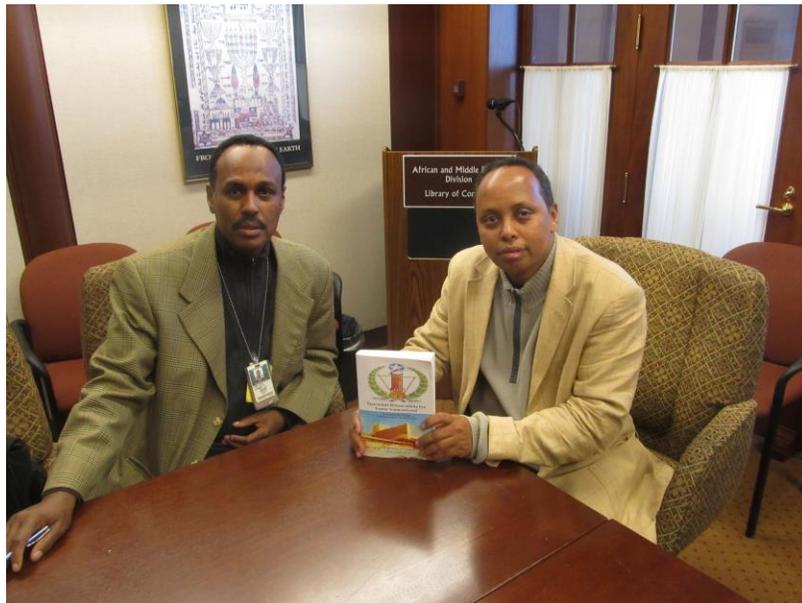


From left, Library staff members Eve Ferguson, Mary-Jane Deeb, Marieta Harper, Charles Stanhope, Abdulahi Ahmed and Angel Batiste (seated) join in honoring Chinua Achebe, center. - Lili Irvani (*the Library of Congress*)

WDN: The Library of Congress prides itself as the largest library in the world with more than 158 million matreial consiting of books and other pusblihed works; what can you tell us about the history of the library?

Abdulahi: The Library of Congress officially serves the United States Congress, but it is also the de facto national library of the United States. It is the oldest federal cultural institution in the United States. By 1990, the Library of Congress became the world's largest library, and retains that title today. The Library's collections are universal, not limited by subject, format, or national boundary, and include research materials from all parts of the world in more than 450 languages. Two thirds of the books it acquires each year are in languages other than English.

It is not exaggerating when it is said that The Library of Congress is the storehouse of the world's knowledge and preserver of the world's memory. Case in point, it is very unfortunate that the Somali civil war has entirely wiped-out the cultural heritage of Somalia over the past two decades. When the civil war broke out in 1991, the first institutions to suffer were the universities, the museums, the libraries, the archives, the book stores and the theaters. Had the Library of Congress not had copies of many of the material that were destroyed, the losses would have been irreversible and the history and creativity of Somali people would have simply disappeared.



WDN: What division do you work in and what collections are stored in its archives?

Abdulahi: I work in The African & Middle Eastern Reading Room which is the primary public access point for materials housed in the [African and Middle Eastern Division](#) (AMED). We cover 78 countries from Morocco to Southern Africa to the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. The division's three sections--African, Hebraic, and Near East--offer in-depth reference assistance, provide substantive briefings on a wide range of subjects relating to these languages and cultures, produce guides to the library's vast resources and cooperate in developing and preserving the division's unparalleled collections.

The sheer amount of material preserved at the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) is an amazing thing itself and in the case of some countries, like Somalia, we have more materials than these countries themselves.

WDN: Since you started working at the Library of Congress, could you tell us about the most interesting material you came across in the archives of the library?

Abdulahi: One of my favorite collections is the Serials & Government Publications Division which maintains one of the most extensive newspaper collections in the world. Some of these newspapers are three centuries old. As newspapers capture the daily stories of a community and its citizens better than any other form of publication, I have read so many interesting and entertaining stories written about Somalis and Somalia in the past two centuries.

The story below appeared in *The Cook County herald: March 26, 1904 (Grand Marais, Minnesota.) 1893-1909*



CONCEIT OF THE SOMALI

His Good Opinions of Himself Are the Subject of His Song.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of the natives of Somaliland is their unbounded, preposterous conceit. Englishmen who know their language have been appalled by it. When watering his camel or his horse the Somali encourages the animal to drink by chanting to it in a monotone. It is at such moments of extemporaneous effusion that the man shines in all his glory.

The subject matter may be the experiences of the day's march, the virtues of the animal beside him, the charms of his latest wife, or his own prowess in some bloodless tribal raid. By great good fortune the following literal translation of one of these chants or songs came into my possession, and I insert it without any comment:

Will you see a man? Then behold me! I am a Somali, as perfect in size and form as Adam was after God had breathed into him his Immortal soul. Look how beautiful my curly hair is, and how majestic I look when wrapped from head to foot in my snow-white or jungle-colored thobe, although there be sometimes only one pie (a small piece of money) tied to it. My house is the desert, and I am born a free man. Free as the wind! I know neither king nor master. I am as Adam was, my own master and king. In the Jungle I tend my camels and sheep; my only labor to watch them feed. In my kerrier, my wife, my dear slave, does all the manual work, while tending

my off spring, and woe to her if she forgets to prepare my evening meal. The jedal (whip) shall then have its turn to make her remember for next day. In such a state is any man happier than I?
By Golden Penny

From such article written 111 years ago in no other place than Minnesota, a state that hosts the largest Somali population in the Diaspora, captured the mind of Somali nomad. This is indeed a captivating story and it is rare to find such interesting historical piece.

Another interesting story was as shown in the pictures below, when group of Somali artist detained at the Clark Street Police Station in Chicago, Illinois, on August 07, 1915, when they clashed with the police as result of not being paid. [The Day Book ran the story on August 7, 1915.](#)

Fourteen Somali Negroes, who raised Cain when they didn't get pay for being wild men at S. Sate St. Theater will be deported to Africa. Where in Judge Prindivilles's court garbed only in sheets and blankets.

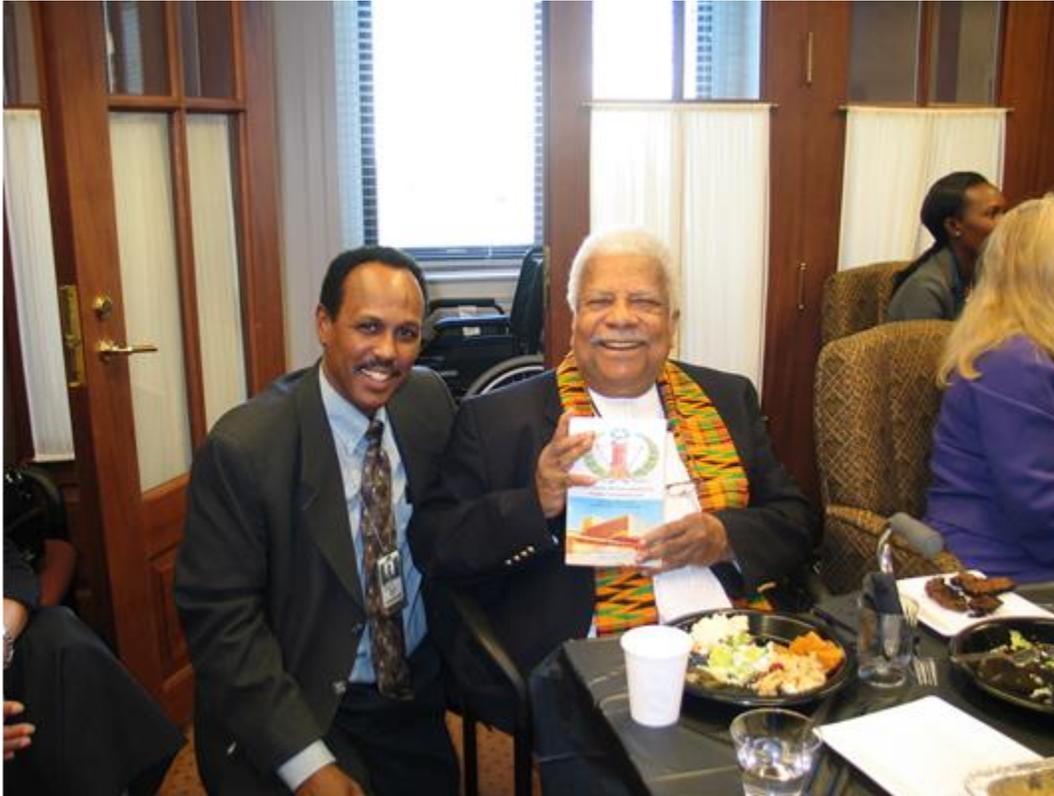




WDN: In your opinion what are the critical ingredients to build a library and how the libraries could be built or rebuilt in Somalia or Somali-inhabited regions?

Abdulahi: Libraries are among some of the most important institutions for countries that are trying to rebuild, and the Internet is a hugely necessary facilitator in that process. In the case of Somalia the challenges are numerous where there is no reliable funding, power grid, lack of good and reliable telecom-communications, infrastructure and most importantly peace and stability.

Somalia had a network of public libraries in major cities until the collapse of the central government in 1991. While efforts are now being made to restore infrastructure and collections across the country, quality remains patchy and access is very limited. Again, access to the World Wide Web across the country is limited. So, the question is who will pay, and how much for the rebuilding the country's libraries, bearing in mind the more urgent needs of rebuilding Somalia?



Abdulahi Ahmed with the late Professor Ali Mazrui

WDN: In the past, libraries were the only unique places to read, borrow books and do research, however, with the advent of the internet and the e-book revolution, do you think libraries could hold their position in the future?

Abdulahi: People are not ready to abandon the libraries, and probably it won't be in the near future. The experience of digging into a book for hundreds of pages just doesn't happen online.

Libraries are adapting to social and technological changes, but they can't be replaced. Though libraries are different from the internet and it's true that there are vast collections of information to which people can access remotely, nevertheless, a lot is still on paper in which some, the internet didn't catch up with yet. What is irreplaceable and unique, is however, the reservations of libraries collections, the free accessibility for the public, and the librarians who are the most suited experts to guide scholars and the public toward a better understanding of how to find valuable information both online and offline.

WDN: Do you think building digital libraries and this new e-books technology could change how people in Somalia and developing countries access books, or could the new technology help jump start reading programs, reading clubs etc, that could jump start a culture of reading with young people in Somalia?

Abdulahi: I understand that in some circles, digital libraries are seen as the hope for countries like Somalia in their struggle to access books, journals, newspapers, scientific and academic publications. I don't disagree with that argument totally, except, building such libraries in developing countries is a real challenge. These countries usually encounter many difficulties, such as low computer and internet penetration rates, poor IT infrastructure, lack of qualified human resources and lack of financial resources, etc. It's also important to form a strong network with universities and other learning institutions. Therefore, it is imperative to find alternative methods of building digital libraries that best fit the specific needs of Somalia.

WDN: Thank you Abdulahi for your time.

Abdullahi: You are most welcome Abdelkarim.

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See more about Abdulahi Ahmed at the Library of Congress:

[Abdulahi Ahmed discusses the Somali collections at the Library of Congress- Video](#)

[Lost at Home, Somali Cultural Memory Lives at Library by Mary-Jane Deeb](#)

Somali Folk Dances

Cayaaraha Hiddaha iyo Dhaqanka Soomaaliyeed



Abdulahi A. Ahmed (Somaliyow)

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