The Somali Oral Tradition and the Role of Storytelling in Somalia

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The Somalis are still an oral people. In the Somali context, orality is the preferred medium used for cultural representation. The above sentences do not, however, suggest an oral hegemony that has complete sway over the Somali mind/consciousness. For, as Ruth Finnegan explains in *Oral Poetry*, "The idea of pure and uncontaminated 'oral culture' … is a myth" (24). In short, there is a symbiotic relationship that exists between the oral and written forms. Both oral and written should be studied in light of their basic functions. A description of the function of the two literary terms is best understood by etymological analysis of the term text. The term, as Bongasu Kishani explains, originates from the Latin *texere* (to weave) (72). To be able to weave something, i.e., cloth, (not Kishani's image, but mine), one has to have two things in hand, string and a loom. The analogy becomes clear when one considers a child playing cat's cradle who has to have a piece of string in order to form different designs; otherwise, the configurations in his mind will remain abstract. The child's mental configurations convey meaning with the help of other things (a piece of string) outside the mind. In a similar fashion, human thought needs an artifact in order to be transmitted across time and space. Such a medium could be the spoken or written word.

The Somali oral tradition like any other oral tradition extols the virtues of memory. And memory presupposes two things: the existence of a pool of memorizers and secondly, a constant repetition of the "word" for its survival. In oral cultures, children are taught about their tradition

by word of mouth. Each generation in the process selectively preserves its wisdom and that of preceding generations for posterity. Oral literatures, therefore, apart from their aesthetic quality and the experiential wisdom inherent in them, ensured the survival of tradition in the minds of the young.

One form of memorization, which is common to both prose and poetry, is content memorization, wherein the narrator is not obliged to quote every word. Content memorization is most appropriate for prose narratives. (The other form of memorization, "verbatim memorization," is supported by a mnemonic mechanism that utilizes alliteration, rhythmic patterns, rhyme, and so on. These two modes of memorization suggest dividing Somali literature into two streams: a time-bound stream and a time-free one. B.W. Andrzejewski explains:

> The first consists of all those items which can in some way be placed on the time scale, and the second of those which cannot. Thus a historical narrative, a poem connected with some known event, or even a love poem known to have been recited originally by a real person in particular, known circumstances are examples of the time-bound stream, while an animal fable, a fictional narrative describing an event not set in any specific period of time or a poem used in work songs are examples of the time-free stream. (1985, 36)

The classification of time in Somali oral literature shows the existence of a clear distinction between narratives which are perceived to be true, that is, those which have an historical basis because of their depiction of a real character or a true event in Somali history,

and narratives which, in a fictionalized form, are meant to entertain and to impart a moral lesson. This is not to suggest that the first form does not also impart a moral lesson. The distinction lies in the literal seriousness of the story told. The distinction also carries with it a value judgment of its own. Somali historical narratives, by virtue of their definition as "real" accounts of "real" people, are accorded a higher status. Thus, children and adults are expected to memorize these accounts verbatim.

Somali male adults rarely expend much of their time in either listening to or telling fictional narratives. Fictional storytelling is mostly the domain of women. Women in successive generations had to store and transmit the fictionalized wisdom of the past for posterity. This engendered role can be found in many other societies in the African continent and beyond. One possible explanation for this arrangement among the Somalis was livestock herding, especially camels, with all its attendant hardships, which kept young men away from the homestead for long periods of time. (Elder men actually delegate many herding tasks to younger men, allowing the elders more time in the homestead and more time for interaction with each other under trees, in town, in mosques, and so on. Elder Somali men do not, to my knowledge, engage (in the main) in fictionalized tales. The explanation probably has more to do with militarism—associated with pastoralism—than with the actual tasks and separations of livestock herding. Militarism encourages adult males to recall their exploits, emphasize the value of valor, group loyalty, self-discipline, and a hierarchy of older over young.) During such times, the women were left with children and had ample time to narrate to their children stories which would simultaneously give the children entertainment and food for thought.

One salient feature of Somali oral narratives is their ability to incorporate poetry and proverbs. Poetry and proverbs share one characteristic, namely, the alliterative technique. Such

an alliterative technique gives both proverb and poetry a strong anchor in the traditions from which a storyteller, a poet and an audience take their cue. Through the use of proverbs, the narrator depicts a bond, which holds the communalist ethos of the society together. It is for this reason that proverbs, according to Herskovits, furnish "'a grammar of values' by which the deeds of a hero [or heroine] can be measured and evaluated" (qtd. in Lindfors 50-51). In addition to providing a frame of reference for the deeds of a hero, proverbs are also "used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict and to focus on the values of the society … [the storyteller] is portraying" (Lindfors 64).

Somali oral narratives utilize a proverb as the central strand, the kernel, so to say, around which all other elements in the narrative coalesce to give the story its specific contour and meaning. The proverb, which may be the whole story in a nutshell, comes at the end for two reasons: the one who quotes it has built an edifice whose foundation runs deep into the traditions of the community; secondly, those who conform to such traditions have to accept the deductions of its user. Indeed, being apodictic as it is, a proverb cuts short all discussions on any subject, or as the Somalis say, "Waxay Maahmaahdu soo af jartaa hadalka" ("A proverb brings debates to a close"). It is like the evidence a clever expert uses to prove his point, evidence after which no argument is allowed. Somali proverbs, which are structured in verse, function as mnemonic devices helping listeners remember the moral of the story. Indeed, the genesis of a story, more often than not, is forgotten. The proverb that frames and is framed by the narrative is remembered because the proverb becomes part of the Somali unconscious. In short, the proverb allows the storyteller to reconfigure and re-imagine the original story all over again. With the proverb at his disposal, a storyteller is able to trace the contours of the old story while at the

same time giving the story his signature. That is why no two performances are alike in Somali storytelling sessions.

Most Somali narratives are didactic. This, in turn, affects many aspects of the narrative, such as characterization, point of view, and so on. Storytellers utilize a viewpoint which gives them sufficient freedom to manipulate their narrative stories. This viewpoint is usually an omniscient third person voice. The narrator vaguely conceals his subjectivity; indeed he makes both subtle and overt remarks about both the attitudes and actions of the characters. He does not minimize scathing criticism of those characters that deviate from the social ideal. Such characters become subject to ridicule and, at times, even humiliation. He sometimes lets another character that conforms to his version of the ideal pass judgment on the one deemed to be a villain. The narrator sometimes describes his character through his physical appearance and by the kind of clothes he is wearing. He also gives the audience a good description of the character via his ambience. Such a description has affinities with traditional Somali narratology.

Craft is tradition-bound. Stylistic devices such as the external approach to characterization emanate from a tradition that upholds the supremacy of action in narratives. In most stories in the Somali language, character is subservient to action and a character trait only provokes an immediate action. In short, the events are externalized and motivation is less deeply psychological. As a result of the externalization of events, the narrator rarely lets us see the character through interior monologue. Rather, he uses physical correlatives to describe mental states.

The geographical movement of most Somali narratives is from the known to the unknown and then back to the known. The narratives seem to emulate the paradigm of the rite of passage, particularly the separation-trial-reincorporation element. However, in social practice, as

Andrzejewski and Lewis write, there is "no formal initiation for Somalis from boyhood to manhood." Circumcision is in a sense a stage of initiation for both boys and girls, but even "this is not an occasion for esoteric instruction, and is usually performed without much ceremony" (19-20).

In its broader meaning, however, the protagonist who leaves his place of origin for some other place is apt to pass through some form of a "rite of passage." Once away from home, the hero passes through an ordeal, perhaps no less painful than that involved in a rural rite of passage involving circumcision without anesthesia. To survive, he has to be ingenious. On his return trip, the protagonist is welcomed not as a prodigal son, but as someone with experience and a lot of yarns to spin. In this type of story line, the protagonist is depicted as more of the hero type who sets out in a quest involving perilous attempts to bring a benefit to his family or community. The journey into the Somali interior entails traveling on foot through an unfriendly environment. Negative characteristics such as cowardice reveal themselves after a few days walk in the harsh Somali terrain.

By utilizing the journey motif as plot device, storytellers take into consideration an important aspect of Somali traditional society. Traveling entails new experiences. As a Somali proverb states, "Nin aan dhul marin dhaayo maleh" (literally, "A man who has not traveled does not have eyes"). It is also through traveling that one comes to know his fellow traveler's strengths and weaknesses. There are certain traits that force Somalis to avoid taking a trip with the person who is in possession of these traits. The Somalis mention three kinds of people with whom you never travel. These are: a person who never leads the way, i.e., one who is afraid of being the first to encounter trouble (i.e., a coward); one who gulps whatever meager/skimpy food

available, i.e., a greedy person who does not leave some leftover for his companions; and, finally, one who does not tell stories to while away the time.

The Somalis are said to be great poets, but they are equally great storytellers. Their stories reflect the kind of values they cherish. They, for example, put a premium on loyalty, courage, fairness, intelligence, and generosity. Their stories depict the tasks, the preoccupations and contradictions that Somali society grapples with, and attempts to explain to its members. It is through oral narratives that children are inducted into their culture. In Somali oral narratives, form and content are inseparable. A good story comes to life through good storytelling. A performance is profusely enjoyed when facial contortions and gestures, intonation, and the overall body language of the storyteller harmoniously become one with syntax and construction. In short, the bifurcate use of language for instruction and entertainment is keenly observed in Somali storytelling sessions.

Somali oral narratives proffer solutions to existential problems. They help the community formulate a map, a blueprint of a sort. They also give solace, as they afford the community a valuable insight into the perplexing issues that baffle them. In short, the stories explain how, for example, things came into being, and why they are what they are. Somali oral narratives are replete with stories that sniff the air in order to explain what is, and that which is to come. The stories explore and offer representations of social relations and of social space. They also give an insight into the storyteller's relationship to the civic place.

The four beautiful stories collected for the Minnesota Humanities Centers' Somali Bilingual Book Project run the whole gamut of emotions and concerns of the Somali community. The stories are well known throughout much of the Somali populated regions of the Horn of Africa. Their popularity owes much to the stories' relevance to the *modus vivendi* of the Somali.

They in effect grapple with issues that concern the daily quotidian of the Somali. Through their meticulous rendering of social injustice, abuse of the mighty, poverty, communal strife, and an overall oppressive reality, the stories give a glimpse of hope to the listener. They seem to concur with the Somali proverb that states, "Si jirta, siima jeeddo" ("What is, is never everlasting." The idea being, that this, too, shall pass.)

"Qayb Libaax" ("The Lion's Share") is a powerful story that resonates well with the abused, oppressed, and with all those who languish under the whimsical rule of a mighty tyrant. The story exposes the sordid logic of an injustice that purports to embody and represent fairness. It is also a cautionary tale that warns the mighty of the excesses of their unjust practices. These practices are depicted in order to call attention to the pain and misery they cause in the lives of others. They also underline how the humiliations the weak undergo could have a replicating negative effect on the status quo that favors the mighty. The story also underlines the power of raw intellect, represented in this story by the shrewd and sly fox. (The fox's cunningness is almost universally acknowledged. In the Somali case, stories and songs are abound that rhapsodize about how smaller animals, including the fox, survive on their wits. A Somali song that compares and contrasts the wit of several animals has the following refrain: Caqligii wanaagsani itaal inuu ka roonyahay, bal eego, u fiirsadaay" (Lo and behold that/ good sense is better than prowess.)

"The Lion's Share" also underlines the importance of meat in Somali culture. They say, "Cad iyo caanaa lagu noolyahay" ("[We] live on meat and milk"). The Somalis also say one should not accept a piece of meat given to or thrown at him in humiliation—(*cad quureed*)—even if you are needy and famished. "Meat," in short, is a metaphor for life, dignity, and for communal bond.

The story problematizes notions of justice, the abuse of justice, subsequent attempts at disabusing abuse, fear of collective punishment, and so on. The lion's order to the old hyena to divide the meat among the animals is a coded stratagem that does not reflect any kind of egalitarian ethos. The old hyena is put in the spot wherein he must satisfy the whims of the king of the jungle, while at the same time maintaining a modicum of dignity in the eyes of the other animals. His fair sense of arithmetic incenses the lion, which, in fury, slaps the hyena in the face. The slap is a punitive action meant to punish the "wrong-doer." It is also meant to intimidate the other animals at the council. The old hyena limps away in pain and shame. But that is not the end of his misery. The rest of the hyenas—intuitively or taking their cue from the lion's gestures—follow suit. They, too, leave the convocation, once their leader falls from grace. The fallen hyena was the eldest of the hyenas. Age connotes wisdom, leadership. He is an embodiment of the collective. Thus, the rest of the hyenas fall prey to punitive practices that punish the community for the faults—real or imagined—of the individual.

The lion next orders the lowly but sly fox to divide the meat. She does not need any convincing from anyone to give the whole carcass to the lion. Yet, she, too, has to appease the mute but palpable wrath of the animals. The fox's strategy in redeeming herself and by extension, through a social synecdoche, her "clan," lies in manipulating language. She drags out her sentences, prolonging the anxiety of the other animals. Ironically, it is the lion that interrupts her speech, unable to sustain the fox's lengthy pyrotechnics. Asked how she learned to divide with such elegance, the fox says that she has taken her cue from "the eye that is hanging from the hyena's cheek." The rest of the animals are forced to gnaw at crumbs, the offal, left behind by the lion.

But here is where the seemingly innocuous ending of the story assumes a new poignancy. The animals go about their different ways, chanting, "The lion's share is not fair, the lion's share is not fair." The disgruntled animals direct their imprecations at the lion, but only when he is not present. The repetitive nature of the chant is important, in that it registers in their consciousness the depth of their pain. It seems that the animals have now passed a hurdle: their consciousness is now simmering with anger, and that by formulating their anger, fear is no longer rife in them. They still have to pass another hurdle, which they'll be able to when they learn to chant in unison. Yet the animals' collective, albeit subdued, anger spells trouble for the lion, and by extension, all those who rule by the precepts of the stick.

"The Travels of Igal Shidad" recount the trials and tribulations of a man destined to be the butt of jokes in Somali culture. The persona of Igal Shidad is a figment of the Somali imagination, and not that of a historical person. Igal Shidad personifies certain traits and characteristics that Somalis ridicule and shun. In a place where courage and bravery connotes manhood, Igal's cowardice connotes its absence. Yet in this story, Igal is bound by duty to find a better place for his family and animals; both are under the mercy of a relentless drought. Under such conditions, the adult male in the homestead is required to travel far and wide until they find a place with pasture and water. The Somalis are said to be "naq-raac" (in search of pasture for their animals). Water or the scarcity of it punctuates the pace of life in the harsh terrain of the Somali interior. If, as we suggested earlier, meat and milk are the staple diet of the Somali, then "biyo iyo baad" (water and pasture) are what sustains a modicum of life in the Somali interior.

Traveling at night, and away from his homestead, Igal comes across a menacing object on the ground. He cannot surmise or ascertain the real identity of the object, which, to him, looks like a lion, ready to strike. He decides to wait the night out. Finally at daybreak, he finds out of

the identity of the object that had rendered him motionless through the night: a tree stump. The story ends with a classic saying that has become part of the Somali lore, and is forever etched in the national consciousness. Igal's "Ma waxaan ku moodey, mise waxaad noqotay, mise waxaan loo noqon doonin" (roughly, "What I thought of you, and what you actually have become, and what will not be repeated"). Igal here reflects on the incongruity between perception and reality. The phrases, respectively, refer to the feared object, which his mind processed as "a lion," the real identity of the feared, shadowy object, i.e., a tree stump, and what Igal will not do again: travel by night. In other words, the wordplay is on the disjuncture between appearance and reality. In the Somali version, the three phrases are alliterated in the letters "m" and "w." This gives them the status of a proverb, and since alliteration has a mnemonic factor, Igal's adage is always at hand for people who are at a loss for words when confronted by a disjuncture between appearance and the reality on the ground. The phrases give solace to people who have become sober and wiser after the event. A way out is given to those who have been through some sordid experience. Igal's adage is like the punch line that captures the story in a nutshell.

Yet the punch line almost displaces the purpose of Igal's initial journey, a journey about reconnaissance, an exploratory survey of the land beyond his drought-stricken homestead. The encounter with the shadowy object overwhelms the initial intention of his journey. The story now becomes a story about cowardice, albeit one of quaint nature. A coward is entrusted with finding a new place for the family. And it is here, perhaps, that Igal's persona becomes a screen on which the community's fears are projected. Perhaps Igal's fears verbalize our fears, and by verbalizing them help us domesticate them. Yet, we laugh at his frailties and foibles, not to mock him or even pity him. We laugh in order to conquer real, concrete fears that beset the Somali in an inclement environment: traveling without torch or guns. The traveler is always at the mercy of

the landscape. The slightest unnatural bend, contour, or shape adds to his fears. Ambushes are always risks that stalk the night traveler. What Igal's anecdotal story teaches us is to be prepared for any such eventuality. To expect the unexpected. To beware of the shadow that follows or precedes you in the dark. There is an African proverb that warns people of five things, one of which is darkness, because one never knows what lurks in the dark. Also, an adage in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* states, "Darkness is so great it gives horns to a dog" (206). We laugh at Igal's cowardice for they force us to reflect, and, in the process, help us snap out of the jaws of undue fear. The humor is sharp and coruscating. Yet Igal Shidad, the coward, lives another day to tell his story. Indeed, as the Somalis say, "Fulay hooyadiis ma gablanto" (A coward's mother never mourns prematurely).

Women in Somali oral narratives are, as elsewhere, either praised as icons or devalued as villains. The story of Dhegdheer, the cannibal, is a curious story in the genre. The story of Dhegdheer is told in many parts of Somalia, and as such each version reflects the landscape, the idiosyncrasy of the particular teller, and the overall political drift extant in the place. Dhegdheer, a.k.a. Xaynwada (Haynwada), true to her name was a group leader. Early on, she exhibited leadership qualities. She was a pretty, precocious young woman of humble origins. Her parents gave her hand in marriage to a wealthy man in the homestead. The man was known for his bad, violent temper. One version mentions how her husband lost interest in her when she could not give him a male heir. As the years passed, the land was devastated by a long drought. Soon after, Haynwada's behavior took a dramatic transformation to the worse. She became a cannibal, and her husband was one of her first victims. Haynwada soon developed the traits of a predator animal. She could smell or hear from afar. Indeed, it is because of her sharp auditory senses that she is called "Dhegdheer" (the one with the long ear).

The story in this book is distilled and culled from several versions of the Dhegdheer repertoire. The woman in the story is a recently widowed wife with one child. She is on her way to her family's homestead. En route to her destination, but exhausted, she and her small child come to Dhegdheer's residence. The cannibal's daughter cautions mother and son against any long stay, as she fears for their safety. The daughter's role in the story is pivotal, in that she adumbrates and frustrates the cannibal's nefarious intentions from within. She also attenuates the perspicacity and keenness of the cannibal's auditory and olfactory senses, by insisting that the mother's cannibalistic senses are picking out none other than her daughter's scents and presence. The daughter's tussle with the mother buys time for the potential victims for whom her ruses signify life or death.

Finally, the frightened mother and son are forced to run for their lives. Dhegdheer is after them, pursuing with gusto. The two come to the Hargega valley. Behind them is the cannibal, before them, the valley. The mother asks for mercy and a safe passage. The valley promises to let them pass, if they are free of sin. And pass, they do. A similar request from the cannibal meets with a similar response. Dhegdheer, however, fails to prove her innocence, and she falters and dies. The story ends with the death of the cannibal, and the redemption of the innocent. The ending conforms to the universal precepts prevalent in all didactic stories: the villain is punished, and the innocent is rewarded.

This version of the Dhegdheer story does not, as we are told in the "Author's Note," conform to the prevalent belief that the cannibal was finally killed by her only child, a daughter. Yet, we must remember that this published version weaves together several strands welded cogently from several variants of the Dhegdheer repertoire. Indeed, the ending here is similar to a version that has Dhegdheer die in the ocean. The ocean demands that both victim (represented

by a brother and sister duo) and villain avoid dirtying its waters, or risk its anger and certain doom. The victims are saved, while the cannibal drowns. Both versions have a striking similarity with the Moses and the parting of the waters of the Red Sea story in the scriptures. If that is the case, the story's genesis can be traced to a period in Somali history when intense myths and fables were created: the era that inaugurates the advent of Islam on the shores of the Horn of Africa. The ending of the retold story in this book, that uses "sin" or its absence as an important trope, conforms to a strong belief in Somali culture that even a sieve (strainer) will hold water for the innocent and pure.

The above three stories have one important thing in common, namely, their being fictional accounts of fictionalized events. The stories have no known connections to historical figures. The fourth story in this collection, however, is different, in that it recounts the intellectual genius of a known, historical figure. Garad Farah Garad Hirsi, popularly known by his nickname, Wiil Waal, was an enlightened philosopher-king, who inspired awe and fear in his subjects. The adjective "Waal" signifies or conjures up certain traits such as: daring, bold, and reckless. "Wiil" means 'boy" in Somali. Thus, the sultan's name means, "The daring, bold, and reckless boy." Wiil Waal ruled his subjects by engaging them in meticulously and provocatively worded riddles. The sultan always rewarded the wit that solved his riddles. In this particular story, the sultan convenes a meeting of all the male adults under his jurisdiction. He challenges them to bring him the part of sheep that can unite or divide people. All those at the assembly are men, thus the predominance of patriarchy in the culture is discernible. The sultan is looking for his match in the men folk, not bothering to include the women in his search for the wisest person in the land. The attendants at the gathering disperse, and soon after their ordeal begins. Among the men at the assembly is a poor man who is known for his unique thoughts. He, for example,

treasures his family more than wealth. (It is important to note here that the assembly is open to all adult males in the region. In other words, being poor does not preclude one from attending the *shir*, and from taking part in the test. Granted, it is only those who have sheep to slaughter who could effectively take part in solving the riddle.)

Once at home, the poor man in the story explains to his daughter why he has to slaughter the best sheep in their small herd of sheep. He then selects the ribs as the part that could cultivate friendship or sow the seeds of enmity among people. His decision is not without its trepidations. He waits for his daughter's response, to either affirm or object to his decision. The father's hesitations signify his willingness to hear his daughter out. Here is a father who values, indeed solicits, the opinion of his daughter. Thus, what was not possible at the sultan's gathering is possible at the poor man's house: girls speak their minds and proffer advice. This is important, as the narrator does not mention any filial or spousal input into the decision-making processes of the other male adults in their endeavor to select and divine the needed part.

The daughter's answer to the sultan's test surprises the father. The gullet of all things? How could the esophagus symbolize what unites or divides people? Knowing that his daughter has his best interest at heart, and believing in her intellectual ability, the father sallies forth with the gullet to the sultan's assembly. Subdued and eerie silence dominates the gathering, when the man presents his "find." It is only the sultan's congratulatory remarks that jolt the man out of his stupor. The sultan surmises, however, that the dazed man is not the one who indeed solved the riddle. The poor man tells the sultan that it was his daughter, and not him, who solved the riddle. Wiil Waal asks to see the daughter. When they meet, her explanations win her the heart of the sultan, who crowns her the queen of his land.

The daughter's explication and solution to the sultan's riddles emanate from a belief in Somali culture that greed is the archenemy of communal unity and cohesion. The Somalis say, "Hunguri ayaa dad isku dira ama duma" ("It is the gullet that can foster enmity or cohesion among people"). In Somali culture, greed is associated with shame. The greedy person not only brings shame to himself but also to his family and, by extension, his clan. Somali oral literature is replete with characters who are ridiculed, shunned, and castigated for their greed, seen as the epitome of anti-social behavior.

Be that as it may, Wiil Waal's riddle could be solved in other ways. Some storytellers mention the tongue as that which has the potential to divide or bring people together. The Somalis understand the dualistic nature and double-edgedness of the tongue and, by extension, the human mouth, to either foster unity or enmity among people. A riddle that plays on this duality is the following:

Riddle: "Idan yar oo aleelo leh?" ("A brazier with seashells?")

Answer: "Waa afka." ("The mouth.")

The riddle that compares the human mouth to a brazier says a lot of the Somali's deep understanding of language. The human mouth is equated with a brazier, a carrier of fire. Much depends on how and for what purposes that fire is used. Riddles, like primers, introduce kids to their culture, and to the dynamics of the spoken word. Through the riddle, the children wrestle with language and with the force of ideas transmitted in and through that language. They learn how to reflect and engage in critical thinking. Riddles enhance the intellectual faculties of the young. They create nimble and agile minds. Wiil Waal's riddle exhorts the community to tap the unharnessed intellect of women in his region.

It goes without saying that a modicum of an order of culture is needed for the articulation of the ideas extant in the four books in the Somali Bilingual Book Project. The stories, whether apocryphal or not, thrive and blossom in an ambience that's protective and nurturing of ideas that go against the grain. Alternatively, the stories have their origins in an era when there was a highly nuanced struggle and/or a relentless competition over the direction and shape the culture was to take. At the plot level, the stories formulate ideas that give voice to marginalized positions. The animals are given a moment's reprieve from the lion's autocratic rule, when they complain and chant about the unfairness of his bullying tactics. Igal Shidad verbalizes his fears in a place where the coward is frowned upon and humiliated. The young woman in the Wiil Waal story is crowned a "wise person" in a place where she was not even allowed to partake in the assembly and convocation of the adult males in the region. Finally, the emergence of Dhegdheer in the midst of her community is justified with elaborate extenuating circumstances that preface most of the stories in the Dhegdheer repertoire. Her transformation into a cannibal is traced to one form of traumatic experience or another. The etymology of her cannibalistic behavior links her story to that of Medea in Greek mythology. Both Medea and Dhegdheer attest to one thing: Insanity is communally induced.

All in all, the four stories in these splendid picture books externalize the inner dynamics, torments and turmoil of familial, filial, and societal contradictions. (Contradictions, after all, sustain life.) Contradictions thus externalized allow the community to take heed of simmering fragmentations, concerns, and burgeoning configurations (or effacement) of axiomatic ontological and etiological truths. The contradictions, in short, exhort the community to devise plausible solutions to gnawing and perplexing challenges. But the stories are also beautiful artifacts that showcase the venerable and veritable tradition of Somali storytelling. For a story to

be enjoyed, there must be the right balance of instruction and entertainment. These four stories reflect that venerable tradition.

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