

# Luck of the Somalis

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A Somali-related incident recently has aviators and officials of the sky gasping in astonishment. The officials were bowled over by the riveting story of a Somali stow-away who sneaked undetected into the wheel receptacle of a jetliner that took off from San Jose (California) airport for a seven-hour flight to Hawaii. To the mind-boggling realization of the world, he survived to tell the tale. What especially has officials reeling concerns the boy's belief-defying ability to live through the terrifying combination of three lethal elements: 1. The frigid-frosty altitude of more than 30,000 feet, 2. The near-nil absence of a whiff of oxygen at such a height, and 3. Most incredible of all, when the landing gear was deployed for landing, he didn't fly out of the vacated receptacle to splatter on the tarmac into bloody parts, as nearly always happens to other triers of his trick. To the contrary, he stayed stowed away, like a hibernating bear in the heavens, till he was pulled out to safety by the startled airport staff. For two-thirds of the perilous trip, he was passed out from lack of breathable air. Why didn't he die? Because he is a Somali, at once so suicidal and self-destructive but so fortune-favored. Talk about luck of the Somalis!



As it happens, the phrase “luck of the Somalis,” which titles this piece, itself was intentionally employed to invoke the commonplace utterance “Luck of the Irish,” a cruel ironic aphorism, especially with respect to Ireland’s colonial history with what the Irish refer to as the “Big Island” i.e. Imperial United Kingdom that colonized and ruthlessly exploited the defeated Irish for more than six centuries from Oliver Cromwell’s occupation in the early 1660’s, through the man-made forced starvation that killed an estimated two million Irish men, women and children in the 1840’s, right up to the 1994 so-called “Good-Friday” Agreement that ended the long-simmering destructive Irish-Irish and Anglo-Irish civil war, euphemistically referred to as “The Troubles.” Still, the Troubles are scarcely over, to judge by the recent arrest and detention of Mr. Irish-Face, Jerry Adams, leader of the Irish Republican Army, the anti-British insurgency in northern Ireland that nearly brought mighty England to its knees during the Troubles. Indeed, a tortured tale is the story of Anglo-Irish experience. That explains why Ireland remains the only Western state whose universities offer higher degrees in “Post-Colonial Studies,” much like the universities of the Dark Continent. That is also why the average Irish patriot bristles with

rage when the name of the U.K. is casually mentioned. Hence, a piece of unsolicited advice: if you are scheming to do a number with an Irish lass, do not talk of the Brits favorably, or you will forfeit your intended beaver!

I speak from experience with a touch of the fictional. Some years ago, an old acquaintance --a Somali anglophile from London who was visiting here--and I ran into a couple of Irish red-heads at a Starbucks joint. We had designs but were at our wits' end how to approach. Still, approach we did with a measure of awkwardness. "Hullo ladies, we are from the Dark Continent." They both smiled cheerfully. That "Dark Continent" phrase, with its mixed evocation of innocence and utter savagery, is a magic that always works on Caucasians. (You can't imagine how many times I used it to advantage, thereby making Venus rejoice!) They smiled; great, I felt. "May we sit?"

"Of course." I proceeded—you see when you have to be creative, nay, inventive, you have to fabricate a wild tale—I proceeded to recount some escapades of my early life from the exquisite arts of camel-herding in lion infested forests, participation in some harrowingly bloody tribal feuds and vendettas, hair-raising encounters with the King of the Jungle. Voila! It worked. They were at once smitten, eating out of our hands. Unfortunately, it did not last long. I had to get up for reasons of nature's call. I was apprehensive of what my Anglophile -pivoting might say about the Brits during my absence in the men's room. So I cued him to keep off the British.

When I returned the girls were "Gone with the Wind!" I asked him what transpired. He said--with the voice of one unjustly wounded--"To put some spice into the conversation, I allowed that the Magna Carta remains the greatest document achieved by human effort since Imhotep of ancient Egypt invented the Pi, the symbol that underlies all principles of mathematics. The Magna Carta laid down the basis of all democracy, including modern democracy, thereby liberating humans from political and economic tyranny by their rulers, and therefore leading up to humanity's progress towards peace and prosperity."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the girls blanched in unison, their faces lengthened, their countenances clouded into fearful scowls, and they bolted out in a huff. I—"

"Aabahaa..." I cried out uncontrollably, a Somali garden-variety cuss too obscene to be rendered into English. Then I took a swing at him. "Didn't I tell you never to be lovey-dovey about Britons when in company with the Irish?" He returned the favor with a counter-swing, from whose impact I staggered back backwards. Fists galore, to the amusement of the on looking coffee consumers!

A couple of Good Samaritans intervened to separate us. One of them was a smooth-faced and kindly-disposed middle-ager with deep-set-eyes. (Did you notice, incidentally, that nearly all Caucasians have deep-set-eyes – “Indha-ceel” -- in Somali, whereas almost all South-Asians have un-ink-potted eyes with luminous white orbs?) Then the smooth middle-ager sallied forth and inquired quizzically:

“Are you fellows Somalis?”

We admitted being of that dubious species. He murmured with a chuckle, “It figures!” He went on, “Throughout the colonial tenure of the British Raj in Africa, the Somalis were dubbed, ‘The Irish Man of Africa.’”

The Anglophile and I made up, as quickly as we had flared up. The learned-looking man indeed turned out to be learned—a college professor of “Cross-Cultural Studies,” as we found out. Then he plunged into the fatal character flaw of all professors—lecturing. He said, with some animation, “Sir Richard Burton, the eccentric/romantic/ globe-trotting 19<sup>th</sup> century British explorer”

“Aren’t all Brits eccentric? “ I wanted to interject—the learned man continued, “Sir Richard Burton on the Somalis: ‘A fierce and turbulent race of Republicans...constant in nothing but inconstancy—soft, merry, and affectionate souls, they pass without any apparent transition into a state of fury, when they are capable of terrible atrocities’.”<sup>i</sup>”

Why did British colonials label us “The Irish Man of Africa?” I later mused to myself. I think largely because the Brits noticed in the old days of the British Raj in northern Somalia, certain cultural characteristics that the Irish-Irish and Imitation-Irish share, to wit:

1. The Gift of the Gab—poetic oratory. Irish conversational speech is nothing but poetry masquerading as prose. After all, the Irish invented the limerick form in poetry which is named, I believe, for the Irish city of the same appellation. For their part, the Somalis have been called a “Nation of Poets, whose poetry is intimately linked to the vicissitudes of the people’s daily life.”<sup>ii</sup>”

2. Volatility of temperament. Here, one may recall the stereotypical joke about the Irish man chancing upon a fray of fists at some melee and earnestly inquiring: “If this is not a private quarrel, may I join in?”

3. Geography—the Almighty has chosen to place both the Irish and Somalis near mammoth powers,--“the Big Island,” as they call the U.K. --in the case of the Irish, and

Ethiopia, in the Somali case. Purfirio Diaz, Mexican dictator near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once observed in desperation of U.S.-inflicted Mexican traumas, “Poor Mexico, so far from God, and so near to America!” Mr. Diaz’s frenzied remark could be modified to read: “Poor Somalia, so far from Allah, and so near to Ethiopia!” And in the case of the Irish, “Poor Ireland, so far from Saint Patrick and so near to Britain!”

The Irish have finally emerged out of occupation, exploitation and poverty into a wealthy nation blessed with an exceptionally highly educated middle class, thereby earning the name of the “Cultic Tiger.” Will the imitation, notably the Somalis, ever emerge out of their current misery of violence, bloodshed and refugeeism into—not to the heights the Irish have climbed—but at least into a modest level of economic and political wellbeing, a modicum of a decent life?

Back to the boy who defied the laws of gravity and hypothermia. What private and public demons drove him into such a perilous adventure? The good Abdelkarim Hassan of WardheerNews has hinted (based on the boy’s relatives account) at the trepidations of the “Aayo Syndrome” in Somali culture--the motherless child terrorized by the father’s second wife. Abdelkarim provides this capsule of information about this improbable boy:

*His name is Yahye Abdi; he is 15 years of age. His father brought him to San Jose, California with his stepmother whom some relatives said mistreated him, as is a common custom with an “Aayo relationship” in Somali culture. He yearned for his mother, Ubax Maxamed Cabdulle, who lives in Sheed Dheer Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. The mother said in recent reports that the boy had learned she was alive after being told by the father she passed away. She also said her ex-husband, Abdilahi Yusuf, took her son and his two siblings to the United States without her consent and that she hadn’t heard from them since 2006. His sister in California, though, said in defense of her father and stepmother that her mother (biological) is not telling the truth and her father didn’t mistreat her nor Yahye or took them to the U. S by force. The boy’s father, in a statement issued recently said “Yahye was struggling to adjust to life” in America. (Private communication).*





But pray—take a look at the mother. She appears as an apparition of ultimate misery, in abject poverty—bent, emaciated, shoulders drooping, a walking skeleton in rags, trying to maintain her dignity by sweeping the front yard of her hovel of a habitat. Are you moved by that image of deprivation? Can you eat lunch after seeing that sight? I wonder whether there is a way of sending her some change?

Mind you, she is lucky, uncommonly lucky; certainly luckier than the mass of Somali boys and girls kept as sex slaves by Yemeni Chaat-chewers, with popping eyes and bulging cheeks stuffed with Chaat leaves, who manage to support their drug habits by hiring out the hapless Somalis into prostitution. What about the Somali lasses in Kenya who, like their male counterparts, face daily humiliation-- arrested, harassed, gang-raped by Kenyan security services, and subject to the perennial threat of deportation, much like the desperate girls of defeated Germany in WW II, who could be had for a cigarette. I guess that is what happens to you when you've consigned your country to occupation by Dacay weyne!

An old comrade of mine, poet and social critic, Mohammed Khaliif Salaad, used to muse years ago in his apartment, which he kindly allowed me to share for a season:

“Markii Soomaalidu waxa ay tahay la Ogaado, adduunku wuxuu oran doona, war kuwaani xaggey ka yimaadeen!?”

“When the world comes to know what Somalis are really like, the world community will come to cry out in unison: “Where have these creatures come from?” That is exactly what the world is asking today: “Where have these come from and what do we do with them? How do we fit them into the human community? They are too intelligent to be managed like animals, and too feckless to be fitted into any structure!”

To quote the wise, great poet, Haaji Aadan Afqalooc (who I hope to offer a deserving tribute to in a subsequent piece):

“Iyana waa tebaalaha wakhtiga, teynnu aragnaaye”:

“And these are the ways of the times we live in today!” Where will we go from here, fellow Somalis?

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<sup>i</sup> First Footsteps in East Africa. 1966 edition, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, P. 90.

<sup>ii</sup> Samatar, Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism. Cambridge. 1982, p3