



Sarbeeb: The Art of Oblique Communication in Somali Culture

By Professor Said Samatar
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Editor's note: Today, November 24, 2016 marks the 12th anniversary of WardheerNews. To commemorate this occasion and one of the greatest scholars Somali speaking people have produced, [the late Professor Said Samatar](#), contribution to WardheerNews, we would like to re publish *Sarbeeb: The Art of Oblique Communication in Somali Culture*. *Sarbeeb* (written in 1995) is vintage Professor Said Samatar—reflective, cautionary and sobering. Said takes a look at the past in order to make a cogent point about our current national morass. Samatar does so by showing that, in contrast to the lawless chaos that reigns supreme among Somalis today, precolonial pastoral Somalia possessed a vibrant corpus of constraining social sanctions that regulated inter-ethnic relations. One such sanction was the cultivation of “the art of oblique communication” that governed inter-clan interactions. As Samatar demonstrates, pastoral elders of yesteryear had, through bitter experience, learned to address one another—calmly, softly, respectfully—in veiled, soothing indirect speech. Many a blunt word, as the saying goes, had a sharp edge, and the effect of a sharp edge is usually a pool of spilled blood.



To step back from the brink, *Saahid and Feetin*, the principals of the first poetic exchange below, resort to circuitous semantics, each singing about a “proverbial mare” when what they are really alluding to concerns the pains of a grief-stricken groom trying to find a face-saving, non-offensive way of squirming out of a bad marriage.

It is Somalia's great misfortune today that her muddled folk have lost the culture of cautious discourse that characterized the world of their pastoral forebears without acquiring in its place a measure of the manners and methods of modern life. We have, that is, transitioned to zero! The result: a country drenched in bloodshed. Off to the essay now:

Most societies have stylized forms of discourse and ritual action that serve to establish indirect but powerful patterns of communication. The symbols and idioms for expressing a stylized discourse vary greatly, from the mundane to the sublime and from the ordinary to the bizarre.

Among the Somalis of the Horn of Africa, the dominant medium for addressing a hidden discourse is poetry – oral and written. This is the form of art that pervades so deeply the social fabric of Somali society.

The Somalis have been described as a “nation of Poets” whose poetic heritage is intimately linked to the vicissitudes of the people's daily life. In the great demoralization that followed the collapse of the Somali state, some Somalis turned for inspiration to what a former president has called “and asset of inestimable value” – namely, their lyrical poetry that moves the Somalis in almost primeval ways, alternately inspiring them for good or inflaming them for evil.

From early times foreigners who studied Somali language and culture observed the centrality of oral poetry in Somali literary temper and tastes. For example, , in 1854 the romantic and highly eccentric British explorer, Sir Richard Burton, entered the Somali coast town of Zayla ' disguised as a Muslim holy man and traveling under the pseudonym of al_Hajj Abdullah. Burton who spoke flawless Arabic and knew Islamic theology well, resided in Zayla' for some months impressed the inhabitants with his considerable Islamic learning and by some accounts induced them to appoint him the imam of the mosque of Zayla', where he allegedly regularly led the faithful in Friday prayer.

Burton 's impressions of life in the Somali coast and the city of Harar , which he visited some months later, are recounted in his book entitled, with characteristic Victorian arrogance, the *First Footsteps in East Africa* . Among the phenomena that Burton reported with astonishment was the high level of interest in literature, oral poetry in particular, found among the Somalis. A revealing passage records his amazement:

“ The country teems with poets” Every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take great pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation.... Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan, and the great patronize light literature by keeping a poet.

The power and influence of oral poets in Somali society, rightly noted but wrongly explained by Burton over a century ago, stem from more significant social enterprises than mere singing of tribal “panegyrics.” An important factor in the power and popularity of Somali poets was the versatile use made of their poetic craft in society. For example, poetry as a principal medium of mass communication. To a large extent, therefore, the pastoral poet's prestige and influence rest on his ability, through the use of verbal art, to manipulate communication – in short, to exercise a monopolistic hold on the flow of information and ideas.

Given its alliterative and metrical regularity, Somali pastoral verse is easy to memorize, far more than prose. The significance of this fact is easy to grasp; in oral culture where writing is confined to the clerical and commercial establishment in the cities, the only library or reference material people have is memory. Thus events that are truly memorable in their clan affairs are committed to a poetic form, first to underscore their importance, and second, so they will endure in memory through the generations. In this way poetic versification enables the pastoralists not only to transmit information across considerable distances but also to record it for posterity. Hence, Somali pastoral verse functions both as social communicator and as archival repository.

In doing so, it plays a role similar to that of the press and television in Western society. Somali poets, for example, like Western Journalists and newspapermen, have a great deal to say about politics – about the acquisition and use of political power. Because it is language and the vehicle of politics, the verse produced by Somali poets is an important source of Somali history, just as the printed and broadcast word performs this function in the west.

It is the duty, for example, of the Somali pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize in poetry the dominant issues of the age – in short, to record and immortalize the history of his people. And since the poet's talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts, and actions of his times.

Before descending into the anatomy of *sarbeeb*, or the art of oblique communication, I will summarize briefly the physical and structural properties of Somali pastoral verse to suggest its flavor. First, the verse springs for the most part from a nomadic pastoral base. Even though the majority of Somalis are semi- sedentarized and semi-urbanized today, the culture is still informed by pastoralism of a kind reminiscent of that of the pre-Islamic Jahiliya Arabs (from the Age Ignorance). Indeed, in the its environment of pastoral feud and vendetta, love of horses and camel rustling, contemporary Somali society may be characterized as a modern Jahiliya . This is not to imply any racial consanguinity between Arabs and Somalis, the later being eastern Cushites related by language, blood and tradition to the Oromo of Ethiopia.

Second, the poetry of the pastoral Somalis is didactic, with a message to convey. A pastoral poem is intoned, chanted or recited, with poet presenting his work before an eager live audience, often in the circle of a campfire at night after the animals have been secured in a corral. A distinguished poet has a retinue of admirers and memorizers (*hafideyaal*) who commit his “noble lines” to memory and transmit and disseminate them throughout the peninsula. Sometimes poetic competitions, a kind of literary warfare, are held during the rainy season when the clans assemble to enjoy light literature, each poet(s) artistic dueling with those others, their verbal boots overseen by a hoary panel of elder literary connoisseurs called *heerbeegti* . In the scheme of Somali pastoral poetry, therefore, the doctrine of art for art's sake does not belong. But to say that every poem contains a specific message which a hearer seeks to find is not to say that such a message can be abstracted with ease. While the meaning is direct in some in some poems,

in others it is hidden or, the Somalis put it, “closed” (qafilan) and require considerable intelligence on the part of the hearer to decipher.

The poet Ali Dhuuh , for example of the Dhulbahante clan family, uses a straight forward declarative style in his poem “On account of fourteen points,” pleading with the Ogaden to restore his stolen camels:

On account of fourteen points return the camels to me:
From the Gobaysane season (a plentiful year) when I was a mere lad
Until today when I am old, wearing silvery hair
There never occurred between you and us a matter for vendetta;
Know this – and so return the camels to me.
The man of many years brings forth wise advice;
Youths and fools understand not the so obvious point- pray, return the camels to me.
Listen, you did not find the camels astray;
A predator thief brought them to you
And such rapine works all of us into death – pray, return the camels.

In this fashion, he goes on to declare fourteen points, arguing persuasively why the looted camels should be returned. By contrast, another poet – say Huseen Dhiqle – might shroud his verse in arcane language and “sings of the rapacious caprice of ‘Lion Justice’ when in truth he was not thinking of lions at all but of his people's plight under a tyrant chief”

The third principal characteristic of Somali pastoral verse is alliteration (higaad) – in particular, head alliteration wherein the beginning of the line contains a consonant that corresponds to a similarly sounded consonant at the end of it. For an illustration of this, Sayyid Mohammed's poem “ Muuq-maasuq ,” or “ Flim-flammer ,” will do:

Musuq-maasuq Soomaali waa meheradeediye
Hadba midab horlay kuula iman maalin iyo layle
Malahmalahda iyo baanaha mowdku ka adeegay.
(Dissembling is the Somalis' inveterate habit,
They come to you every day and night
With new color,
Oh! Death to duplicity and bluster.)

All vowels are considered alliterative, as in this excerpt from the poet Ismaa'iil Mire's “My Lad.”

Wiilyahow ilmaa igaga aragtidaadiye !
Qalbigaai i oogsaday markaad tidhi adeerow e!
(My lad, the sight of brings tears to my eyes!
It caused to my aching heart to throb the moment you called “Uncle!”) (59)

The fourth - and final - major characteristic is meter (*miizaan* , literally, balance). Meter in Somali poetry is acquired by the interplay of long and short syllables in a line much like ancient Greek, in marked contrast to English poetry where the meter is established by beat and accent. The Somali word for poetry is *maaniso* , and there are four major forms in classical verse (*gabay* , *geeraar* , *jiifto* , *nad buraambur*) with the *gabay* the most popular and having the longest syllabic units in the line, ranging from fourteen to eighteen syllables. This excerpt from Sayyid Mohammed's “ *Gaal Leged* ,” or the Scourge of the Infidel” demonstrates the point:

Eeb -bow gar-ka ha- daan qab-sa-day gaah -she na-bad-diiye
Eeb -bow gam-maan i-yo wa-haan ga-ni ‘as dhii -baa-ye
Eeb -bow ga -row ka- ga ma he- lin goo-la-shaan wa -day-e
(Lord, however much I'd plead with them, the infidels refuse to honor the peace,
Lord, they do not reward me with praises for my gift:
The red stallions and precious mares which I lavished upon them,
Lord, the choice camels which I sent them do not earn me their esteem.)

To return now to the genre of *sarbeeb* , it may be said that the word *sarbeeb* in Somali means closed or hidden talk, as opposed to plain or straight talk. Hidden talk (hidden, that is, from the uninitiated and the ordinary) can only be interpreted by a poetic expert. While some may find the ambiguities, vagaries, and the obliqueness of the communicative medium of *sarbeeb* as well the manipulative capacity of its performer to be very much postmodernist vein, discourses on African cultural practice do not necessarily have to be couched in a deconstructionist mode.

In *sarbeeb* , forms of “hidden” speech are employed to transmit coded messages that, upon arrival at their destination may be decoded by experts who are acquainted with the rules of the genre. Naturally, *sarbeeb* is supremely suited to the language of diplomacy where the art of oblique communication is essential in order to address sensitive issues – issues that by convention cannot be directly approached for fear that a direct approach may compromise somebody's honor. In pastoral society, as in others, a social lubricant for face-saving is necessary for people to coexist harmoniously in the aggregate. This is particularly so in situations involving the external relations of the clans and lineages where incautious speech – a slip of the tongue, as we in English – can easily provoke murderous feuds.

To illustrate the specific uses of *sarbeeb* , I will refer to an episode that occurred in 1946 when the delegates of two clans met to discuss a number of outstanding issues. I will call them clan A and B. The leading elder of clan A – named Saahid – who happened also to be established poet, opened the tribal palaver by reciting a short poem of the *sarbeeb* genre, which he had addressed to the leading spokesmen of clan B, a poet by the name of Feetin :

Among your many horses, O Feetin , there is a variety of mares:
Some withhold the gift of milk from their offspring,
While others barely know how to gallop,
As for the old stallion – behold, he is grown old –

gone is his agile step of time past.
If you love us, give us a trade-in for the old beast.
Pray, do not refuse to treat with us:
If you do let that seal the standard of dealings between us.

Feetin , the spokesman of clan B, responded in poetry of the same genre:

Men of noble blood, O Saahid , speak words of wisdom,
Ceaseless banter is the mark of the low-born.
He who knows the ways of a young mare prepares her gently.
Behold, your unkind lash has cut into her delicate back,
Making her trembling body to know fear,
Do you know? She is barely two seasons old:
She will yet bloom with beauty.
Why blame us, my friend, if you do not know how to ride!

To the uninitiated, the subject of the poem would seem to involve a quarrel about horses, especially a young mare that changes hands from clan B to clan A. Clan A found the mare an inferior breed, one that “barely knows how to gallop.” Clan A would like to have a trade-in, a new offer in place of the first one. If clan B refuses to make a new offer, he threatens, the refusal will seal for the worse the future relations of the clans.

A quarrel about horses – such would be the apparent impression conveyed by the first poem. This impression is moreover, strengthened by the response of the second poet who maintained that the trouble was not that the mare in question was inferior but that the owner did not “know how to ride.”

In fact, the real subject of the poem concerns a dispute about marital mismatch. The young mare is a metaphor for a young woman (lineage B) whom the first poet married, apparently at great cost in bride wealth but who proved disappointing as a wife. The unhappy man of lineage A is pleading with the elders of lineage B to reopen the marriage case, in particular, to provide a new wife, because the earlier wife “ knows not how to gallop” by which he means that she does not know how to run a home. If lineage B does not propose a new offer in place of the old, the poet would obviously be doomed to be stuck with an unwanted partner. But he warns that his plight is bound to strain the two clans' future dealings.

The poet-spokesman for lineage B, however, remains unimpressed with this argument. Specifically, he has no intention of reopening the marriage case, for he blames the marital trouble on the man who has not learned “how to ride” (a loaded phrase, by the way), not on the mare who “will yet bloom with grace.” Far from sympathizing with the predicament of the unhappy man, the respondent poet charges him with wife battering: “Your unkind lash,” he remonstrates, “has cut into the delicate back of the poor beast / Bringing fear into her innocent eyes.”

The poetic exchange can therefore be seen to be rough and remorseless; both poets having gone for broke, verbally, in order to present their respective cases persuasively. But the rough and remorseless language is permissible in pastoral negotiations so long as it is conducted in the context of a veiled talk. For our purposes, it should be noted that the whole communication was conducted not only in the arcane language of *sarbeeb* but also in an apparent exchange about horses, when in reality the issue had nothing to do with horses but everything to do with questions of interclan marital negotiations.

Perhaps the most famous *sarbeeb* poem of the twentieth century in the Somali peninsula is that of Ismaa'il Mire, a distinguished poet and a top commander in the Dervish struggle against British, Italian, and Ethiopian occupation forces. Entitled "Pride Maketh You Stumble," a Somali pastoral version of "Pride goeth before a fall," the poem is a paragon of ambiguities. It is composed in the early twentieth century during Somalia's anticolonial Dervish movement led by the poet, mystic, and warrior Sayyid Mohammad Abdille Hasan, the Mad Mullah of British colonial literature. In 1920, after two decades of bloody warfare, perhaps the longest drawn-out and the bloodiest in the annals of African resistance, the Dervishes were finally demolished by the British, and the Sayyid and his force were driven to an inglorious flight westward into arsi country in Ethiopia. British victory was made possible by the use of aircraft. As one of the pilots remarked, the airplane was a "convenient weapon to bomb the old villain out of hiding place."

The defeat of the Dervishes gave the upper hand, politically, militarily and economically, to the British-friendly clans over those who had been allies of the Dervishes. The latter now began to chafe under perceived domination. What particularly infuriated the Dhulbahante (as the Dervish allies were named) was the appointment of a new police commissioner, one 'Arab Dheere, who was alleged to have systematically harassed the Dhulbahante, seizing their camel herds, roughing up men and ravishing the women. In protest, Isma'il Mire composed his lugubrious jeremiad, a philosophical discourse on the vagaries and futilities of human existence. He sang rather darkly:

The Lord divides the bread amongst all his slaves
Taking care of the fishes in the sea and even of the contents of a cup.
Everyone will receive what has been prescribed for him;
Even though he runs fast or sets out early in the morning climbing a high hill
No one will gain more than his allotted portion: let that be remembered!

This epitomizes what some have called Islamic fatalism, a disposition that seems to inform the poet's world view, one in which the individual seldom plays a role in shaping his destiny. If the "Lord divides the bread amongst all his slaves" and "everyone will receive what has been prescribed for him, his allotted portion," does human effort or self exertion matter at all? Isma'il Mire would probably dismiss this objection as irrelevant; he was reared in a frontier Islamic culture with ideas of human beings as "slaves" under the omnipotent hand of a Supreme Being who dispenses his cosmic plan regardless of what puny humans do or fail to do. His task is to make persuasively through the obliqueness and ambiguities of *sarbeeb*, and in the forty-one

lines of the poem he embarks on a jumble of abstract allusions and intertribal relations, the intent being, as I once said in another context, “to range far afield, holding the hearer in suspenseful anticipation while probing him for sympathy through the eloquence of language.” And by caustic analogy:

It was to his overweening worldly pride that Corfield owed his death;
It did not occur to him that young lads could kill him with their rifles.
Oh men, pride brings disaster: let that be remembered!

Richard Corfield was commander of a British expeditionary force, and the verse evokes his death at the battle of Dul Madoba between the British and Dervish forces in 1913. As summarized by Andrzejewski and Lewis:

Isma'il Mire is well qualified to speak of this incident since he led the Dervish attack. Corfield's death, with other heavy casualties on the British side, was attributed to his supreme self confidence and rash action in engaging the enemy without adequate numbers or resources and in underestimating the power of the Sayyid forces.

As Corfield was brought down by the sin of “overweening arrogance,” so will another be ruined by his reckless behaviour, oppression and greed – another, though, whom the poet is constrained from naming by the oblique dictates of *sarbeeb*. To name names or to be direct in communication is to violate the prevailing rules and ethos of the genre and Isma'il Mire, master craftsman in the field, is unlikely to commit that error. For him the withering analogies will do:

Again and again the Sayyid made war and people helped him;
Thousand and upon thousand, all with white turbans, he brought to the battle of Beerdiga,
But what brought his downfall was the day when he destroyed the Khayr people.

Few could have been more appreciative than Isma'il Mire, the veteran Dervish fighter who knew first hand the violent early months of 1920, that what caused Sayyid Mohammad's “downfall” was the “combination of British might and smallpox epidemic which ravaged the Dervishes by turns.” And yet Isma'il Mire, like all Somalis, sees a more transcendental cause of the collapse than the immediate: they attribute the “ultimate downfall of the Dervish movement to the Sayyid's wanton attack on the Khayr section of the Dhulbahante clan. This lineage is composed largely of men of religion whom Somalis consider to be under Divine protection.” By analogy, the poet implies that a similar “downfall” is sure to unfold through the commission of similarly wanton brutalities incurred by an unnamed oppressor. And the nearest thing to revealing the identity of this “dark” oppressor occurs in the last verse in which the poet observes thus:

I saw a man such as those described who will not live long to enjoy his wealth;
His bags are full of loot taken from men of honour and valour.
Watch silently, Muslims, and see how those who prosper lose their souls!

The accusing words, the plaintive tone, the evocative pathos – all were designed to state his case persuasively with the object of invoking mystical forces to intervene on behalf of the despoiled “men of honour and valour” pillaged by the “full, satiated man” who has “grown fat buttocks like a big ram” from loot. “I a man,” the poet obliquely remonstrates, “who will not live long to enjoy his wealth,” a poetic vision of Edenic proportions predicting the downfall of Mr. Fat Buttocks. Presently the Islamic community, or universal community of faith, is called upon to “watch silently . . . and see / how those who prosper lose their souls,” a pastoral version of the biblical “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” The reader – or more appropriately the listener, since the poem would likely have been composed and performed orally around an evening campfire before a live audience of a nomadic homestead – wants to know this man of prediction against whom the sword of providence is invoked. But the listener's longing for knowledge is forever frustrated, without the exegetical aid of elders, by the *sarbeeb* artist's ethos to conceal, to dissemble, to be coyly vague about the subject of his composition. The poet's demurring to reveal the identity of “the man” but to enshroud him in mystery forces the listener with an enquiring mind to meditate on the “poetic eye” or “I” of the composer – that is, to enter the poet's very being if only to share his poetic vision in hopes of figuring out the “man” for himself.

Types of Curses in Somali Poetry

Who Can Use the Curse?

Against Whom

Inkaar	All living beings, including plants and animals: a weapon for the weak against predators and the powerful	The powerful, oppressors, and those who use their advantage over others in irresponsible ways
Na'alad	God, angels, prophets	Unbelievers, liars, troublemakers
Habaar	Intelligent beings: men, angels, elders, holymen	Infidels, disobedient children
Asmo	-	Rival clans
Kuhaaan (Guhaan)	Poets	Balatant
Haanfiil (Yuasho)	-	Rival clans

Such are the ways of pastoral *sarbeeb*: at mystifying, provoking, and soul-searching. One of the curious features of *sarbeeb* relates to its overarching dimensions that merge into other forms of prosodic genre in pastoral classic verse; other forms like, for example, the genre of Kuhaan (also Guhaan), or curse poetry. While Kuhaan refers to a collective category of verse, the pastoral word for the individual curse versicle is telling *gabay-awayti*, or a “stabber-poem,” the notion being that a curse poem possesses the stabbing effect of a dagger. The doctrine of the

poetic curse in pastoral sanctions is based on the notion shared by nearly all traditional Somalis that the poet possesses, as it were, a hotline with deity and is therefore equipped through his poetic oration to intervene in natural events. Possessed of such deadly weapon in the form of his poetic craft, the composer of *Kuhaan sarbeeb* is believed to have the power to injure others, often fatally, by directing his malevolent verse at them – likened, in pastoral heart as does being the object of a poetic curse attack. After all, one has the chance of dashing for cover in the face of incoming artillery shells – an art in which the Somalis have acquired some experience lately – but who can survive the mystically directed darts of a poetic curse.

There are many categories of poetic curse, as seen in table 1. The fear of being cursed helps to encourage an ethos of peaceful co-existence. After all, even a transhuman, constantly mobile society of pastoralists requires a modicum of rules, sanctions, taboos, and strictures in order to function as a society at all. In a segmental a cephalous society without chiefs or any duly instituted central authority to impose some semblance of order, people need a devise strategies to control the vagaries and excesses of human behaviour. Accordingly, in Somali pastoral ethos, with *gabay-awayti*, one commands the capacity, through the poetic curse, to inflict wounds, and this serves to empower mystically those who are powerless physically.

I offer elsewhere a detailed account of the full range and function of the poetic curse verse in Somali pastoral ethic. The relevant point here is to demonstrate the interplay of curse and *sarbeeb*. Simply put, Isma'iil Mire's hidden, lamenting allusions to the “man with fat buttocks” who has fattened on “loot” taken from “men of honour and valour” signifies nothing short of the deadliest kind, in Somali eyes, of *gabay-awayti*, an attach directed with all its dark malevolent associations at the criminal despoiler who is the principal subject of the poem. What added a mysterious awe to Isma'iil Mire's *sarbeeb-gabay-awayti* raid on Mr. Buttocks (who, as we know from historical sources, was non other than Arab Dheere) was the fact this gentleman was suddenly summoned by the angel of death soon after the composition of the poem. And although to the secular observer the man died of explainable natural causes, to the pastoral eye the transcendental cause of his death was the poetic curse. Thus poetic curse = death. It is as clear and automatic in the pastoral view as any cause and effect can be.

To speculate momentarily, one wonders why in the face of the recent Somali apocalypse of 1991 – 1995, an apocalypse that saw the whole-sale plunder of the weak by the strong in that unhappy country, no poet of any stature – none known to this writer – came forward to utter a curse in the land; why the warlords' whirlwind of rape, disposition, and mayhem failed to provoke a single line of poetic curse. This is indeed is mysterious enough to stir speculation of observers and pundits on the Somali scene. My own hobbyhorse explanation is twofold: One is that even in the most classical times in pastoral literary temper and tales Somalis have shown great reluctance to compose *gabay-awayti*. To restate the point:

It is true that only under very extreme conditions does a poet compose *kuhaan*, for poetic curse, though a recognized power is frowned upon in pastoral sanctions and its frequent user may therefore bring social ostracism upon himself. Moreover, once let loose, a poetic curse is

uncontrollable, and may not only strike down the cursed object but return to the head of him who has uttered it. As one elder put it, “composing *kuhaan* is like allowing poison to seep into the air and is dangerous to both curser and curse.”

As plausible as this explanation may be, it cannot fully account for what appears to be total absence of curse poetry in the recent cataclysm of the Somali peninsula. The overriding reason, in my view, for the death of *gabay-awayti* is that, as one elder put it, Somalis have “become a rudderless nation” – having lost, their traditional cultural moorings while unable to avail themselves of arguably modernizing systems of colonial experience. The result is a “national coarsening of the soul,” a coarsening in which an entire generation of Somalis languishes, culturally, politically, and spiritually, in a state of suspended animation, no longer adept at the living tools of the past nor able to master the modern methods and manners in a strange world of nation-states. It is unlikely, for example, that any Somalis under fifty have the vaguest idea that such things, as *sarbeeb* and poetic curse once flourished in their culture, let alone being able to use these cultural assets themselves. Hence one of the great misfortunes in Somalia's troubled experience as a failed state concerns the desertification of the Somali collective soul to match the nation's physical destruction and environmental degradation.

This explains why leading Somali intellectuals, faced with a collapsed state and consequent despair, today call for the recultivation of the artistic ambiguities of *sarbeeb* as a resource in Somalia's present search for a viable political solution. This in turn will require the restoration of the institutions of elders and poetic experts with the skill and experience to appreciate the subtle and creative ambiguities of *sarbeeb*. To do this, it will be necessary to empower traditional leading elders and senior notables of the clans. The roots of Somalia's political and economic instability, in my view, lie in the tragic mismatch between moral and physical authority. The Somali state inherited from the Europeans has placed power in the hands of the faceless, self-made men who cynically and self-servingly manipulate clan competitiveness and antagonisms without knowledge of or interest in proven traditional methods of conflict resolution in particular and the governance process in general. All those impositions of leadership in the anti- Barre forces, as well those in Barre's entourage, have been part and parcel of Barre's former dictatorship. Having fallen out with him over the division of the looted national resources, they took up arms in order to regain their fair share of the spoils. These are cynical, opportunistic people uninterested in Somali welfare or national reconciliation, only pursuit of personal ambition.

The only moral and effective authority that clanspeople recognize and obey are the clan elders. There is a need, therefore, to remove power and authority from the opportunists and self-seekers in charge of the various movements and to return it to the traditional elders. The elders once empowered and with benefit of educated advice will bring to Somalia the dual benefits of controlling and delivering their respective clans and of possessing the political skill and knowledge in traditional law and ways to negotiate in good faith and to settle with one another through a time-proven procedural framework, notably the *heer*, or political contract.

This writer, therefore, calls for the creation of a two house of parliamentary system for Somalia , consisting of a house of representatives based on numerical representation and a house of elders. Harnessing the resourceful ambiguities of *sarbeeb* and in line with traditional Somali cultural idiosyncrasies, the elders should be empowered to play a vital role in the reconstruction of Somalia . In particular, the principles and sanctions of poetic curse, verbal obliqueness in the conduct of political discourse, and the capacity to be powerful tool of resistance in the hands of the oppressed, as I have noted, are the political/aesthetic attributes that triumphantly inhere in the genre of *sarbeeb* . Combined, these qualities should create for Somalia a new space in the struggle for national redemption and renewal.

Professor Said Samatar