

NEW DALKKA

Your Somali current affairs and culture monthly

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Op-Ed: Moments to ponder

The events of the last month have certainly given us moments to stop and ponder. The attack on 14 October 2017 in Mogadishu has certainly left its scars, physical, emotional, psychological.

Just as the families of victims and the wider population mourned, another attack—an explosion from a truck bomb—struck two weeks to the day, on 28 October.

As the grieving continues, questions are being asked: about the security of the city and the country more widely and what the next steps should be. In this issue, Mohamed Ali Arkow writes, optimistically, that the 'gloomy political cloud' which hovers over Somalia will soon come to pass. But for this to happen, a radical break is needed which will demand courage, steadfastness and perseverance.

As ever, there is space for hope and optimism. A 'Data Bulletin' (p5) seeks to reassess the conventional wisdom of Somalia as one of the world's most corrupt countries, by focusing on other areas of the UN's Sustainable Goals particularly in relation to other African countries.

Looking across the continent, optimists will find other cause for positivity too. This month saw the first televised presidential debate ever held in Somali politics, in the self-declared republic of Somaliland.

Challenges, setbacks, fears all allow us to stop and ponder. Recently a guest on the flagship BBC Radio 4 programme, Edna Adan Ismail—the courageous activist and midwife—looked back on a lifetime of service, her fifty years as a clinician. She proudly recalls her achievements, not forgetting some of the challenges she faced in her youth on her path to success.

Perhaps fifty years from now, there will be those who can look back at these days in history and be impressed by how much things have changed. Here's to hoping.

This op-ed was sent in by Diric Asluub.

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Somali Conflicts and Reconciliations: Falsities and Veracities

Dr Abdurahman Baadiyow

Discussion of national reconciliation in Somalia has taken place since the total collapse of the state in 1991 without initial agreement on the definition and the nature of the conflict. The most popular conception did not differentiate between apolitical and political conflicts; thus, the Somali conflict has been lumped together as a primordial conflict. In reality, these two conflicts are different in their objectives, scope, means and type of leadership. For instance, apolitical conflict initially begins as a series of accidental clashes between individuals belonging to different clans. Such clashes are typically about resources, such as pasture, grazing land, firms, watering rights and so on. This type of conflict is prevalent in the rural communities and is normally managed by the traditional elders who apply traditional conflict resolution methods, well known in the Somali culture.

Conversely, political conflict takes the form of an elite tussle for power, prestige and resources, and clans are mobilised as instruments for purely political objectives. Political conflicts often remain unresolved, since they require different remedies, approaches and mechanisms. The rhetorical peace and reconciliation conferences, which have taken place since 1991, have focused on elite power-sharing based on clan division and cake-cutting exercises (1). "Clannization" of the conflict is a way of avoiding individual responsibility for the crimes, depicting human rights violations as the collective responsibility of the clans.

The concept of "clannization" of political conflicts is a falsity

derived from an anthropological interpretation of Somali politics and society, which posits that Somali conflicts are essentially primordial, in accordance with the model of the "state versus clan" [*qaran iyo qabiil*] equation. This relational model accounts for the vertical relations (ancestral or blood relations) and largely excludes all other relations in the societal equation, such as women, minorities and Islamic scholars (2).

This model emphasises the role of the clan elder and negates the role of horizontal social relations through mothers, marriages and organisational affiliations (3).

The "state versus clan" model is a distorted representation, an invented falsity that places an emphasis on "Somali exceptionalism" (4).

For instance, Professor Said Samatar considers the clan factor as a single overriding factor and remarks: "Somali polity is shaped by a single, central principle that overrides all others, namely the phenomenon that social anthropologists call 'the segmentary lineage system'" (5).

This model was criticised as a reductionist approach by many scholars (6), and this article presents an alternative model to the "state versus clan" equation, namely a "state versus society" [*qaran iyo bulsho*] conception. This model is based on veracity that considers the Somali conflict much like conflicts in other countries and thus refutes Somali exceptionalism. It incorporates all of the components of society and all relational connections and affiliations.

Differentiating clan [*qabiil*]

and society [*bulsho*] is the cornerstone of redefining the Somali conflict.

Clan is based on vertical relations only connected through ancestry (blood relations). It is founded on the diya-paying unit, which may swell to high levels during conflicts (7).

On the other hand, Somali society [*bulsho*] combines vertical and horizontal relations such as collective settlements, matrilineal relatives, intermarriage relations, and organisational affiliations. Thus, the state-society model recognises that Somali society consists of all Somali citizens irrelevant of their clans, gender, class and religion. This model presupposes that the Somali equation comprises the dialectical interaction of the postcolonial state and Somali society. This interaction was restructured during the colonial era in such a way that it became conflictual (8).

The state structure, its legal framework, policies and political processes were completely alien to traditional Somali society. Therefore, the Somali society has confronted this strange system of governance and its oppressive penetration of society, using its available ideological arsenal: clannism and Islamism. In particular, during the military regime which denied political freedom, resentful elites mobilised their clans and established armed factions which brought down the state in 1991. On the other hand, furious Islamists, in reaction to the forced secularisation of the military regime, have intensified their ideological opposition and established various Islamic movements (9).

Some of these Islamic movements reverted into militancy and extremism (10).

Somali elites could be classified into two main categories: traditional and modern elites. Traditional elites basically consist of clan elders and traditional Islamic scholars. Modern elites do not easily fit into existing structures and comprise non-Islamist and Islamist elites. Non-Islamist elites are not necessarily secular, though they are also not Islamic activists (11).

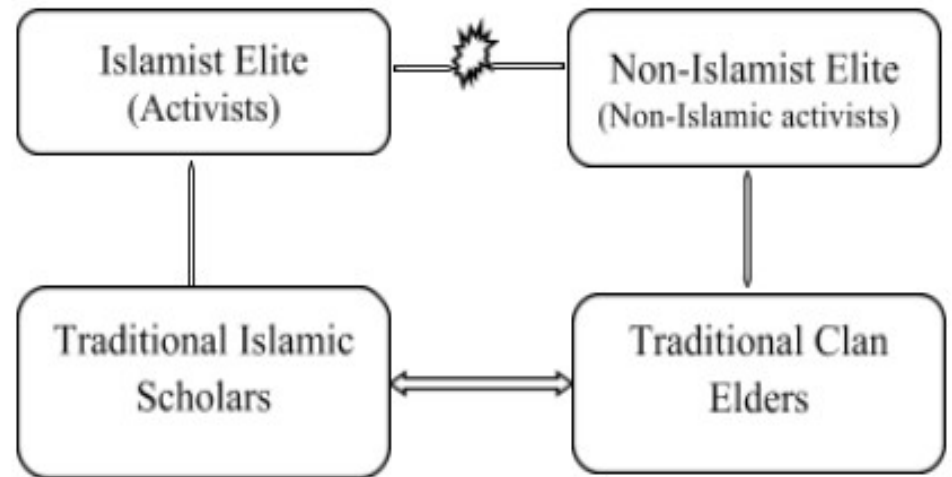
They are not ideologically driven and simply perpetuate the status quo and the nature of the postcolonial state. Islamists are activists who advocate for the introduction of an Islamic legal system and values to the space of the state (12).

The cosmology of the traditional elites is derived from the synthesis of clan customary law [*xeer*] and Islamic Sharia. The division of labour among the traditional elites is well-delineated, and usually, they work in harmony in administering societal affairs. On the contrary, the modern elites (non-Islamists and Islamists) are conflictual in terms of power struggles or the nature of the state (13). Figure 1 (above) outlines the four components of the Somali elite and their relations.

There are four types of conflicts in Somalia, each one generating the subsequent one. The first conflict refers to the state-society conflict between the modern state and traditional society. This conflict generates the second conflict, which is a power struggle between non-Islamist elites; while the third is an ideological conflict between non-Islamists and Islamists.

The fourth conflict is the result of the non-Islamist power struggle, which escalates into civil war. In the civil war, elites use clans as instruments of their struggle and incite clan animosity.

The nature of this clan conflict is different from the nature



of traditional apolitical conflicts. Thus, these conflicts should be addressed, with each requiring detailed and appropriate mechanisms. In fact, the root of all these conflicts is bad governance. During the civil war, besides clan-conflict, violent conflict of the Islamists and non-Islamists have been evident. The current active conflict between Al-Shabab and the state is the major security challenge.

Approaches to Reconciliation

The first step in reconciling state and society requires us to abandon a singular conception of modernity in place of one that incorporates multiple modernities and departs from extreme models of westernisation or indigenisation of the state. The westernisation model was based on moving society towards the state, although this model failed, having been tested in the postcolonial state. The indigenisation model was based on moving the state towards society by adopting the 4.5 clan power-sharing formula. The indigenisation is completely antithetical to the modern system, which is based on citizenship, individual responsibility and supremacy of law. Therefore, reconciling state and society requires moving state and society towards each other to a middle space that is acceptable to both sides. It requires an

innovative process which synthesises modernity and tradition. The reconciliation of state and society can be realised only when the roles of Islam and the clan system are well-delineated vis-à-vis the borders of the state, and when both state and society respect these boundaries. Another component of state-society reconciliation is to address previous grievances through material compensation, recognition and apologising officially to the victims of the state violations of the human rights.

The second stage of reconciliation could be realised through forging an elite consensus, such as adopting a permanent constitution, constructing an acceptable power-sharing model, and promoting a culture of good governance. This stage also extends to promoting national political parties, adopting appropriate electoral laws, and ensuring consultative and inclusive participation in politics. This reconciliation should result in creating a new culture where elites in power and elites outside of power routinely meet and consult each other, respect each other and listen to each other. In this reconciliation, Islamist and non-Islamist elites should be reconciled by agreeing on the role of Islam in the state and in society. The current Provisional Constitution

provides the basis for such reconciliation, which simply requires prudent applications.

The third stage of reconciliation is clan reconciliation, which is undertaken by reconciled elites. This reconciliation should be approached using a bottom-up approach employing traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution. It may apply shared elements of modern and local transitional justice mechanisms (such as identification of the perpetrators of crimes, payment of reparations, as well as forgiveness and repentance). This step should begin by collecting data and documenting the mass human rights violations, which thereby signals that impunity is not tolerated and that violations will be addressed.

In conclusion, this article refutes the falsity of representing Somalia as exceptional which dehumanizes them. It posits the fact that Somalis should be approached in studying their conflict and reconciliation similar to other countries. Thus, their comprehensive reconciliation requires creation of three separate spaces in Somali society: traditional space (for clans, clan elders and traditional Islamic scholars), civil society space (for professional organisations, Islamic movements, and other non-state institutions and actors) and political space (for political parties and the apparatus of the state). These three spaces must be demarcated through legal framework so that each of them cannot infringe the space of the other while recognizing shared spaces.

Dr. Baadiyow holds a PhD in *Modern Islamic History*. He is a socio-political activist and writes on Islamic movements, traditional authorities and state-building of Somalia. He has published a number of books, book chapters and papers. He can be reached by email at abdurahmanba@yahoo.com.

Endnotes

- (1) Men Khaus, Mediation Efforts for Somalia. Africa Mediators Retreat, 41;
- (2) Abdurahman Abdullahi Baadiyow, *Making Sense of Somali History* (Adonis & Abbey Co. 2017), 20;
- (3) Accordingly, clan elders have monopolized representation of the clans after the collapse of the state;
- (4) The “state versus clan” model promotes hegemony of the “majority clans” and excludes minorities and naturalized Somalis who do not belong to any clan;
- (5) Said S. Samatar, 'Unhappy Masses and the Challenges of Political Islam in the Horn of Africa', available from www.wardheernews.com/Marc_h_05/05 (accessed on February 2, 2017);
- (6) Abdi I. Samatar, 'Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention', *The Journal of the Modern African Studies* 30 (1992): 625-641;
- (7) The *diya*-paying group is the smallest clan unit who take collective responsibility in making or receiving reparation for killed or injured individual members;
- (8) The state-society relations can be described in six possible scenarios ranging from extreme cooperation to extreme conflict. These are mutual collaboration, mutual engagement, conflictual engagement, mutual disagreements, enforced disengagement, and resistance-revolutionary disengagement. See, Abdurahman Abdullahi, and Ibrahim Farah reconciling the state and society:

'Reordering Islamic Work and Clan System'. Available [here](#) (accessed on May 2, 2017);

(9) Abdurahman A. Baadiyow, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Case Study of Islah Movement (1950-2000)* (Adonis & Abbey Publishers, 2015) 231;

(10) Al-Itihad al-Islami in the 1990s and al-Shabab of today are examples of the militancy of some Islamic organizations;

(11) For the rationale of adopting the terminology of “non-Islamist” which means non-Islamic activist as an alternative to the term “secularist”, refer to Abdurahman Abdullahi, *Reconverting the Somali State: Islam, Islamism and Transitional Justice* (Adonis & Abbey, 2017), 28;

(12) *ibid*;

(13) Abdurahman Abdullahi Baadiyow, 'Tribalism, Nationalism and Islam: The Crisis of the Political Loyalty in Somalia', MA Thesis submitted to the Islamic Institute, McGill University, 1992, 92- 100.

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to the Editor.

A Gloomy Political Cloud over Somalia

Being boring is one personality trait president Mohamed A. Farmaajo has in common with our first president, Aden A. Osman. Like Aden, Farmaajo is not a great speaker, he has no charisma, and he has no emotional attachment to the masses. The festivities and the joyful celebrations of February 8 were fueled by a positive delusion, if not self-deception, of a nation battered by decades of conflict and divisiveness. Principled leaders can get away with being boring. They are not combative or spontaneous, but they create a sense of stability. Although they are not excitable, they stick with their core principle. While a charismatic leader is over-concerned about his or her image, a principled-boring leader is focused on the progress of the institution he is leading. With calm demeanor, he always reminds his people of the core values to live by. If tested, he will not shy away from confrontation. Aden Adde was that kind of leader.

Looking back at the first nine months of his presidency, we can easily see the stark difference between Farmaajo and the first president of the country. Aden Adde was a true believer of the Constitution and he never let anyone to cross that line. After the election of 1964, many members of the National Assembly tried to block his choice for Prime Minister. Aden Adde reminded them that he can nominate Habar Iisho as Prime Minister if he wants to (Habar Iisho was a well-known mentally challenged lady). In contrast to Farmaajo, Aden Adde would not allow the government security services to snatch a Somali citizen, or any human being for that matter, and hand over to another country without court hearing.

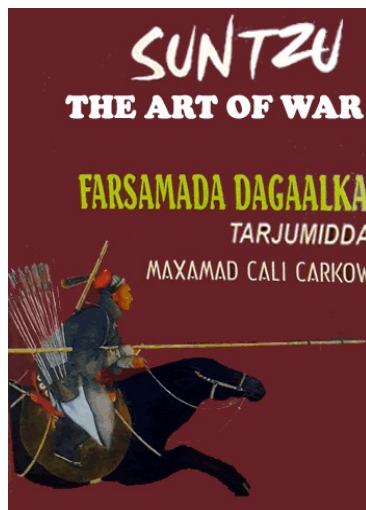
After the political spring of February 8, a gloomy cloud of uncertainty sets in over Somalia. Farmaajo came with an aura of a great Somali patriot. The aura of greatness is a God-given gift that comes with a price. Like some beautiful flowers, it needs a constant caring. Flowers may ask for water,

fertilizer and a protection from strong winds. Aura, on the other hand, may ask for true sacrifice, **YOUR BLOOD**. If you don't have what it takes to protect her, it becomes a **CURSE**. Farmaajo could empower his aura of greatness by standing firmly on the popular foundation of patriotism. If you do not have a powerful army that can pacify the whole country, you need the masses on your side. Their awareness and emotions is your artillery. Don't let this opportunity to slip through your fingers. If you hide in your **IVORY TOWER** (Villa Somalia) and sever your ties with the people, your enemy will spring up everywhere, and the neighbouring countries will be emboldened to do what they have been doing for the last 26 years:

DISMANTLING OUR COUNTRY.

Some of you may know how much I cherish my beautiful wishful thinking. Relying on hope as my strategy, I see Farmaajo redeeming himself, captivating the masses and uniting the country.

Mohamed Ali Arkow lives in Canada. A retired teacher, he previously taught at the Foreign Language Institute of Ottawa (FLIO) and various Canadian high schools. He also served as an adviser on the Somali language and culture to a number of organisations, including the Canadian Ministry of Immigration. More recently, he published a Somali translation of the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu's treatise



The Art of War
[Farsamada Dagaalka].

How Somalia fares in Sustainable Development Goals rankings for Africa

When it comes to corruption rankings, Somalia typically appears among the worst affected. The logical conclusion from Corruption Perceptions Index is that no African country is worse than Somalia when it comes to security, good governance and provision of health services.

But this assessment may not be so simple. Not so, for instance, if you take into account the following facts: firstly, that Somalia is ahead of a whole host of African countries—namely Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria—when it comes to the Sustainable Development Goal number 5, especially when looked at from indicator of the percentage of women in a country's national parliament.

As for life expectancy (SDG 3), Somalia falls in the lowest life expectancy band but still ahead of Nigeria, Chad, Kenya, Angola and Côte d'Ivoire. Countries in highest life expectancy band are: Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya—four countries in North Africa.

What's in a Somali song?

by *Liban Ahmad*

Imagine you wrote a Somali song. How would you put music to it and choose a singer? The beautiful pre-1991 Somali songs which Somalis enjoy listening to or watching are products of creative endeavours of a song writer, a *mullaxan* (vocaliser) who decided how the song will be sung and chooses a singer for it, and a person who put music to the song.

Before the Somali vocaliser, Abdikarim Farah Qaarey (known as Abdikarim Jiir), the deputy director of the Somali National Theatre in Mogadishu, gave a series of interviews to Somali TV networks, how Somali songs become popular was a complete mystery to the public.

Born in the port city of Hobyo in the Mudug region, Abdikarim Jiir began to take an interest in Somali songs after independence. He arrived in Mogadishu shortly after independence and auditioned for Radio Mogadishu song competition.

While having a haircut, his song was playing on Radio Mogadishu. The barber was incensed by the voice of the singer and said: "Who let this person with such a bad voice become a singer?" It was then that Abdikarim Jiir realised that his future as an aspiring singer was in tatters.

In 1967 he joined Radio Mogadishu troupe as a what Somalis now call *cod-sameeye* (literally, voice-maker). Melodists worked with playwrights and song writers. Their involvement turned lyrics into a song before a music writer fills the gap with music compatible with the way the melodist vocalised lyrics. During the 1970s, the era of the Somali plays, Abdikarim vocalised songs by such Waaberi troupe playwrights and poets as Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame (Hadrawi), Mohamed Ali Kariye, Abdulkadir Hirsi Yamyam.

"Words of the song guide me. I pay attention to the meaning of words, have a conversation with the song writer, vocalise the song and

choose a singer."

As to the factors that make a song a hit, Abdikarim attaches importance to the ability of singers. "All singers have different singing voices. You have to select a singer whose voice matches the song". Among songs which Abdikarim vocalised are 'Beledweyn' by Hadraawi; 'Naftu doqonsanaa' by Mohamud Tukaale, and 'Macallinka' by Hassan Sheikh Mumin.

Without Abdikarim's role as musical genius reflected in Hadraawi's song, 'Beledweyne' would hardly come to the fore. Hadraawi made use of complicated grammatical structures, conversational and poetic in tone. The first line of the song (*Bi'iwaa jacaylow'* –O love may you not suffer) is vocative; it contains negative interrogatives such as '*Sow taliye baasoo'* ('Didn't a bad commander...?').

"Vocalising a song is a skill that required focus", Abdikarim told Horn Cable TV interviewer Abdulkadir Dulyar. To the collapse of the state, he attributes the poor state of

Somali arts particularly Somali songs sung by one person sung with one person playing the organ. In my generation singing, song-writing and vocalising were a calling but now people who become singers view arts as means of livelihood".

Abdikarim helped many Somali songs rise to fame. One of them is the late Ahmed Awad Rabsho, who is remembered for Axaddii, a song written by Hadrawi and vocalised by Abdikarim Jiir.

Abdikarim credits his talent to his upbringing in an environment where exposure to work songs [*hees hawleed*] meant an opportunity to acquire knowledge of folk songs in different contexts. "I made use of the tune of traditional songs without people realising traditional songs' tune shape the vocalisation", Abdikarim said.

In his monograph on the work of the late Somali poet Mohamed Hashi Dhamaac (Gaariye), the Somali linguist and literary critic Abdirahman Farah (Ina Guri Barwaaqo) discussed the genres of Somali



poetry [*maansada Soomaalida*] about Gaarriye's discovery of the Somali poetry metre in a series of 1976 articles in now-defunct *Xiddigta Oktoobar*. Farah discovered that Hadraawi unknowingly used two different song genres in the first two stanzas of the song 'Suleekha', sang by the late Mohamed Nuur Giriig. The first and second stanzas of the song are based on *baarcadde* and *geeraar* genres.

Among plays whose songs Abdikarim vocalised is 'Hablayahow hadmaad guursan doontaan?' [Young ladies, when will you marry?] written by Tukaale in 1975. Abdikarim views the play as a social critique on the ruling class of 1970s using their position and associated prestige to befriend girls and have night meals at Jungle bar [Baar Jungal]. "The owner of the bar was serving the cast for several weeks when the play was being staged at the Somali National Theatre in Mogadishu thinking the play was a publicity for his business. The 1980s revival of the same play was not as hard-hitting as the 1970s because the theme was diluted", Abdikarim reflected.

Recently the Hargeisa-based Somali literary historian Boobe Yusuf Du'ale urged Somali people to give credit to the person who wrote a song, the person who vocalised it and the person who put music to it as well as being sure to mention the year the song was released and whether it was a part of a play. Thanks to Somali TV networks such as Dalsan TV, Horn Cable TV, SNTV and Universal TV, interviews with Abdikarim Farah Qaarey will blaze the trail in raising awareness about the collaboration that transforms Somali lyrics such as 'Suleekha', whose vocaliser I was not able to find out, into a song.

Liban Ahmad is a freelance journalist and translator based in England. He writes extensively on Somali politics, culture and Language. He is currently the Books Editor of **New Dalka**.

Review

QAAMUUSKA AF-SOOMAALIGA (Somali Monolingual Dictionary)

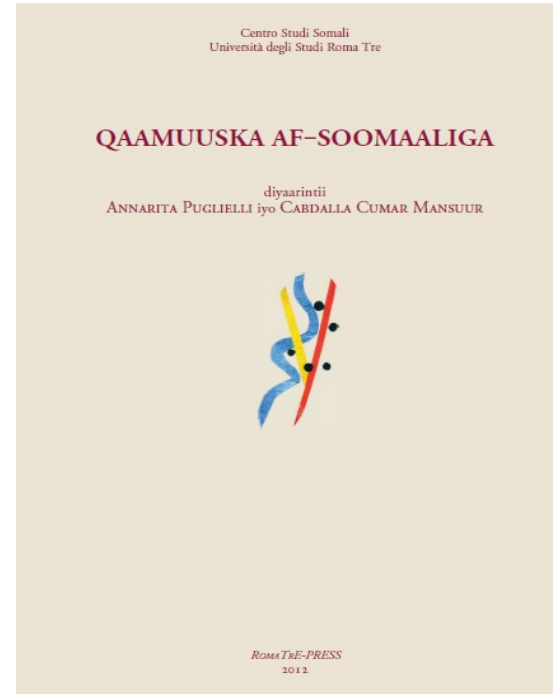
Edited by Annarita Puglielli and Cabdalla Cumar Mansuur (Università degli Studi Roma Tre: Roma Tre Press, 2012)

In 2012 Roma Tre-Press published a monolingual Somali dictionary. Staff of the former Department of Languages at the Somali National University began work on the dictionary in 1985 as a part of Somali-Italian Cooperation. Due to state collapse in Somalia in 1991, the work on the dictionary came to a halt. Later, Somali and Italian scholars resumed the project.

Lexicographers adopted English alphabetical order for the dictionary entries, following in the footsteps of Yaasiin Cusmaan Keenadiid, who edited the first monolingual Somali dictionary in 1976. Annarita Puglielli, Cabdalla C. Mansuur and other lexicographers made use of the Somali terminology developed after the Somali language had been adopted as a medium of instruction in October 1972.

It is a dictionary that every Somali translator or journalist should have to avoid making spelling errors that one comes across when reading Somali websites, books, magazines and journals. The dictionary teams made effort to include different variants for entries. Noun entries are identified by gender, not by declension group.

This dictionary raises grammar questions about verbs and adjectives. The Somali equivalent of 'good' is 'fiican'. The dictionary identified the grammatical category of the word as an intransitive verb like *tag* [to go]. Puglielli and Mansuur's choice to categorise *fiican* as an intransitive verb is based on a classification made by the late Professor B. W. Andrzejewski, who described the Somali adjective as a 'hybrid verb'. In the *Somali*



Reference Grammar, Professor John Saeed identifies *fiican* as an adjective. Somali has a second type of an adjective which, when used attributively, is followed by a verb 'to be' such as *geesi* [brave] and *deeqsi* [generous]. The dictionary categorised this type of adjective as a noun. It has a feminine form—e.g. *geesiyad* and *deeqsiyad*—and can be used comparatively and superlatively.

The Somali language has intransitive verbs with transitive properties e.g. *qadee* [to lunch] and *mataanee* [to give birth to twins]. This dictionary categorises *qadee* and *mataanee* as intransitive and transitive verbs respectively. Linguists have divided Somali

verbs into two groups: conjugation groups (1-4) and irregular verbs such as *oro*, *aqoo*, *ool*, and *imow*. In the dictionary, the simple past form of conjugation group 1 word *dheh* [to say] is *yiri* when used for the first person pronoun although *yiri* is the simple past tense form of the irregular, variant verb *oro* [to say] for third person masculine pronoun as in *Wuxuu yiri*, "Berri baan dhoofayaa" [He said, "I am travelling tomorrow"]. These are minor oversights that lexicographers can address when preparing a second edition. The dictionary is available online free of charge.

This review was prepared by **Liban Ahmad**. The *Somali dictionary* can be accessed [here](#).



Making waves

In this feature, we provide a summary of radio programmes of particular interest to Somali listeners



Source: BBC

Edna Adan Ismail on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs

“As tough as General Petraeus, as compassionate as the Pope, as tireless as Michael Phelps, as beautiful as Tina Turner, and with a work ethic to rival Bill Gates.” That was how Kirsty Young, presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, introduced her guest, Edna Adan Ismail, quoting an article written about Ismail five years ago.

Ismail is well-known as an activist and pioneering force in healthcare in her home, Somaliland, the self-declared republic in the Horn of Africa, where she opened its first maternity hospital, among the ashes and rubble of the war that had affected the city of Hargeisa and its surrounding area.

On the flagship Radio 4 programme, the guest—known as the castaway—is asked to choose a couple of tracks they would take if they were to be cast away on a desert island.

Ismail's first was Pharrell Williams's *Happy*, which Ismail first encountered while on transit in Dubai, on the way to Somaliland, tired and angry with the airline for having lost her luggage. It was then that she heard Williams's track, the most successful song of 2014, which, with its chirpy tune, was suitably disarming and settling.

People come to the Edna Adan Maternity Hospital from across Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti. It is the only hospital in the Horn of Africa that inserts shunts in babies' heads to treat Hydrocephalus, the condition where a child is born with an enlarged head due to fluid accumulation within the brain. If parents had taken their children abroad, treatment would cost them \$15,000; at Ismail's hospital—“a bright, shining

beacon” among the sandy streets of Hargeisa—it is free. “Lots of credit in the bank upstairs,” says Edna modestly.

The second of Edna's chosen tracks, and the only Somali one, was Cabdi Nuur Alaale's *Maxay Dantu Ciishay Wiloo*. A song of resistance, it tells of hope—that despite the drought, the famine, the reprieve is in sight and the rains will soon fall.

Remembering herself as a “very passionate student”, Edna spent seven years in the UK to train as a midwife and as was the norm at the time, was often the “only black face in class”. With many Scottish friends, she would often be called Edna MacIshmael or among Irish counterparts, Edna O'Ismail.

(Interestingly enough, the prefix “Mac” and “O” are used to form patronymic

names—as in “son of so-and-so”, making it like Somali full names which read as signifiers of lineage through the paternal line.)

Edna met her first husband, Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, for the first time in London, when the two were students there. Years later, and now back at home, Egal—born, according to Ismail, to “one of the richest men in my country”—would send beautiful flowers, picking her up in his red MG convertible. Then he suddenly disappeared and it later seemed that his father had had a stroke. When he returned and asked her father for her hand in marriage, Edna was angry—that an educated man would do such a thing before wanting to know what she thought. In terms of the local custom, he had of course done the right thing but she made sure to rebel against him.

When they were married, Egal was the leader of the Opposition in Somalia's nascent parliament. As First Lady, when Egal became Prime Minister in 1967, Ismail accompanied him on official trips and is photographed in “glamorous photographs” with Charles de Gaulle, Lyndon B. Johnson and the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson. “I enjoyed it”, Ismail reminisces, “I loved it”.

Ismail did not allow being the First Lady to get in the way of her vocation. “I was a nurse before I was married” and two days a week, she continued to teach her students, deliver babies and wear her uniform proudly. Coworkers were shocked that the Prime Minister's wife would continue working—“when I am with a patient, I treated her with respect” and after a while, people got used to it.

Her sense of duty would show itself in all sorts of circumstances. When after the 1969 military coup, Egal was put under arrest and Ismail under house arrest, a hotel caught fire.

An announcement on the radio pleaded for anyone with healthcare expertise to come to the hospital to care for the wounded. Ismail simply walked out of her house. The guards were shocked. She promised them that she was going to the hospital and they could accompany her there if they wished or wait for her at the house until the morning. Having worked all night, she walked home the next morning. The guards were no longer there and did not return again.

Track five: 'These Foolish Things' by Ella Fitzgerald, which has seen Edna through “so many things”. For instance, when Egal was in prison after the military coup, along with his cabinet and other Members of Parliament, they were not allowed to communicate with the outside world and visits were not permitted. When Ismail emerged from her house arrest of six months, she took her car—on two occasions—and stopped outside the prison. Putting Fitzgerald's song on full blast—“one of our favourite songs”—she would then take the volume knob on the car stereo to prevent anyone, such as the passing traffic police, turning it down. To pull off the stunt, she would feign a punctured tyre or “release the air out of my tyre!” Her husband later confirmed that he heard the blaring music from inside the prison on these two occasions.

The interview then veered to Oman, where in the late 1970s Ismail spent six years as the wife of the Somali Ambassador there. The only problem for her was that, as the Ambassador's wife, she was not allowed to do paid or unpaid work there. As ever, passion managed to find its expression: Ismail continued to do consultancy work for the UN and started to train midwives in Djibouti.

Although Ismail admitted that she would have loved to have children—“every hormone ever

invented was tried on me”—“it just didn't happen”, before reasoning, “maybe it was a good thing”. After all, “if I had children, I would not spend so much time, my resources and energy on the hospital today”. “When I was praying for just one or two children, I think God had four million and more [planned] for me. Today, every child is my child”. Ismail talked of the warm welcome she receives from young children wherever she goes. “They see me on TV and recognise me”.

Another area where Ismail has a particular interest is girls' education, helping to dispel dismissive retorts such as “I'm just a girl. What can I do?” In a note of inspiration, Ismail adds, “I was a girl once and look what I've done. Get up and go and do it!” After all, the hospital itself began as the dream of a young girl. When, aged eleven or 12, Edna heard her father at work in a hospital saying, “I wish I had better forceps, scissors than this”, she knew she wanted to become a clinician. “I wanted from then to build a hospital that my father would want to work in”, she remembered. Asked what her father would make of it if he saw it today: “I think he would have approved of it”. That seems a fitting tribute to a lifetime's work—and a fitting vindication of her choice to become a midwife or nurse, something the local women in her youth sniggered was below the daughter of a doctor.

Edna Adan Ismail appeared on BBC Radio 4's 'Desert Island Discs' and was interviewed by Kirsty Young. The programme can be accessed on the BBC website [**here**](#).