

Remembering Said S. Samatar: Death prevents you from Thinking

By Faisal A. Roble
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The late Said Samatar

On 14th of March in 1883, Fredrick Engels eulogized Karl Marx: “the greatest living thinker ceased to think.” Likewise, on February 24, 2015, Said Sheikh Samatar, Somalia’s reputed historian ceased to tell Somali stories. Our own “waayeel,” or sage, in the tradition of the late Muse Galaal and Aw-Jamac, will no longer be here to indulge us in his lucidly crafted tales of distant pastoral memories. Said was both a trained historian and a product of nomadic culture that he so ably narrated with endearment. The twin forces of town and bush shaped Said into a “segmented” persona of Arnold Toynbee (historian) and Macalin Dhoodaan (an eminent bard of nomadic culture) in one.



He so fondly without shame [talked and wrote about his impoverish background](#). In 1992, I heard him telling a well groomed white American something that most Somalis will never share. Answering to a casual question by a concerned American friend regarding Said having knee pains when getting up, he told his friend that such a mishap is due to the severe malnutrition he had sustained as a child growing up in Qari Jaqood, part of the Ethiopian administered Somali region, where kids walk miles without eating during torturous camel tracking. He quickly added: “There wasn’t much to eat after all, except an occasional camel milk.”

Despite early childhood hardships and a father that abandoned him, Said had gained success in life and had a colorful career; at the height of the Somali civil war, he advised ABC’s coveted news magazine “Nightline” hosted by the incomparable journalist, Ted Koppel; he contributed to a UNESCO historical encyclopedia; he was an invitee as an “eminent scholar” to the convention of the drafting of the Eritrean constitution.

Ironically, he was never invited to the Somali constitution-making process at any time. I don’t know if he would have accepted such an invitation since the scars of the trauma he

had sustained from hiding in a US military tank to scape a death threat from a powerful warlord in Mogadishu in 1991 never left him.

A Man of Scholarship

Owing to his extraordinary intelligence and an early memorization of the Qoran and the Fiqi (Islamic law and jurisprudence), Said, the son of a Sharia magistrate, defied the odds of not starting school at the tender age of six; as matter of fact he started at about 16 years old, but completed his entire primary and secondary schooling in about six years. For college, he attended “Goshen, then followed Master’s and PhD at Northwestern, then assistant professor of the humanities at Eastern Kentucky University (1979-81), and now,” that is until February 24, 2015, “at Rutgers University, serving time as professor of African history since 1982.”

Being a consummate and serious researcher, he crisscrossed (in the 1970s) the Somali region administered by Ethiopia (his birth place), thereby spending time with nomads. He gathered massive data on the oral history surrounding the poetry and political struggle of Sayid Mohamed Abdile Hassan. His research later on took him to Mogadishu, interviewing prominent Somali sages including but not limited to the late Muse Galaal, Mohamed Maygag Samatar (no relation with Said Samatar), Aw-Jaamac, Aw-Dahir Afqarshi, and Caaqib Boon who was known for his Saar songs.

During his stay in Mogadishu, Said skillfully exploited rare documents he found at the then Somali National Academy. His acclaimed book, “*Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Mahammed Abille Hassan*” (Cambridge, 1982), an offshoot of that exquisite and expansive research, is today hailed as a classical book on the political, social and cultural construct of post-colonial Somali society. In it, Said presented to us a revolutionary narrative about the Sayid. By painstakingly reconstructing the hitherto maligned “mad mullah’s” image, a distinction unfairly bestowed on this nation-maker and a philosopher by the colonialists, Said changed the way Somali history of that particular epoch was read. Today, when one reads Said’s brilliant treatise, one can’t help but only compare the Sayid with the Towedros of Ethiopia and the Usman dan Fodio (Fulani) of Nigeria.

Before his death, Said confided in me that he would have one day sought my help to write a comparative piece on Towedros of Ethiopia and Sayid Mahammad Abdile Hassan of Somalia. He was impressed by the similarities between the two; their equal aversions to colonial penetrations in their respective countries, and their vitriolic, albeit skillful, use of poetry to expose the enemy and educate their people, unite these two anti-colonial

leaders. Also, their incessant search to unite their disparate countrymen immensely appealed to Said.

At the time of his death, Said was working on two books, one on the political debacle that had befallen his nation. Tentatively titled *“Fool’s Errands: The Vain Search for a Central Government in Somalia,”* Said was advancing an argument about the demise of the unitary state and the return to the more decentralism system of governance which is more appropriate for a pastoral society such as that of Somalia. For the love of labor, he was also about to complete a book on the life and poetry of Haji Adan Afqalooc, a prolific Somali poet with impacting nationalist themes. The third book in his hand was a historical novel, which I believe would have been a delicious, if unorthodox, and a lucid read for all of us.

Forensic Historian

Said was a forensic historian. I will always remember him by his unravelling of two indomitable but often overlooked Somali institutions: one is the Somali Guurti system, and it’s utility as a tool of conflict resolution. Upon reading Said’s book in 1984, I couldn’t appreciate enough the relevance of the Guurti concept. Once the civil war of 1991 teetered and eventually broke down the Somali society’s foundation, the question remained what forces can sow it back together? I reread the book again at the time when the first Somali peace consultation started in Djibouti. The Guurti concept in Said’s book became so appealing after the civil war of 1991. The traditional Guurti system which Said recognized in the 1970s, as he did it in his book, was the only viable tool at hand to deal with the destruction of Somalia. No one but Said could have picked up this organic tool in our midst. He was blessed with the keen eye of grasping Western concepts and Somali cultural repository at an equal zeal.

The other institution that took me by a surprise was the concept of copy right. To show that Somalis have their own version of copy right, two narratives in his research are worthy of note. One is centered in Qalafo and the other one in Mogadishu.

First, let me take you to Qalafo, a city linked to the famous town of Baladwayn by River Shabeelle, and its panoramic river-view. Every afternoon, men gather at teashops. There was one particular teashop located on the bank of the river, where pious and bards gather to exchange their latest invention in the art of crafting the Somali word, a common practice in the Somali society. Such a setting is where one gets “discovered.” In the hasty of seeking fame, one recalcitrant man at the site recited an exquisite poem – “Alahayow nin iidaran maxaan daafta seexshay” ...Impressive piece of work that is.

By claiming this poem to be his own craft, the man received an instant admiration by everyone listening, except one suspecting red-bearded inquisitive listener. By constantly jogging his memory back to far and distant places, the skeptic suddenly demanded silence of the hostage audience; he flawlessly recited the entire verses of the poem, and finished it with a big bang of mentioning the lawful and legitimate owner – Ugas Nuur.

According to Said, the skeptic pronounced: “ninka gabaygan tiriyeey waxa uu ahaa nin reer Galbeed,” or, the legitimate composer of this poem is a man from the West, alluding to the western regions of Somalia (Awdel). The verdict was settled and the claimant was denounced as a plagiarizer. If America protects the ingredients of the Coca-Cola formula, Somalis nomads do so with poetry, their most cherished cultural asset.

The other narrative, although not published, is about part of his vast research materials that he collected in 1977. The point of contention that Said wanted to clarify on Somali history was on the legitimate ownership of the famous poem: “lix halkaad ku joogtaan, dagaal laabta ka Ogaden,” or as Said translated, “wherever six of you gather, let their hearts remember war.”

Most Somalis, including great poets, like the late Gaariye, mistakenly maintained that the poem belonged to Farah Nur, until Said put forth his findings. Said wrote that the owner of this poem was not Farah Nur of the Arab clan, but Ali Oday of the Ibraahiin sub-clan of the Ogaden. His irrefutable findings were supported by extensive interviews with the late and eminent historian and poet, Muse Galal. According to Muse Galal, “Farah Nur was imitating the work of earlier poet of the Ogaden clan” called Ali Oday.

Interestingly enough, both the Arab and Ibrahiin of the Ogaden, according to Said’s irrefutable source, Muse Galaal (Mogadishu, April 21, 1977), were fighting for their dignity against oppression by larger clans; the Arabs were fending off of the then powerful Idagale clan, while the Ibrahiin were fighting against the numerous Bah-Hawadle (Mahamed Subair); thus it was so natural to have similar deep sentiments about fighting enemy till their respective last man dies. Because of Farah Nur borrowing powerful verses from someone with a similar experience, that is Ali Oday, these poems are, in the words of Said “anti-slavery” war hymns.

I will be doing deserves to my late friend’s achievements if I reminisce his delightfully lucid and timeless essays. Said Samatar of Somalia danced with the written word and told soul-nourishing stories about history and contemporary challenges. His “Self-hating Dostoevsky syndrome,” or “[The Leelkase Captain Ahab](#),” and “[Conversion of a New Convert to the Geri-Koombo Clan-Family](#)” are all delicious, lucid and enchanting literary work; they are equally political as tools to demystify Somali clan chauvinism. Said did

not only write, but he crafted stories through graceful words; he painted both our inner ugly as well as our collective glorious history.

Scholarship with Integrity

With a deeper knowledge of his society, [Said hated Somali politics](#). Not only was he disappointed by the failure of its contemporary elites to regroup, but also by the sheer unsophisticated, if not less cultivated, albeit dangerously opportunistic, urban-based primitive petite bourgeoisie. He often denounced them as “minions,” or his all-time favorite label of “shimbrayohow heesa,” “crony birds, sing for the dictator.”

In the 1992 African Studies Conference, in Baltimore, a number of Somalis caucused to possibly revive Somali Studies. There were a number of Somali intellectuals at hand. No sooner the conversation started than did things got sour, mainly at the behest of one of the attendees accusing some of the scholars being opportunists. The accuser said “Said was the only intellectual who refused to accept a free ticket from Barre to attend the last pre-civil war Somali Studies Conference.” The accuser added that Said was the only Somali intellectual worthy of the name of true intellectual lest he had the strength and integrity to tell Barre that he was not for sale. That person, a learned person, was from the North or “Somaliland.”

As a matter of fact, Said published a letter on the Horn of Africa Journal imploring the rest of Somali Studies leadership not to go to Mogadishu to legitimize Barre’s massacre in the North. His plea fell on deaf ears and some of the very ones who later on started heaping condemnations on Barre after the civil war incidentally took the tickets, flew to Mogadishu, and tried to legitimize the late dictator’s ploy.

I will never forget the awe and prodigious feeling that overwhelmed me when, in 2008, Mahamoud Hamud (Nine) and I visited Said at Rutgers to lecture at his class. After finishing an enlightening seminar with his graduate students, he hosted us at his house in New Jersey. Spending about four hours at his basement, he shared with us some of his impressive archives. He took us around his cozy basement where he showed us old and dusty shelves filled with boxes and boxes of interviews, shared with us thousands of hand-written notes, ancient Arabic documents, photo copies of documents he had acquired from British libraries, tapes and dusty books printed by “Madbacada Qaranka” that he collected from the region but not used. These were materials that remained in excess of his book. Said Mohamed Shire, alias Said Suugan, a close friend of the late Said believes that the excess material from his Ph.D. research could produce more books. If exploited by the right student of history, these materials would be regarded as no less than the discovery of a rare gem.

As for Said Samatar, “The Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Mahammed Abdile Hassan” tells it all. Whereas Ralph Ellison could not outdo or match his own “The Invisible Man,” Said Samatar couldn’t outshine himself in a second book. Every author has that *one book* (my emphasis) and Said had his own in “Oral History...”

The Friend I Lost

In Said’s death, I lost an irreplaceable friend. I first met him in 1979 at the Franz Fanon Conference in Mogadishu, Somalia. I was a junior at Lafolle. Thousands of African American Diaspora (Karim Jabar, Amiro Baraka, Ali Mazrui, Dean Claudia Michelle-Kernan, who later on helped me to get into UCLA) and many Somali scholars – Hussein Tanzania, Peter Gabriel (Roble Nur), Hussein Bulhan, Said Samatar, Judge AbdulQawi, Ali AbdulRahman Hersi, Ismaciil Wacays of Deri Dhaba), as well as many Eritrean scholars (Bareket and Elias Habte Sellasie, Jordan Gebra Madhin and others) - descended onto Mogadishu in the summer. It was a memorable summer that marked one of the great moments in Somalia. That was the Mogadishu in which I first met Said with a huge Afro presenting his draft PH.D findings. The second time I met and cemented friendship with Said was in 1991, at the founding conference of the Somali Peace Consultation (ERGO).

I will miss what most about Said is the smallchats that we frequented; we regularly talked about weekend escapades; daily challenges of our society, family and friends. At least three times a week we will have telephonic conversation; Saturday mornings, I will call him during my morning Starbucks break, and he will call me two or three days during the work week, often catching me on my lunch breaks. He will always start our conversation with such an endearment: “war ninyahow Geri-Kombo...,” In such a distinguished address, he would remind me of the debt that my Tol owes to him – a pretty lady in exchange for his conversion into “the Geri -Kombo” family. I will always respond to him by saying that the Garad, our ultimately authority, had already sent scouts to find one that fits his desire.

After exchanges of niceties, he will in the end get melancholic and convey a message of deep despair and resignation about his people’s future. He once told me this: at 23, in 1960, he was one of the most hopeful young man growing up in the continent, and that was true, he said for most Somalis of that cohort. But now pushing towards 73 years-old, he said he is a broken-down old Somali man consumed by self-hating stateless syndrome. Ouch! That is, I suspect, a shared feeling by many Somalis of his generation, or older. I am sure Said was aware of the condition of the late PM Abdirazak Haji Hussein, his favorite statesman, passing his last days in a government-provided low-income housing in the coldest state of Minnesota.

Days of Sorrow

The first time Said admitted a sense of resignation creeping into his soul was in 1992. A number of us, drawn from the founding members of the ERGO, held a conference in Toronto, Canada. Said gave us the keynote speech; it was dark but effusively overwhelming. He conveyed a sense of surrender and loss of the battle of ideas between him and Professor Mesfin Weldamariam of Addis Ababa University.

Apparently for decades, the two had been at each other's throat at multiple scholarly conferences debating the epic Ethio-Somali conflict. Now that Somalis destroyed themselves, Said sounded remorseful and repentant: "Bal manta maxaan Masfin kala hortagi, maxaanse kula dootama soo anagu ismaanaan burin, so dalkii kumaynaan kala cararin." meaning, "Today, I am in no position to debate Professor Mesfin, we did the job for him by destroying ourselves." I sensed from thereon his sense of obliviousness and the demise of the collective being of Somalia. That speech defined Said's post-civil war hopelessness and bleakness of his nation. No wonder that at the time of his death he was writing a book expressing such a sentiment.

All in him was not lost though. As a person, he liked anything Somali, its women, and its organic kinship that descended from eternity, the toughness, republicanism and independent mindedness of his pastoral background. As a person from a humble background raised in the forbiddingly dry and scorching lowland of Qari Jaqood, where only the lucky ones get one meal a day, little or no material world appealed to him; he rarely indulged in the capitalist and materialist consumer culture of Uncle Sam's country in which he lived for the last 50 years. When it came to money, he was truly a magnanimous and bohemian sort, never honoring the western concept of going "Dutch," whenever we dine together, but choosing a culture of sharing thus one of us, often, Said cutting the check. He genuinely liked the collective aspect and humility of his pastoral society, but hated its politics exemplified by an elite he revered to as "minions" or "shimbrayahow heesa"

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