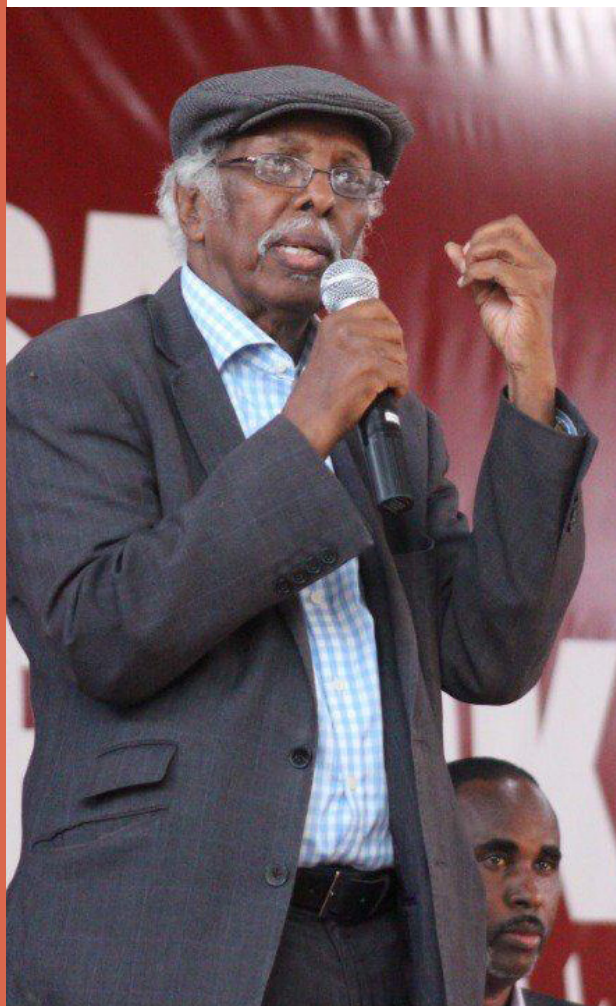


This article, rather more of an essay, was written by Said Jama Hussein at the wake of the second Hargeysa International Book Fair (2009), as one of the main themes launched to mark the literary splendour and significance of that occasion. Thirteen years on, and in the light of the groundbreaking changes currently taking place in our region in the Horn of Africa, that essay seems, by all standards, to us today equally begging for our attention and honest brooding. Hence its republication in this magazine for the benefit of our readers.

INTOLERANCE: A VILE AND DANGEROUS HUMAN ATTITUDE

By Said Jama Hussein



The International Book Fair with Mooge Cultural Festival, held in Hargeysa, the capital of Somaliland between 22 July and 27 July 2009 was a unique cultural event at least for three tangible reasons:

Firstly, it was the first time a literary and cultural festival of that scale and magnitude has taken place in the country since the downfall of the obnoxious military rule of General Siad Barre in 1991.

Secondly, Since the festival had been primarily meant, as its name unmistakably indicates, to honour the memory of the late Mohamed Mooge Liban, celebrated artist of rare talents, a patriot and educationist of amicable personal qualities, Hargeisa as undisputed hub of Somali art and culture, and being the hometown of the late Mohamed Mooge, was the most apt venue to be chosen for this remarkable event.

Thirdly, the astonishingly excellent level of preparation and organisation carried out by the co-partners, KAYD arts and cultural organisation and Redsea Cultural Foundation, under the experienced and dynamic direction and leadership of Ayan Mahamoud and Jama Musse Jama respectively.

The Hargeysa festival which lasted for a whole long week, practically starting at dawn and finishing at dusk throughout the week, was meant to achieve three objectives: to inform, to entertain, and to educate. For this purpose, to the festival was invited an appreci-

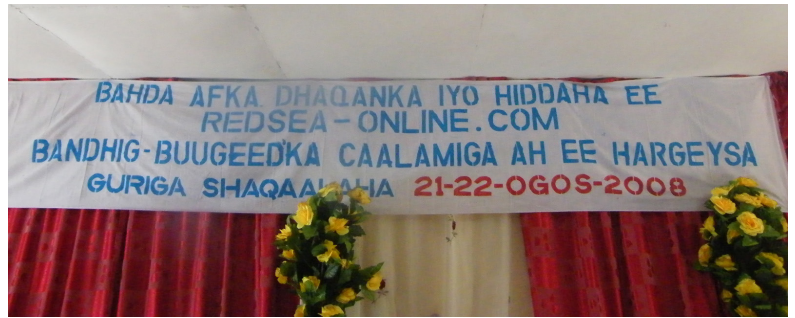
able number of renowned artists, writers, poets, intellectuals, playwrights, professors, and prominent social figures. The sponsoring organisations of Redsea Cultural Foundation and Kayd had, this time also, true to their principled tradition in such undertakings, chosen such pertinent themes as Censorship, Intolerance, Need for Reading Culture to be debated and discussed as a vital and integral part of the festival programme.

And this is precisely the reason that prompted me to hastily scribble this short article on 'INTOLERANCE' as its subject. Before moving to our theme of 'Intolerance', let me say a final word about the festival. The turn out to the festival was massive beyond belief, particularly among the young generation who luckily happened to be on their school vacation; and the festival ended in a brilliantly resounding success.

It is my absolute conviction that of all human passions, attitudes, and behaviours the most dangerous and despicable is intolerance. Hence the fight against it must be equally resolute and tenacious. Human history is full of glaring examples of the immeasurable damage which extremist movements, be they political or religious or in many cases the combination of both, driven by their blind and powerful urge of intolerance, are capable of inflicting. To cite but a few easily remembered ones, we can easily mention the Crusade Wars in the Middle Ages, the First and Second world wars in the first half of the 20th century, and the most spectacular atrocity of our time- Al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Centre in New York killing at least 3000 people in the first year of this 21st century of ours.

It has been verified beyond the slightest shade of doubt that all radical and fundamentalist movements of whatever persuasion can be seen to have the spirit of intolerance deeply ingrained in their political ideologies or religious doctrines for that matter.

Appalled by the horrific outcome of the world wars of the last century, and to forestall the recurrence of similar catastrophes in the future, the United Nations has promulgated the Human Rights Law as a major article in its charter and made it binding to its member states. As quite well known, all the UN member states, despite their obvious differences and diversities, are signatories to this most plausible law ever to be enacted in the interest of humanity.



Its message is loud and clear- to unreservedly and indiscriminately safe-guard the well-being of humanity and forcefully thwart any measure deemed detrimental to the life and livelihood of humanity. The commendable positive impact of this Human Rights Law notwithstanding, yet the stark reality remains that no matter how fatal the policies may be practised by states or parties such repulsive and outrageous actions cannot be simply stamped out by the mere setting of a law. That is why even the most despotic and totalitarian regimes in the world today though having the Human Rights Law incorporated into their national constitutions, do not care the least.

On the other hand, a quick glance at the democracies or the democratic states in our world today is enough to reveal that they are sustained, among other essential factors like economic, social and cultural advancement, by the dissemination of the spirit of tolerance coupled with the enforcement of the rule of law. And that constitutes the bedrock of their much admired and envied social welfare and social harmony. As it is for the state, so it is equally true for the individual citizen. To acquire in your lifetime the commendable trait of tolerance as part of your personal

character is to have gained the key to the realm of human civilisation- the utmost that one can aspire to achieve.

Of special concern to us here is to briefly touch upon the theme of intolerance and how it applies to the Somali society. Since the ousting of the military regime headed by general Siad Barre in 1991 and the subsequent collapse and disintegration of the Somali state, the country has been ravaged by incessant, un abetting diabolical civil war that aptly earned it in the world mass media the reviled title of 'the most failed state' for the past two decades and which it strangely struggles to retain much longer.. Of course, this dire state of affairs did not come about randomly, nor as a curse from heaven as some feeble-minded people try to self-righteously explain. The

gist of it is that we came to this lamentable state as the result of logical culmination of unpopular and misguided policies and unbridled maladministration over the past forty years. In short, one can safely say that aside from the direct repressive policies and practices meted to the Somali people by the dictatorial Siad Barre regime and the warlords who succeeded him only to take his hateful legacy even further; in both instances the wilful and malicious spread by remorseless politicians of clannish values utilising the parochial notion of intolerance among the hapless population contributed to no small extent to the prevailing state of agony and hopelessness.



Over the past 20 years, at least, we have been hearing from Somalis, supposedly learned ones, as well as foreigners writing about the core causes of the ongoing Somali dilemma their haughty assertion- the same vague singing song- that the chief cause of the Somali predicament lies squarely on its nomadic, pastoralist, clannish way of thinking and behaviour. In other words, the qualities and natural behaviour of the pastoralist nomads were chiefly responsible for the unending internal wars and the destruction of the country. There is absolutely no denying of the fact that the parochial relations and the tribal value system dominantly prevalent in the countryside acted as a catalyst to be exploited by wily, undeterred selfish politicians serving their own interest and not caring the least for the Somali masses that brought them to power. This being so, yet such audacious claim that the Somali tribal structure and its traditional business norms were

the primary cause that ultimately ruined the country ludicrously smacks of naivety and can simply be dismissed as a load of rubbish. 'How have they – these pastoralists- been able to achieve independence in the first place?' is never asked. Nor is it for me to waste much time in that futile debate.

Worth reminding ourselves, there was a time when Somalia did enjoy a period of relative peace and stability. For the first nine years of its independence, Somalia had, compared to many other African countries, a relatively democratic system of governance that sowed a palpable degree of tolerance among its people and willingness to adhere to the rule of law.

Unfortunately, that was but short-lived. The blatant violation of the constitutional laws by the ruling echelons of the government brought a wedge between the rulers and the ruled which eventually paved the ground for the military takeover.

Moving to an interesting episode on personal level quite relevant to our theme of 'Intolerance', Nuruddin Farah the internationally acclaimed Somali novelist having come to the end of one of his trips to Kenya and on his way to the airport wanted to say his farewell to his father who had been undergoing medical treatment in Kenya at the time. Contrary to his expectation, he found his father cross with him and unforgiving because of his choice of becoming a professional writer in a foreign language and to no lesser degree critical of his choice of dress, his habits, and his friends. Addressing his son the father said curtly, "No one trusts subversives." To which Nuruddin dutifully replied politely but meaningfully, "I wish the two of us could be sufficiently tolerant of each other to celebrate our differences. It is time we got to know ourselves better, time we celebrated the differences in our world views." What a world of difference between the two positions or the two poles of tolerance and intolerance.

To sum up Intolerance is not an inherited but rather an acquired negative trait of character. It is engendered by the historical, geographical, psychological and political milieu in which a person has lived. It cannot be totally eradicated as long as human beings continue living on the face of the earth; but to reduce its negative effect to a minimum is quite a possibility. There could be multitudinous ways of different approaches. The one that is uppermost in my mind now, taking our present epoch

into view, is the one that entails the active collaboration of the most effective factors in the accomplishment of this colossal mission. These factors are the international community, the national state, the civil society, and the individual citizen. The attainment of the highest form of political and human moral consciousness by the person seems to be the ultimate desired goal in which each of the mentioned factors has its own significant role to play. Added to this is the delightful advantage offered by the dynamically transforming world of our time whereby the growing geopolitical, social, and cultural mobility, and the free flow of information, ideas, and value systems do inexorably expand the horizons of human awareness. In conclusion, let there be no illusion that this duty of working towards the realisation of a tolerant society living in harmony and free from the evils of prejudice, bias, and taboo in which sound political activities combine with systematic sound education and orientation to reach its final desired fruition, will definitely demand enormous efforts, huge sacrifices and a great deal of time. Indeed, it is one of the worthiest human endeavours to set our hearts and minds to.

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was a well-known Somali scholar, intensely devoted to the promotion of the Somali language and culture. He is the author of *Shufbeel* and *Safar Aan Jaho Lahayn*; both are collections of short stories and literary essays. His most recent work *Ma Innaguun Baa!* also published by Ponte Invisible, comprises of short stories and personal Memoirs.