



He Called Them "Uncles." They Killed Him Anyway

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Axmed Shire Xuseen survived the frontline against al-Shabaab. He did not survive the road home. His last plea is a question every Somali now has to answer.

A video has been moving across Somali phones this week. I watched it once. It's very painful to watch. I will not link to it here, and I would ask you not to forward it. Axmed Shire deserves to be remembered for how he lived, not circulated for how he died.

In it, [a young man held by armed men speaks](#) slowly, the way people speak when their body is already failing them. He says he is sick. He is hungry, he tells them, and on his way to his family. Then come the words that have not left me since:

"Abtiyaalow, ha i dilina."

Uncles, please do not kill me.

Abti is the word for a mother's brother. We also use it for older men we hope will treat us as their own. It is a word of kinship and trust. Axmed chose it in what may have been the final minutes of his life because he believed it still carried weight among Somalis.

They killed him anyway.



Axmed Shire Xuseen, killed by while pleading his for life

The road home from Buurane

According to reports from Somalia media, Axmed Shire Xuseen was a soldier of the Somali National Army who had been serving at the front in Buurane, Middle Shabelle. He had reportedly been ill for some time. He took leave and set out for Buulobarde in Hiiraan to be with his family while he recovered.

Near Ceelbaraf, an armed militia stopped him on the road together with two fellow soldiers who were also on leave. The other two were eventually released. Axmed was held, filmed while pleading for his life, and killed. When his body reached Buulobarde, relatives said it showed signs of severe torture. Nabadoon Xuseen Jurus, a traditional elder from Hiiraan, told Caasimada that his eyes had been gouged out.

Local reports describe the killing as *aano qabiil*, clan revenge. If that account holds, then what separated the two soldiers who went home from the one who did not was not rank, conduct or courage. It was ancestry.

He had accepted death. Not this one.

Anyone who puts on the uniform of the Somali National Army accepts a hard bargain: they may be asked to die for Somalia. In Middle Shabelle that bargain is tested constantly, by an enemy that relies on ambushes, roadside bombs and suicide attacks. Axmed kept his side of it. He went to the front, and he came back alive.

What he never agreed to was dying at the side of a road at the hands of men who share his faith, his language and his flag. There is a special cruelty in surviving the enemy only to be executed by your own. A soldier killed by al-Shabaab is mourned as a martyr of the nation. When fellow Somalis kill a soldier because of his lineage, he becomes something harder to name. He becomes evidence.

Every law we claim told them to let him go

Somalis often say we live under three systems of law: the law of the state, the law of Islam and the *xeer* of our ancestors. On that road near Ceelbaraf, all three failed together.

The Qur'an (al-Ma'idah, 5:32) teaches that whoever takes an innocent life has, in effect, killed all of humanity, and whoever saves one life has saved all of humanity.

A hadith recorded by al-Tirmidhi and al-Nasa'i goes further still: the end of the entire world would weigh less before God than the unjust killing of a single believer. People like to say one life is worth a million. Our own faith sets the price far higher.

The xeer is no less clear. Somali customary law recognises *biri-ma-geydo*, "those spared from the spear": people who must not be harmed even in open clan warfare, including women, children, the elderly and others who carry no weapon and pose no threat. The ICRC and the Somali Red Crescent documented these rules in *Spared from the Spear* in the late 1990s, and in 2011 Somalia's own government described biri-ma-geydo to the UN Human Rights Council as the nation's indigenous Geneva Conventions. Axmed was sick, unarmed and travelling in peace. He asked for mercy in the language of family. By the standard of the very tradition his killers claim to defend, he was untouchable.

The state's law needs little explanation. Murder is murder. Killing a serving soldier is also an attack on the republic he swore to defend. That is what should shock us. Brutality is not the whole horror. The deeper horror is that every protection Somali society has ever built, divine, customary and constitutional, gave way at the same moment on a single stretch of road.

What one soldier is worth elsewhere

Nations reveal their values in how they treat a single soldier's body. Two examples, one from far away and one from our own continent, are worth studying.

Royal Wootton Bassett, United Kingdom. Between 2007 and 2011, the bodies of British service personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan were flown into RAF Lyneham and driven through the high street of Wootton Bassett, a small market town in Wiltshire. It began with one gesture. When the first two coffins passed in April 2007, carrying Rifleman Aaron Lincoln, 18, and Kingsman Danny Wilson, 28, the town's mayor, Percy Miles, stood in silence in his ceremonial robes. Neighbours began to join him. Over four years, residents lined the street on 167 separate occasions for 345 fallen men and women. In 2011 the Queen granted the town the title "Royal", the first such honour for a British town in more than a century. Its new motto reads: *We honour those who serve.*

No law required any of this. Ordinary citizens simply decided that a soldier coming home deserved to be met.

Rwanda. Rwanda sorts its national heroes into three orders. The highest, *Imanzi*, is reserved for supreme sacrifice, and it holds only two names. One is Major General Fred Gisa Rwigema, who led the liberation struggle and fell on its second day in October 1990.

The other is the Unknown Soldier, who stands for every fighter who died in that struggle and, in the government's own description, for those who may yet shed blood defending the country's sovereignty. A nation emerging from genocide chose to place the anonymous rank-and-file soldier at the very top of its moral hierarchy.

The second order, *Imena*, contains a story Somalis should know by heart. In 1997, militiamen stormed a secondary school in Nyange and ordered the students to separate into Hutu and Tutsi. The students refused. They answered that they were all Rwandans. Several were killed for it. Rwanda made them national heroes.

Read that again with Ceelbaraf in mind. Rwanda honours the young people who refused to be sorted by identity. Axmed Shire was sorted by identity, and killed for the result.

Neither model is beyond criticism. The Wootton Bassett processions honoured soldiers from wars many Britons opposed, and some residents grew uneasy with the media spectacle around grieving families. Rwanda's memory politics are tightly managed by the state, and human rights groups have long argued that public discussion of ethnicity is constrained there. The lesson is not to copy either country. It is simpler: *honour is a choice*. A nation decides what one soldier's life is worth, and then it shows that decision in public.

Mogadishu has its own monument to the unknown soldier, *Daljirka Dahsoon*. We know how to build memorials. We have not yet learned how to protect a living soldier on his way home.

Why are we killing our men and women in uniform?

Ceelbaraf has seen this before. In late December 2024, six or seven soldiers of the national army (reports vary) who were travelling home on leave from the front were pulled from a vehicle near the same town, blindfolded, filmed and shot in what was also described as a clan revenge attack. The Ministry of Defence promised justice within 48 hours. The state news agency SONNA reported that district officials, including the district commissioner, and traditional elders had been arrested. The soldiers received a state funeral in Beledweyne.

Less than two years later: the same road, the same method, the same camera. So what happened to that case? If verdicts were delivered, they never became the public deterrent they needed to be. If they were not, the silence speaks for itself.

The pattern is national. In its May 2025 Somalia report, the European Union Agency for Asylum, analysing data from the conflict monitor ACLED, recorded more than 472 incidents of inter- and intra-clan violence causing an estimated 1,214 deaths during its reporting period.

Revenge was cited as the motive in nearly 200 of those incidents, which accounted for 641 deaths. Hirshabelle alone recorded at least 260 deaths from clan violence and revenge killings, and the agency's list of active feuds in the state names Ceelbaraf district specifically. Experts interviewed for the report said clan hostility had increased substantially over the previous two years.

Numbers explain scale. Motive is another matter. Five structural forces help explain why this keeps happening. Some are established fact; others are my own analysis, and I mark them as such.

1. The logic of collective guilt. Aano treats an individual as a stand-in for his lineage. A grievance against a group can be "settled" on any of its members, including a sick soldier who had nothing to do with the original dispute. To men thinking in these terms, the uniform was invisible. Only the genealogy could be seen.

2. Impunity. Nabadoon Cismaan Maxamuud put it plainly in an interview with Goobjoog: these killings recur because the law is ignored. Deterrence depends on the certainty of consequence. Our current system offers condemnation, which costs nothing.

3. The guns were handed out for a different war (analysis). Since the offensive against al-Shabaab intensified in 2022, the government has leaned heavily on clan militias to fight alongside the army. The humanitarian analysis group ACAPS has documented that militias which served as auxiliaries to the national army also take part in inter-clan fighting. Weapons distributed for a national war remain available for private ones. The state made this trade-off, and it has not yet been honest with itself about the price.

4. We have taught ourselves to see clan first (analysis). Since the Arta conference of 2000, national power has been distributed through the 4.5 clan formula. For a quarter of a century, the official message to every Somali has been that clan is the basic unit of politics. It should surprise no one that armed men looked at a national soldier and saw a lineage. The state itself trained that eye.

5. Al-Shabaab wins every time this happens (analysis). The group's central argument is that the Somali state cannot protect its own people. A video of a government soldier begging for his life at the hands of fellow Somalis makes that argument better than any propaganda it could produce. Former President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed made a related point this week: whenever our statehood weakens, chaos and clan wars grow.

Reconciliation first? The trap of a false choice

A common response this week has been that Somalia needs genuine reconciliation before it can build institutions. That conviction is half right, and the wrong half is dangerous.

Consider the most studied reconciliation process in modern Somali history. Whatever one's view of Somaliland's political status, the Borama conference of 1993 is instructive. From late January to late May, clan elders met in Borama, with 150 voting delegates and around 2,000 observers. They produced two documents. The first, a Peace Charter, set out mechanisms for registering and storing weapons, demobilising militias, forming police and judicial institutions, and securing the roads. The second, a National Charter, created the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

Notice what happened in that room. Reconciliation and institution-building were not sequential stages. They were the same conversation. The elders did not make peace first and leave the state for later; they made peace *by designing* the security arrangements, courts and road protection that would keep it. A charter that addressed road security thirty-three years ago speaks directly to how Axmed died.

Now compare the national conferences at Arta (2000) and Mbagathi (2004). Both produced parliaments, presidents and charters, largely assembled abroad and allocated by clan formula. Those institutions did not grow out of local reconciliation. They were placed on top of unresolved grievances, and they inherited the clan map instead of healing it.

Rwanda offers a further lesson. Its reconciliation after 1994 was never a matter of forgiveness alone. It was tied to accountability through the community gacaca courts, which heard close to two million cases. Critics, including Human Rights Watch, argued those courts fell short of fair-trial standards, and Rwanda's strong central state is precisely what Somalia lacks. Even so, the principle stands: reconciliation without consequence is only a pause.

There is a harder truth as well. If Somalia waits for complete reconciliation before enforcing the law, every armed man with a grievance holds a veto over justice. Axmed's family cannot wait for a national peace process that may take a generation.

Our own customary system needs honest scrutiny too. Under xeer, blood compensation (*mag*) is typically paid collectively by the killer's lineage group. This has settled countless disputes that no court ever reached, and dismissing that record would be foolish. Yet collective payment also spreads the cost of a murder across hundreds of people, which means the individual who pulled the trigger may carry almost none of it. When the price of killing is shared, the incentive not to kill is weakened.

The answer, then, is not reconciliation *before* institutions. It is reconciliation *through* institutions, and institutions that have themselves been reconciled. Elders remain essential for making peace between communities. Murder belongs in court. The elder's role should be to hand over suspects, not to negotiate their price.

How this ends

Three paths lie ahead, and only one of them breaks the cycle.

The familiar path. Statements of condemnation, a wave of hashtags, then quiet negotiations over mag. Somewhere, a relative of Axmed decides the state will do nothing and takes revenge on a traveller from the other lineage. That man's family responds in turn. In a year or two, a new video circulates, and we write these articles again.

The path of visible justice. The killers filmed their own crime, and that footage is evidence. Suspects are identified and arrested. Elders from their community surrender them rather than shield them. They face a military court in public, and the verdict is announced to the nation. Nothing breaks a revenge cycle faster than the certainty that the state, not the clan, will answer the killing. This path is available tomorrow. It requires will, not money.

The path of structural repair. This builds on the second path and cannot replace it. It would include:

- **Protection for soldiers on leave.** Organised, logged transport through known feud corridors such as the Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle roads, so that no soldier travels home alone through a conflict zone.
- **A public account of the December 2024 Ceelbaraf case.** Who was arrested, who was charged, and what the courts decided.
- **A local peace process between the communities of Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle.** Modelled on the Borama charter, covering roads, weapons and the handover of suspects.
- **Formal command over clan militias fighting al-Shabaab.** Guns issued for the nation must come with accountability, so they cannot be turned inward.
- **National honour for Axmed Shire Xuseen.** Alongside it, a Somali equivalent of Rwanda's Nyange heroes: public recognition for those who refuse to divide Somalis by lineage.

None of this is utopian. Each item has precedent, in our own history or on our own continent.

A name, not an unknown

Rwanda placed an Unknown Soldier at the summit of its honours because it could not name every man it lost.

We do not have that excuse. His name was Axmed Shire Xuseen. We know where he served and where he was going. That he was sick and hungry, that he wanted to see his family: all of it is on record. His final words reached the whole country, and in them he called his killers family.

What remains unknown is only what we will do about it.

Allaha u naxariisto Axmed Shire Xuseen, and may his family be granted patience.

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