

An Interview with Prof Lidwien Kapteijns (Ladan) on Somali Arts and Literature

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Editor's note: *Prof Lidwien Kapteijns (Ladan) is not new to Somalia or Africa. Prof Lidwien teaches African and Middle Eastern history at Wellesley college and is the author of *Clan Cleansing in Somalia* (2013), *Women's Voices in a Man's World* (with Maryan Omar Ali, 1999) and numerous research papers that have contributed to the Somali scholarship. This interview focuses on Prof Ladan's work in Somali arts and literature through her book "Women's Voices in a Man's World". The interview was conducted by Abdelkarim A. Hassan for WardheerNews.*

WardheerNews: Prof Ladan, first, could you briefly share with WDN your journey and experience with the Somali language?

Prof. Ladan: Abdelkarim, that is a long story by now. The short version is that when I wanted to study African history at the University of Amsterdam in the early 1970s, that field did not exist. When I decided to try to attend SOAS in London (School of Oriental and African Studies) to do an M.A. there, I was told that Arabic, which I had taken for several years in Amsterdam, was not considered an African language and that I could not elect it as part of my M.A. in the Area Study of Africa. This is how I came to approach Prof. B.W. Andrzejewski, our beloved "Goosh." He wrote back to me that I could indeed take Somali Language and Literature with him as my minor, on the condition that I learn Italian before I would show up a few months later. My mother later reminded me how I had worked through an entire Italian grammar book during the summer before I went to SOAS – I had forgotten about this – for Goosh meant that he wanted me to be able to *read* Italian. With Latin and French in my background and cramming Italian grammar all summer, I met that requirement.



When I came to SOAS, professors were not particularly interested in the foreign Master's students, except for Goosh. He gave me an enormous amount of his time: he worked through a lot of Somali grammar with me; made me read and translate the Somali folktale collection he had put together with Musa Galaal (called *Xikmad Soomaali*); sent me down to the language lab in the basement of SOAS to listen to the "boqorrada quruxda ah" (as

we called the announcers of the BBC Somali Service) even though I did not understand anything at all; occasionally invited me to his house for a hot meal cooked by his wife Sheila; introduced me to his Ph.D. student Abdisalam Yassin, with whom I eventually became good friends and who gave me my Somali name (“Ladan”), and so forth.

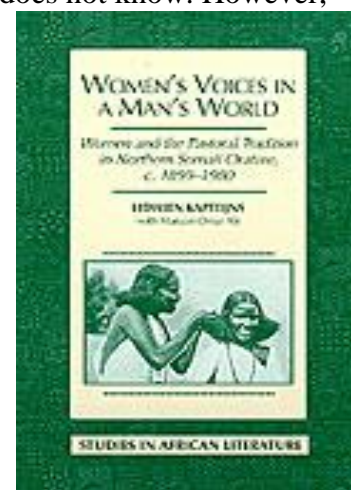
At the end of my Masters I could not speak a word of Somali but I had an amazing foundation for learning it if that opportunity were to ever arise. I looked for that opportunity in the years I spent in the Sudan, teaching first high school and then at the University of Khartoum, but it became possible only much later, in the 1980s. Then Maryan Omar Ali and the popular songs played a big role in bringing me back to an intensive engagement with the Somali language.

WDN: I understand you also speak Arabic, how would you compare the two languages in terms of difficulty?

Prof. Ladan: Well, my (Sudanese) Arabic is rusty, but my background in Arabic helped me in learning Somali. Many of the sounds that are challenging for European and American learners (the x, q, cayn, kh) exist in both Somali and English and there are also many Arabic loan words in Somali. As for difficulty, to learn to speak any one of the Arabic *lahja*’s (spoken tongues) is probably very similar to learning to chat in Somali. One can learn to say “hello” and “what is your name” in any language pretty quickly. But learning the full grammatical complexities and, to me even more importantly, the cultural heritage embedded in that language, is of a totally different magnitude. Then Arabic becomes a challenge because there are so many forms of it (Qur’anic, Modern Standard, and then the many dialects). Somali is difficult because in the past the spoken word had such a complex set of social functions and was so central to conceptions of leadership, morality, and masculinity that especially poets appear to have expanded its vocabulary and its abstract notions continuously. And it has its own rich diversity (*af maxaa* and *af maay*). Really learning another language always presents a goal one will never quite reach. The more one learns, the more one is aware of what one does not know. However, when one gets deeply involved with a language, it will keep bringing wonderful surprises and one will never ever get bored!

WDN: You have written the book [*Women’s Voice in a Man’s World*](#). Can you share with us what the book is about?

Prof. Ladan: Yes, that book came out in 1999 and was my first book about a Somali rather than Sudanese subject matter. To explain the background, I must take you back briefly to my student days in Amsterdam. When I became interested in African history, I was surprised how difficult it was, at that moment in time and in the libraries accessible to me, to find African historians who wrote about Africa. This absence left



an indelible stamp on my approach to history: I have tried to make a principle of always including in the sources I study what people of the society and culture I studied themselves one said/wrote/sang about their past. In the context of my work on Sudanese history, this meant that I co-edited two volumes of historical documents. In the case of Somali history, it led me to study Somali cultural production, especially texts that are often called folklore texts and that Andrzejewski called texts of the “time-free stream,” as they often cannot be precisely dated.

I found two waves of published folklore texts. The first was the one produced by colonial linguists and ethnographers who interviewed (sometimes employed) Somali respondents. The second wave resulted from the flood of publications in Somali following the introduction of the Somali orthography in 1972. I collected and read those texts and, in the first part of *Women's Voices in a Man's World*, I asked by what criteria they judged a good Somali woman and girl. You can read the results in the book!

The conclusions I reached on the basis of these texts was that Somali society was undoubtedly patriarchal, that is to say, found men more important than women and organized itself politically by giving more power to (married) men than to women. However, these sayings and tales are often so boisterous, humoristic, tongue-in-cheek, and contradictory that they undermine the very gender regime they purport to uphold. As a result, one women's power and influence emerge clearly, even if between the lines.

I will give you two examples. First, there is a “saying-in-three” (saddexleh) that says: Three things are disastrous: an oldest son who is a coward, a daughter who is ugly, and a wife who is gluttonous (*hunguri-weyn*). I puzzled over the latter for a while, for I could understand why a father would want a first-born son who could defend his community and a daughter who would easily find a husband. But why emphasize a wife's gluttony? And then I realized that in most social contexts in Somalia it was the wife who not only processed food from its raw components but also managed its distribution. If she was unable to control her appetite, food would be poorly managed and the family might not survive. So a humorous saying indirectly revealed how indispensable and influential married women were.

A second example would be the contradiction between the saying “*kal caano galeen kas ma galo*” (which implies that womanhood (*i.e.*, the ability to lactate) and rational thinking cannot go together), However, how about other sayings such as *reer waa naag* (“a household belongs to (or depends on) the woman”); *naag la'aan waa naf la'aan* (“to be without a woman is to be without life”), *rag naagaa is dhaafshaa* (“men outdo each other because of [the qualities of] their wives”) and my favorite, *nin waliba waa hooyadii oo gamba la'* (“every man is his mother without a headscarf”). I made a Somali elder very uncomfortable once by quoting that to him. Moreover, if women are not capable of rational thought as the first saying appears to suggest, what to do with the many stories about how young men and women would test each other's intelligence, as neither wanted an unintelligent, stupid spouse.

On the basis of my study of these Somali folklore texts, I have proposed that wherever “patriarchy” exists – we really do not use that term anymore in such a general way – it is always dynamic and the struggle to keep women “in their place” is never easy. The noisy and multi-voiced discourse about gender in these Somali folklore provide evidence for this.

When I had written up the analysis of the folklore texts, I found that my manuscript was too long for an article and too short for a book. It was Prof. Jean Hay, a pioneer of African women’s history at Boston University, who kept encouraging me to find a solution to this. That was the time Maryan Omar Ali and I were spending our spare time with the Somali popular songs, and thus, thanks to Maryan’s help with those song texts, the second part of the book came to focus on what Somali songs of the period 1955-1985 had to say about changing gender relations in Somalia. Perhaps this became the most interesting part of the book and it also led to other publications.¹

WDN: Both Somali men and women have significantly contributed to the *suugaan* (literature), particularly the *heeso* (songs), but one may infer from the title of your book (*Women’s Voices in a Man’s World*) that men dominated Somali cultural production. Can you talk about that?

Prof. Ladan: Of course men and women have both contributed, but the ways in which Somali oral culture has been transmitted has favored men and what men – Somali experts as well as the first foreign researchers who collected and recorded Somali oral texts – found important. Imagine that the first foreign academic researchers had been women and had only talked to Somali women! Our image of Somali history would perhaps have been very different!

In *Women’s Voices* I have argued that the Somali canon of “traditional” texts (or texts of the time-free stream) “muted” women’s voices when women expressed themselves in the public sphere. The texts suggest that “proper” women were expected to be heard only in the private sphere of immediate family or among other women and that, when women broke this rule, male society did formally register their voices even if they spoke for all to hear. This is better explained in the book.

When it comes to the popular songs of the nationalist era, we are told that, with very few exceptions, men created the words and melodies even when women’s voices brought those songs to the public. Although I am convinced (and others have also made this point) that male artists crafted these songs in collaboration with female artists, it appears that in this period women mostly sang words composed by men. This is why I called the book *Women’s Voices in a Man’s World*.²

WDN: Talking about the popular songs, do you remember the first Somali songs you liked and memorized?

Prof. Ladan: That is actually a funny story, which I have told before. After I had completed my M.A. at SOAS, Prof. Andrzejewski once came to Amsterdam to give a talk at my university. While he was visiting me in my student apartment, he noticed that time for one of the daily broadcasts of the BBC Somali Service. Now I did not have a short wave radio and only had this old thing I had inherited from my parents' house, the type with a cloth front cover, and not a modern short wave. But Goosh was undaunted and there we were, lying on our bellies on the floor trying to find the BBC Somali Service. And suddenly, against all expectations, the voice of Xasan Aadan Samatar singing "Aaminaay Xusuusnow" flowed into the room. That is when I fell in love with the Somali popular song, even though it took years before I would understand this song. When I was in Mogadishu in the summer of 1987 (my only visit to Somalia ever), I heard many more songs: Samatar's "Siraadey" and "Diinleeye," and many more.

In the period 1955-1985 Somalia had a multitude of extraordinarily talented singers – from Cabdulqaadir Jubba to Maxamed Suleebaan and from Maandeeq and Magool to Khadra Daahir, Saado Cali and Sahra Axmed. I hope all other singers feel included and respected as I mention just these names, for they all brought something unique and special to Somali music. Most of them also sang songs of different genres, from *qaraami* to *waddani* and from love songs to religious and political songs.



However, Somalis are not always aware of the singers from Djibouti. The *qaraami* by Nimco Jaamac and Fadumo Axmed are really up there with those by Magool and Maandeeq. [Afropop recently did a web-based program](#) about the Somali pop songs, so I hope WardheerNews readers will check out those links.³

WDN: In an article called "Making memories of Mogadishu in Somali poetry about the civil war" (2010) and in your recent book *Clan Cleansing in Somalia* (2013), you have written about Somali poetry that deal with *colaad*, civil war.⁴ Can you say something about that?

Prof. Ladan: The article "Making memories of Mogadishu in Somali poetry about the civil war," looks at a series of poems about Mogadishu and notices the connection between the ways in which poets remembered Mogadishu and the kind of future they wanted for Somali. Thus poets such as Mustafa Sheekh Cilmi, Cabdulqaadir Cabdi Shube, and Cabdi Muxumed Amiin spoke about Mogadishu as the mother of the nation (Maandeeq) and encouraged their audience to overcome

clannism by repairing *Qaranimo* and re-establishing the Somali nation-state (which for them was rooted in Islam as a matter of course). In contrast, younger poets such as Engineer Maxamed Cali Cibaar and Cumar Cabdinuur Nuux ‘Nabaddoon,’ who evoked personal but not nationalist historical memories of Mogadishu, emphasized a different solution to the civil war and clannist divisiveness, namely that Somalis become better Muslims and establish a nation-state that was first and foremost Islamic. Thus the memories these poets made about Mogadishu reflected the future they advocated (and vice versa). What also struck me in this context was that websites that might refuse to publish texts that were divisive because they were clannist appeared to have no problem with publishing texts that were divisive in Islamist terms – for example, by labeling everyone siding with the TFG under Cabdullaahi Yuusuf as outside Islam.

As for *Clan Cleansing*, I began the research that led to that book by studying poetry about the civil war that could be recited in shared Somali public space, for example, at the various political reconciliation meetings. The poets I studied composed extraordinary poems. Thus Mustafa Sheekh Cilmi’s poem “Masiibo” gives such a vivid description of what happened in Mogadishu and beyond in January 1991 and after that it is as if you are watching the events on film. This poet, as well as, for example, Cabdulqaadir Shube and Cabdi Muxumed, also analyzed the causes of the *masiibo*, namely the evils of clannism both as a political instrument in the hands of power-hungry warlords and as a diseased and unhealthy popular mindset. However, in this extraordinary and respectable poetry that is suitable to be performed before an audience of Somalis of all political backgrounds, saying who turned out to be almost completely impossible. This silence then became the catalyst for my own research and, eventually, the book.

I hope Somali readers will read this book, for the events that lie at its heart have not been acknowledged and analyzed in the scholarship about Somalia even though they played a crucial role in the collapse of the state and still underlie ongoing political conflict and competition in significant ways.

It took me by surprise how scholarship, political memoirs and other writings about the Somali civil war had skipped, ignored, and even actively concealed and denied a key shift in that civil war, one that I have called the campaign of clan cleansing in 1991-1992. This is not the place to go into details about this book but I hope that people will not simply believe the untruths and insinuations haters and deniers have spread about it. Somalis used to say: *barasho horteed ha i nicin*. What I would like to say about the book is *akhriska hortii ha nicin – hana jeclaanin!* Like the poets mentioned above, the book does not accuse whole clans. It argues (and shows) that clans did not kill and maim but that, at different stages of the Somali recent past, political and military entrepreneurs incited people to do so *in the name of clan*. If we do not make that distinction, we buy into the agendas and thinking of the very political and military men who incited to large-scale clan-based violence against

civilians. In that case, those warlords will have won irrespective of victory or defeat in the field and whether they are alive or dead.

I understand that this book may be hard to read for many Somalis. In the aftermath of the large-scale violence of the last 36 years, people tend to be very strongly invested in what scholars sometimes call their “conflict-identities,” that is to say, in this context, the clan identities that were transformed and (further) distorted because of the violence perpetrated and suffered in the name of clan. However, closing one’s eyes to the past does not make the bad go away and cuts us off from the good it may hold for the present and future.

WDN: Is it correct to say that the scholars and artists who have made Somali literature great are becoming a rare species? Do you see a new generation that will take their place?

Prof. Ladan: Of course the civil war has had an enormous negative impact on the study of Somali language and literature, society, history, and so forth. As for the Somali language, Wardheernews recently featured an interview with Maxamed Daahir Afrax who spoke about the structural and institutional factors that are endangering the Somali language and the countermeasures that are being taken. I am thinking of the continuing Somali language and literature program at SOAS under Martin Orwin, the annual Hargeisa book fair and the annual London celebration of Somali culture. I am thinking of the annual “day of the mother tongue” celebrated in Djibouti, the SomaliPEN clubs in different Somali-inhabited areas, the establishment of the University of Jigjiga, the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies in Mogadishu, the Puntland Development Center in Garowe, and many other initiatives of which I may not be aware or am forgetting to mention here. I think that formal institutions that teach and research the Somali language are indispensable.

However, I also want to point out something that is always true about languages. The command of the Somali language that for example your generation represents, Abdelkarim, is not the same as that of your great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers. You have lost a lot but you have also gained much knowledge those ancestors did not have. The same is true for the Somali youth in the diaspora. I am confident that acquiring a good command of the Somali language will be within their reach whenever they need or want it. They already know so much more than they think even though their elders rarely give them credit! We need to create the structural and institutional contexts that make Somali and other youth *want* to learn more about Somali language and literature.

Already there are many individual Somali artists and scholars in the pipeline and, while not all of those will express themselves in the Somali language, many of them may turn out to be bi- or trilingual in their expression. Apart from returning time and again to the works by Nuruddin Farah and Abdourahman Waberi, I am an avid reader of novels by emerging Somali novelists such as Cristina Ali Farah (*Little Mother*), Yasmeen Maxamuud (*Nomad Diaries*), and Nadifo Mohamed (*Orchard of Lost Souls*) and less

known writers in Somali such as Samatar Sooyaan (*Singal Mother* and *Baadigoob*) and Adan Siciid Cabdi (*Laba-qarax jacayl*). Somali singers too are establishing themselves world- and web-wide: K'Naan, Waayaha Cusub, Aar Maanta, Cawaale Aadan, Nuur Caraale, and so forth. It will not be the way it was in the 1960s or 1970s but, haddii Eebbe idmo, Somali creativity will keep expressing itself in new and significant ways.

Moreover, Somalis are expressing themselves in other genres of cultural production. Think of the cartoonist Amin Amir, who consistently represents the points of view of ordinary Somali people and has been an unwavering pillar of *Soomaalinimo* for decades. Think of film, dance, serious and consistent website opinion pieces and other forms of journalism, and new scholarship. In spite of very limited institutional support, Somali cultural production and creativity has been and is impressive.

It is undeniable that Somalis are currently politically very divided, but I see strong evidence that, at the level of culture and religion, the values of *Soomaalinimo* and *Islaannimo*, which in the past were always organically intertwined, are still enduring in many Somalis' hearts and minds.

WDN: To conclude, you have been studying Somali history and literature for over 30 years. Can you reflect on some of the most memorable dimensions of this subject of study?

Prof. Ladan: Let me make one quick disclaimer and then propose two points. First the disclaimer: Do you remember the scene in the film [*The Parching Winds of Somalia*](#)⁵ that shows a Mogadishu language lab in which a whole room full of Somali men and women with headphones are learning to transcribe Somali oral poetry? That is the kind of education I wish I had received and that I would love to see restored in Somalia and elsewhere. Of the thirty years to which you refer, the years during which I was able to focus completely on Somali history and culture have been very few. Compared to many Somali experts in Somali literature and history I am still a beginner.

But what has helped me – and this is my first concluding point – is that Somali orature/literature is often of such high quality that it can become part of one's life and not just one's work. I think that this conviction was what caused Andrzejewski to publish one book of Somali poetry just in English, for a general reader without any knowledge of Somali.⁶ I also think that this was Maryan Omar Ali's hope for (and gift to) me. Somali songs are part of my life and make-up now and bubble up inside me and make me smile continuously. In a different and more significant way, this is true for many Somalis, as the popular songs are intertwined with memories of the heady and optimistic youth culture of the long decade following independence.

However, I would like to conclude with a word of caution. If we put Somali *suugaan* on a pedestal and fail to approach it critically, then we will fail to see that it is often also artificial and insincere – self-serving and opportunistic *afminshaarnimo* – and can times

consist of the most spiteful and divisive hate narratives. Just as we must evaluate every piece of scholarship on its merits, so we must critically examine every poem, novel, and so forth, not only with regard to its form and artistry but also in terms of its moral and truth-value. Just because something is part of Somali *suugaan* does not mean that we should cheer it on.

WDN: Thank you Prof Ladan

Prof Ladan: You are wellcome Abdelkarim for inviting me again to WardheerNews.

¹ “The Discourse on Moral Womanhood in Somali Popular Songs, 1960-1990,” *Journal of African History*, 50, 2009, pp. 101–22. See also The Afropop program “Reconstructing Somali: Love Songs at the Birth of a Nation:” <http://www.afropop.org/wp/17497/lidwien-kapteijns-love-songs-at-the-dawn-of-somalia/>

² This changed only after the state had collapsed and vast numbers of Somalis had moved into exile.

³ Check Afropop’s Hipdeep program called “Reconstructing Somali: Love Songs at the Birth of a Nation:” <http://www.afropop.org/wp/17636/reconstructing-somalia-love-songs-at-the-birth-of-a-nation/> and <http://www.afropop.org/wp/17497/lidwien-kapteijns-love-songs-at-the-dawn-of-somalia/>

⁴ Lidwien Kapteijns, “Making memories of Mogadishu in Somali poetry about the civil war.” In: *Mediations of violence in Africa: Fashioning new futures from contested pasts*, ed. by Lidwien Kapteijns and Annemiek Richters (Leiden: Brill), pp. 24-75; and Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia: The Ruinous Legacy of 1991*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania: Penn Studies in Human Rights, 2013.

⁵ Produced by Charles Geshekter. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, 1984.

⁶ B.W. Andrzejewski, with Sheila Andrzejewski, *An Anthology of Somali Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.