Herdsman, Townsman, American: My Segmented Life

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I've lived a life of segmented improbabilities. I was born and raised a camel herder in the over-heated sand dunes of Ethiopia's eastern Ogaden (Somali region), between a place called Qari-Jaqood and another called Jiriiban (from "Jirriban," or "Land of Torture," in Mudugh Province, Somalia)--both patches designated by Allah as his chosen "Hell on Earth." I joined the human race by being born, probably, under an acacia tree. I did not learn to read and write until well into my sixteenth year. And now I am a professor at an American university. To borrow an Americanism, "Go, figure."

The early years of my portioned life as a herdsman knew much joy, but also much grief. In the thorny, desiccated camel country that my family frequented, the settled existence of sedentarized agriculture was unknown. We lived off of our herds of camels and flocks of sheep and goats–the land being too dry and harsh for cattle. We trekked from camp to camp in search of pasturelands for the herds. We tracked and trapped deer, too, for supplementary diet.

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The family consisted of two nomadic hamlets: my mother's hamlet and my elder mother's, named Aaye Bullo—Aaye Bullo was practical, resourceful and without pretentions. My mother on the other, Faadumo Duco, or the Blessed Faadumo, having hailed from an Islan (chiefly) pedigree, was too blessed and nobility-pretentious to be concerned about the cares of her neglected children. She nagged the old man (my father) to death for marrying him, a lowly commoner, thereby dooming herself to poverty and misery. So, even nomads suffer a sense of the class itch. The old man, though, had a long memory; he retaliated with a sentence of divorce on her when she grew elderly and unable to bear any more.

Seven uterine siblings and seven half siblings, totaling a brood of fifteen survivors. A number of others died in infancy and early childhood. We were ruled by my father, Sheikh Samatar, a pious religious man (Islam), but also a draconian disciplinarian who, when crossed by friend or foe, gave no quarter. And he had an eventful, flamboyant history as a youngster: in the 1920s, he was press-ganged into the local Somali militia called "Bande" by their Italian colonial officers. By this time the southeastern portion of Somalia was under Italian colonial rule, whence he was taken to Libya (1922) to fight the legendary Omar Mukhtar, who was then waging an epic war of resistance against fascist Italy. When the youthful Samatar realized that he was brought to the Libyan wilds to fight fellow Muslims, he deserted the Italian army, walked across the blistering inferno of the Libyan desert with, perhaps, Arab traders who, surely, would have traded him off into slavery, had it not been for the timely intervention of a kind stranger–an itinerant holy man and his disciples who saved my father-to-be from a grim fate.

Then the lucky Samatar vanished off the known map, and for the next ten years led a peripatetic existence bouncing about the ports of Hobyo (Obbia), Somalia, Zanzibar, Aden, maybe Muscat (Oman), maybe even Bombay, too, now Mumbai. In the early '20s those ports and adjacent waterways were crawling with Arab dhow pirates—nowadays replaced, fittingly, by Somali highwaymen on the high seas--outlaws and assorted screwball characters engaged in all manner of shady dealings–drug-trafficking, gun-running and slave-trading. One of the noblest tasks that the ubiquitous British navy ever did in those days was to patrol these lawless waters between East Africa and the Middle East, in order to impose a semblance of orderly life, and to do the truly good deed for mankind of putting an end to the global slave-trade. (It may be pointed out as an aside that while the British, on account of their vastly superior navy and merchant fleet, hauled off probably more souls out of Africa than the rest of Europe put together during the heyday of the slave trade, it was also the Brits who, once the trade was banned by a

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convention of Europe, worked to patrol the seas with their unchallengeable navy and, therefore, to successfully enforce the ban on the evil trade.) What was the future Sheikh Samatar doing in this wild corner of the earth? Was he mixed up in some nefarious activity? Narcotics trader? A gun-runner? Or, worse still, a slaver?

Whatever he was mixed-up in, he was surely up to no good. Evidence? One day, at the approach of a British naval gun boat, he took a leap off an Arab dhow into the violent sultry waves of "Bab al-Mandem," or the "Gate of Tears," at the confluence of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, so named because many an Arab lost his dhow–and his life–in these quaking seas. In the course of the leap, his right leg was caught in the dhow's railings, scraping the flesh off his shin to the bone. For three days the white caps tossed him to and fro, bleeding in the high seas until he was picked up by another dhow. Hence, a shark forfeited a meal.

Following his decade-long mysterious wanderings, he returned to Somalia in the '30s and invested his savings in the inevitable camel. Then as soon as the first-born boys of the family were old enough to look after the rest, he vanished again when I was about—an infant? I have no clue. This was around 1943 by which time the Italians were defeated and unceremoniously ejected out by the victorious Britons. In the ten years of his absence, he must have studied somewhere (Cairo?) because as soon as he had left us, he joined the British colonial administration as a Qadi, or Islamic magistrate. When the Ogaden region was returned to Ethiopia in 1948, he continued serving under emperor Haile Selassie's feudal/imperial dominions (he Qaadi[ed] variously at Qabre-Dahare, Qallaafo, Dagax-Buur?, etc), dispatching us an occasional sack of dates that broke the monotony of camel milk-–camel milk for breakfast, for lunch and for supper. [In the course of his Qaadi{ing} career], he was shot at twice in two separate incidents by wild Ogaadeenis who felt, somehow, aggrieved by his manner of justice-rendering. The bullets merely grazed him in both instances—lucky son of a gun! Instead of, as expected, fleeing to the country of his roots in Italian Somalia, he took off to—to Jidgjiga? Wherever he went, he returned shortly afterwards, to the surprise of his assailants, accompanied, for good measure, by a convoy of Abyssinian askaris. The Ogaadeenis took notice, and held their peace, forever more!

It may be of interest to note that in those pastoral days, dates served as a kind of culinary stethoscope: when a person fell ill, we used to measure the gravity of his/her illness by placing a date on their mouth. If the individual failed to bite that delicious fruit off your fingers, he was judged to be gravely ill! The life of a nomad is, on occasion, a life of pleasure and unfettered freedom, answerable as he is to no authority, especially during

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rainy seasons--which are always seasons of plenty: fragrant flowers blooming all over the fallowed fields, abundant milk and meat, the surfeited camels lazily chewing their cuds, the mighty stallions busy servicing receptive females, elders exchanging banter and pleasantries under the cool shade of an acacia tree, the boys serenading the girls, more poetry in the evening around the camp fire after the herds had been secured in the corral. Idyllic, to an exceeding degree.

But the life of a herdsman nomad is also a life of wandering and danger: the perennial threat of starvation during drought seasons, marauding gangs of enemy clans bent on murder and mayhem, stripping you of your livestock, the ever-present danger of ravenous predators–lions, hyenas, leopards, cheetahs (haram-cad?) etc–stalking the animals. (Children of my age were particularly vulnerable to being snatched off by a hungry lion while bringing in the camels to the corral in the evening.) The very law of the jungle was in operation here. One of my early memories is of a close encounter with a lion. One leisurely, sultry night this beast of terror crashed through the fence and seized a baby camel next to me (the baby camels are kept in a separate pen within the larger enclosure to prevent them from suckling their mothers, thus leaving the people hungry and therefore in foul mood, which predisposed the older boys to beat us up young ones for negligence.

In pastoral division of labor, it is the job of the boys to keep babies from suckling the milch camels). The panicked camels kicked up a storm of dust. The baby camel, though, proved too heavy for the lion, for he valiantly strove to leap with it over the fence but didn't make it. The whole works came crashing down on me with a heavy thud. I remember the numbing sensation of the rough hairs of its mane grating on my neck and its rancid breath spraying my nostrils. (And that sensation of rough hairs and rancid breath stayed with me for the greater part of my adult life in frequent nightmarish midnight dream visitations--which nightmares accompanied me to America—to Goshen, Ind., where I did college, to Northwestern University (Evanston, Il. Graduate work), to Eastern Kentucky University where I served time for a two-year teaching stint. The sensation of prickly lion-hairs will follow you a life-time. Only about ten years ago in New Jersey did the terrifying midnight visitations end.

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Another episode in the saga of my life as a bushman concerns my first sighting of Americans. It happened like this: I drove the camels one day to a well-pastured field when I saw a cloud of debris spewing spectacularly into the sky, and making an ear-splitting rumble. I approached cautiously, furtively, full of apprehension when I saw a giant yellow metallic object that looked like a crouching elephant. It ambled along angrily swallowing up dirt, rock, shrubberies and all, tearing a large swath of path through the bushes behind it. To my terrifying wonderment, a seated creature was driving the object, not an ordinary human but a monstrosity of a figure with a massive belly, a huge umbrella of a hat, and a sickly pale skin, as if his flesh had been turned inside out. His body was covered generously with be-patched markings. One mark on his arm was cut in the form of a half-naked woman, also pale-skinned, hair billowing in the air. She, too, was turned inside out. The crouching elephant voraciously splurged on the earth, and rumbled gurgling along. The camels stampeded in a headlong panic one way, and I bolted the other. To me this was, clearly, the advance scout of a force of Dejaals (in Islamic eschatology, Dejaal is the name of the Great Anti-Christ come to corrupt the earth just immediately before the resurrection and the Day of Judgment). This was the end, I thought. I reached the camp panting, only to be told by the elders that what I had seen was the lead vehicle of a party of "Mareykanis," or Americans exploring for oil in the wilderness. Only years later did I learn that the "Crouching Elephant" was a machine called a bulldozer, that the paleness was not flesh turned inside out, but the normal color of some humans called "Whites"--eventually I was to marry one, with a pretty pale skin, I should say0!--that the umbrella was a Texas cowboy's hat, and the female visage on his arm was called a "tattoo." Those ubiquitous Mareykanis! Apparently, their mass addiction to the black liquid in the belly of the earth goes back a long ways.

Then the next segment of my life began in earnest--that of the rite of passage to urbanity. About 1959, when I turned fifteen, I think, my father sent for me to come to the town of Qallaafo in the lower reaches of the Shabeelle, or the River of Leopards (where he was still an Islamic magistrate under Emperor Haile Selassie) to start my schooling. He figured, as he later put it, that I might make a "good student." When I first sighted the old man , I knew instantly that it was he, for he bore a striking resemblance to Ismail, a half brother still back in the country, but now, Ismail too, is doing "Minnesota-nice" in Minneapolis. The venerable Sheikh along with three other elders were playing Shax, or chess, on the ground. My escort pointed at him and said, "That is your father." I approached hesitantly and said, somewhat timidly, "Father!"

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He said, without turning his head from the game, “Son, if it is about a legal matter, come to the office tomorrow.”

“Father–you are my father.”

He studied a minute, and betraying a puzzled look on his face; said he: “Your name?”

“Said.”

“Your mother’s name?”

“Fadumo.”

“Yes, there was a Said.” The three reported the incident to the tea-shop in the center of town and the story became the joke of the town for years: “Sheikh Samatar sired so many children that he didn’t know their looks or names!” By that time, he had six more in Qallaafo!

In Qallaafo--a rustic river-bank settlement perched between two swamps--my adventures with literacy commenced. Pens had not yet come into town. The instrument of writing was a chiseled twig (called qalin) dipped into a tiny portable ink trough. The ink itself was brewed from a mixture of crushed wood charcoal, water and gum, the latter to make it adhere to a wooden surface. It was a marvel–and a maddening exasperation–to learn to hold a pen-like twig on one’s thumb, the forefinger and the middle, to form a “haraf,” or a letter on a slab of wood (no paper yet) and to hook several harafs together to make a word, and then a sentence resulting in a slab full of markings with a meaning.

It was a humiliating experience for a sixteen-year old to sound out letters of the Arabic alphabet with eight-year olds, but I endured. In the first two years the Qur’an and rudimentary Islamic catechisms, during which I learned to memorize the whole Qur’an by heart. Then to a regular grade school run by missionaries of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), a multi-denominational Protestant outfit, that is influential in Sudanic Africa from Nigeria to Ethiopia. Then a steady upward–maybe downward–mobility. Skipped intermediate level and muddled through high school at an Academy in Nazareth (Ethiopia), then run by Mennonites, a fine learning place.

Then first footsteps in America (1971), and further upward mobility: college at Goshen, Master’s and PhD at Northwestern, then assistant professor of the humanities at Eastern

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Kentucky University (1979-81), and now Rutgers University, where I've been serving time as professor of African history since 1982. From this brief biographic sketch, can a case be made that adults are educable? Still, sometimes I wonder whether the whole trajectory of this life was not, to quote the Solomon, a "vanity of vanities and a vexation of the spirit!"

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