



Who is a Somali?

By Yusuf Serunkuma

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*If one of the great lessons of Romance is that we are masters and mistresses of our destiny, that our pasts can be left behind and new futures leaped into, tragedy has a less sanguine teaching to offer. Tragedy has a more respectful attitude to that past, to the often-cruel permanence of its impress: it honours, however reluctantly, the obligations that the past imposes – David Scott (2004), *Conscripts of Modernity**

Ever since the publication of [my response to #CadaanStudies](#), I have received both critical and favourable responses. The critical responses have challenged my understanding of the terms of the debate – especially how I sought to racialise a debate, which essentially meant to criticize structures of domination and marginalisation in Somali studies. Let me suggest that racialising this conversation, if I did, is not an original sin of mine. Indeed, one well articulated response angrily urged that racialization of this debate is equally important [what a divided opposition I have here]. What I find strange, however, is that categories such as “Somalis,” “non-Somali academics” and “#Cadaan” loud in Safia Aidid’s theorisation of #CadaanStudies denote race and parentage in their first sense. Terms have meaning as they have histories, and genealogies. Terms are never constructed in a vacuum. They are born at specific moments in history. The event for #CadaanStudies is a concern over native representation on the SLAJ – board and editorial. We can [stretch #CadaanStudies](#) to mean power and privilege, and weakness and marginalisation on the other hand. This is an important stretch, but we have to refine this debate by placing it in a proper historical and genealogical context.



Anyway, in my polemic, I brought in a bit of me – black and East African – perhaps to destabilise and complicate the context in which #CadaanStudies was being theorised. I also sought to extend the frontiers of knowledge production, insert within these frontiers an Africa-to-Africa dynamic, and then point to the ugliness of othering. I am a “non-Somali academic,” but not Caddaan. Where do I belong? Does the critique include me? If it doesn’t, then academics of Ethiopian parentage would have been representative, if they had proper grounding in the stuff they were writing about.

There was that ugly [Fox interview with Reza Aslan](#) after the publication of *Zealot: The Life and Time of Jesus of Nazareth*. I hope it's not forgotten. The questioner, Lauren Green would not stop stalking the persona of the author: "You are a Muslim, why did you write about the founder of Christianity?" In other words, being Muslim becomes his first intelligibility, and would cloud his scholarship. Does this sound any familiar with debates of exclusion and domination by non-Somali academics?

I have been teaching a course at University of Hargeisa, curiously titled, "The Muslim World and the Rest." In an extreme sense, this is a course in othering. Of course, the course has siblings in taglines elsewhere like "The Third World," "Clash of Civilisations", "Oriental Studies," etcetera. It reifies and homogenises the categories, "Muslim World," and "the Rest." As Said observed, these categories do not have "ontological stability." My



satisfaction in this course for me was that I tried to demonstrate to my students, following Said that such categories do not make sense in our interdependent and disorderly reality. Inside these categories are layers upon layers, and in several cases, clashes! The readings were very telling, Said, Mazrui, Mamdani, Lila Abu-Lughod, Robert Pape, etcetera. My students had difficulties accepting that Islam is varied from one place to another, away from the now reifying Sunni and Shia divide.

It is against this background that I am tempted to ask, as a response to several questions, and as a way of extending our beautiful conversation, "Who is a Somali? It seems to me, this is not only taken for granted but is also treated as a homogenous, definite and self-made category assigned a specific intelligibility. Aidid theorised that #Cadaan was,

"...[A] way of thinking about the words of one anthropologist and the exclusions of one journal not as isolated incidents, but as signifiers of the current state of Somali Studies, and the ways in which it has continued to sustain non-Somali dominance on all things Somali. It examines how colonial logic is replicated in contemporary scholarship on Somalis, and in the research practices of non-Somali academics in their gaze upon the Somali."

Let me start with a lighter query: "the current state of Somali Studies, and the ways in which it has continued to sustain non-Somali dominance on all things Somali." I have a problem with a couple of blanket statements in this excerpt. First, what is the criterion for measuring this "non-Somali dominance?" Isn't it even ahistorical to claim that one can run past or easily catch up with those who started running years before them? Second, one could imagine that the current state of Somali Studies is a product of both Somalis and non-Somalis. Does this suggest that Somali academics have just replicated a colonial logic in contemporary scholarship about Somalia? If

this is true as Ahmed Qassim Ali (1995) has argued¹ then this becomes an internal critique, implying that native representation does not help the situation either. And how do we want to think about the “current state:” is it measured in terms of numbers of academics in the field or the leading influence on shape and direction of discourse?

Perhaps I digress. I set out to ask questions about the category, Somali – reproduced a great deal in the excerpt above.

Hanging out in Hargeisa has been very illuminating to this question. Studying popular culture and doing a great deal of ethnography and history, I have been exposed to not just the diverse and multi-layered nature of the community, but also the multitude of cultural practices and interests. Many of these borrow from a colonial epistemology in the same way that there are plenty of claims for people to be picking from “traditional Somali” ways [very problematic term I am using there]. At the same time, explicitly Islam-inspired thought and behaviour in the last two and a half decades has intensified. In fact, as an East African Muslim, the public monitoring of religion relating especially to sexual promiscuity, women’s dress, the space for open entertainment such as music and performance, and also the shy underground alcohol industry are quite striking. Equally interesting is the fact that this fervour is just two and a half decades old! Friends have often pointed me to where the Hargeisa Club [to denote a liquor-store] used to stand, and have showed me pictures of their mothers going around with a simple head covering. In other words, we are living in the era of a new Somaliland and a new people. Someone should do us a study on this almost instantaneous shift in modernities in Somaliland, especially through or extending Ali Mazrui’s (1986) idea of Africa as having a triple heritage. It could be more than just triple! Or I have to read Hussein Bulhan (2013) *In-Between Three Civilisation* a bit more carefully.

To return to the question, “Who is a Somali?” I provide three ways of complicating this question [caveat: these seemingly neat packages can also be complicated further]: The quickest method is looking at Somalis in the northern part of the horn – Somaliland, against those in the south, or northern Kenya or Djibouti. Can we assume that these will have a common worldview – future, present and past? The second would be a debate on the diaspora community one that is also not homogenous because of its scattered nature across the world. At the end of the well-attended Arabic Poetry Night at the Cup of Art in Hargeisa a week ago, a competition was announced for the best shots of the night [well, because of western/colonial technology everybody has a camera in their hands]. When I suggested to my openly diaspora-disparaging friend, Mustafa whether he wanted to take part in the competition, he quipped that he could not because it was for Arabs. In other words, all the young men and women who graced the event and chatted away in Arabic were Arabs despite their Somali parentage, names and present location. Mustafa went on

¹ Qassim Ali noted that, “Most of the time, however, the Somali scholars have not produced material relevant to the national situation. Often their erudite works were conceived to impress foreign scholars and had little impact on the Somali reader, who could neither have access to them nor understand them.” See, chapter 5 in Ali Jimale Ahmed ed. (1995) *The Invention of Somalia*, Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, Inc.

to ask a somewhat political question, in Somali not Arabic, why the poet had poems about Tunis, Asmara, Cairo and not a single one on Hargeisa. The good laureate answered in not very good Somali [I was told], she did not feel Somali. Born and raised in Yemen, she felt more Arab than Somali. Mustafa's story reminded me of my Somali family friends in Kampala where all the little ones chat away with me in Uganda, and might grow up with a Ugandan worldview. Despite competence in Af-Somali, their world will be shaped by a Ugandan reality. Are these people Somalis?

It is not uncommon to hear diaspora-disparaging diatribes in certain sections of Hargeisa. The first time I told my friend Mustafa about my visit to Crown Hotel, he advised that I should be more careful about my religion. There was potential for contamination at Crown Hotel. And he wasn't alone, my taxi driver, a war veteran advised the same thing. In Hargeisa, places like Crown Hotel, Summer Time, 4 Seasons, and Fish and Steak (formerly, Obamas) are renowned for hosting number of diaspora returnees, especially teenagers and young adults. Many of these youth have been associated with many things including cultural and religious ignorance, lewdness and moral emptiness, teenage smoking, and binge drinking, etcetera. On the other hand, many diaspora friends hate everything they see around them and complain about belonging to "these people!" And I have heard complaints about how un-Somali these diaspora returnees are. Despite these sanctimonious diatribes flying from either side of the divide, the "home" government recognises the diaspora as being 15 per cent of Somaliland's population, sustains many people at home and wield a great deal of power over government. How should we think about this in our attempt to define a representative Somali?

The third way of looking at this diversity is considering people born and raised in Somalia/Somaliland, but without lineage in the traditional sense. Take the example of Somalis with Turkish parentage who continue to live in Burco and have been part of the Somaliland social and political imagining for years. Their offspring, now parents, are in their fifties and sixties also have children whose first language is Somali. They do not speak a single word of Turkish. Despite not belonging to any clan, they were all born and raised in Somaliland. There are also Indians, Yemeni Arabs, and Ethiopians etcetera, whose worldview is shaped by a Somali reality and historical context, but do not have Somali parentage. How should we think about their Somaliness?

On that note – with this rather incomprehensive treatment of the subject - I return to my question, "Who is a Somali?" All the groups described above have a legitimate claim to being Somali, and do cherish their Somali connection. I'm convinced being Somali is a valid description of a people, but I do not understand the persistent representative traits of Somaliness. When does one become representative of the Somali community, and who speaks for Somalis. We might have other sub-groups such as Al-Shabab who are now putting up a spirited campaign in representing Somalia/Somaliland in East Africa. These are questions I would ask theorists of #CaddaanStudies to consider.

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