

Celebrating Transnational Reading and Writingⁱ

By Abdulkadir Osman Farah

Last weekend, September 1st, 2023, the Somali-Scandinavian transnational publisher “Laashin-Halabuur” (<https://laashin.com/l>) celebrated its 9th anniversary. The centre voluntarily publishes, edits, and distributes diverse insightful works on Somali literature, culture, and art, as well as various topics on social challenges within and around Somalis. The Somali society currently recovers from decades of self-inflicted cruelty and suffering with the use of a sort of “shumac iyo faynuus” (candle and lantern) in navigating through potential alternative pathways. A progress, that for some, resembles a tortoise steps (socodka diidiinka), yet better than a standstill or regression.

In contrast, Laashin-Halabuur projects an enlightenment of signification in reading and writing-disseminating Somali voices and script across distant spaces. With the veteran author, Dr Husein Wadaad, the institution insists the transformation of the society occurring through a concerted collective commitment to the art of reading and writing. Collaborating intellectuals additionally recognize literature, particularly poetry, representing the highest expression of human imaginations and realities worldwide. This is a world of creation mainly existing within divinely determined “doubleness” (lamaaneyn). “Waminkulli shay’in khalaqnaa sowjeyn lacallakum tadhakaruun”. Doubleness in creation” lamaane, lammaaneyn” also applies to the act of readership as well as writership, including “tix iyo tiraab” (poetry and prose); “hadal iyo aamusnaan” (talking and silence); “dad iyo dowlad” (people and government/authority). Constantly representing crucially balancing and networking steps. The one cannot exist without the other. Mohamed Dahir Afrax (aun) titles a book “*Dal Dad Waayey iyo Duni Damiir Beeshay*” (a country with no public/publicity and a world without conscience).

The technicalities of reading and writing often depend on the interest as well as the attendance of attentive reading and writing public (publicity). Under such conditions, authorities might impose particularly selected reading and written works on people- depending on what they want to accomplish. In return, people have the option of receiving such works or alternatively rejecting and opposing it. The actual management and organization of the processes of reading and writing equally influences how people react and engage.

Traditionally, Somalis do not normally discuss and debate about the process of reading and writing. Prof Saalax Xaashi Carab (aun) suggest Somalis instead differentiate *tix* (poetry) and *tiraab* (oodhaah) (prose). “Tiraab” is unstructured statement, talk and utterances. Meanwhile, “Tix” is short and often connected and organized words systematically following each other. So far, Somalis, presumably a “nation of poets”, remain *af ku nool* (oral exchanging society). Reading and writing therefore exists minimally, making the oral expression superior within the society and beyond. Somali proverbs confirm such tendency. The saying goes “*Soomaali been waa sheegtaa, beense ma maahmaahdo*” (Somalis might lie, but rarely in proverbs). “*Hadal waa murti iyo macno la.aan; Hadal waa kii gaaban oo go,aan leh; Hadal waa margi kolba meeshi loo jiido ayuu aadaa; Hadal ninna si u yiri ninna si u qaaday; Haddaad hadal jeedin, aamusnaantaada ha dhaamo*” “*Hadal ninkii dhahay miyaa dhaamay, mise ninkii dhabjiyay*” (“Talking either contains a wisdom or is useless”; “Talking should be brief and decisive” “Talking is like a tendon stretchable to multiple directions/wishes” “As one talks in an specific way, the other understands in yet another specific way” “Talking must be better than remaining quite” “Talking does not fill a container” “Talking and truth must be precise and clear” “Who improves the talking, the one who utters or the one who distort”).

Almost all Somali proverbs deal with the significance of oral expression. Although Somalis memorize and partially remember their tradition and history, much is lost, over the generations, due to the lesser emphasis on reading and writing. The emphasis on oral expression and exchange therefore

requires not just the fostering and expansion of reading and writing culture but also the management and performance of that interconnected culture by prevailing organizations and institutions.

Though militaristic in style and approach, once “olalaha reer miyiga Soomaalida” (Somali rural literacy campaign) proved the significance of bureaucratic administrative organization for the introduction of reading and writing to societies. In around mid-1970s, Somali authorities mobilized about 35.000 young students from intermediate and secondary schools, together with about 10.000 of their teachers to travel far away dangerous places in the interior of the country. The youngsters successfully implemented a 9-month internationally recognized literacy campaign among nomads and farmers. Following decades of societal decline and aimlessness, diverse communities (with promising aspirations of civic driven transnational revival of reading and writing) recently organized numerous competitive bookfairs within the country and beyond.

Historically, humanity experienced transformation from a culture of book-reading and book-writing to a culture of book-visualizing towards the current book-digitalizing. There are also persistent elements of intrusive marketing and performance. Apparently, it is not what is read and written that matters most but who recommends and influences or exploits people’s wishes to read and write. For instance, in a recent public interview, one of the world’s richest men, the owner of Amazon (hereunder amazon books), Jeff Bezos declared “*I am not interested in books*”. He is obviously focused on profit and data generation from people and places. Likewise, celebrity culture and marketing principles makes some works more mainstream than others. It is not about the contents and the value of these books- but how these books correspond and internalize the dominant culture of the era.

Reading and writing conventionally

In a world with enduring hierarchies, conventions and institutions, students should probably:

- A) (at least in their early stages of knowledge seeking) adhere to a “dariiqo” (a way), a method, or a “discipline” to focus and demonstrate sustained interest in it. In the professional world, such field(s) could preferably belong to the natural sciences or human sciences (social sciences and humanities).
- B) Students should also identify respected profiles, mentors and teachers that mastered the relevant ways, methods, and disciplines- with the aim of linking and learning from them. This includes the process of learning from individuals as well as from collective disciplinary communities.
- C) The task is to understand almost all about the chosen community, and how that community works, how they interact and what tools, language, and conceptual frames such communities deploy. This enables one accessing the professionally sanctioned knowledge, eventually mastering prevailing structures. In concrete, for example, the person striving to become a lawyer will have to adopt to the customary doings/not doings of the lawyer institutional enterprises. The same applies to people seeking knowledge (reading and writing) in diverse technologies and sciences fields.
- D) Recognizing the source or the roots of one’s subsequent acquired/accumulated knowledge is also crucial. For instance, renown Somali transnational authors and intellectuals, Nurrudin Farah and Professor Ali Jimale Ahmed belong to respective professional communities. In diverse interviews over the years, the two authors repeatedly refer their accomplished knowledge and success to their professional enterprises- but also to their childhood experiences and upbringing. Nurrudin often refers to his mother, a poet and storyteller, influencing him immensely. The cosmopolitan author once suggested that he writes to keep “Somalia and its people alive”. Though human beings cannot even keep themselves alive, let alone others, Nurrudin has a good point that what people know about a particular nation, a country or a society is about what is publicly read and written about that given society or nation. Similarly, Prof. Ali Jimale Ahmed often connects his scholarly

accomplishment, not just to the diverse professional communities and the global citizenry he obviously belongs to, but to the “ardaa” of the family house yard in which every Friday, diverse groups of people gathered in enthusiastically sharing “bun” and exchanging living existential stories. This confirms the formation of intellectual curiosity and aspiration begins much earlier than the subsequent secondary professional complex educational and institutional reproductions.

- E) For most, the process of reading and writing is not equally straightforward and easy task. The process needs systematic attention and sustained efforts. According to Professor Ali Jimale Ahmed “Lafaha ariga ama idaha in dhuux lagala baxo waa sahlan tahay- laakiin lafta geela in dhuux lagala baxo waa adagtahay” (Retrieving a sheep/goat bone-marrow is easier than retrieving camel bone-marrow). Similarly, the strong and fear- triggering huge lion, results from years of eating meat since being a cub. Likewise, the person growing up with reading, writing and storytelling eventually becomes a better reader, writer, and storyteller.
- F) Apart from the historical consistence, reading and writing requires capabilities of multiple forms of imaginations. One can put words systematically in a structure of linguistic grammar, but utterances and statements need meanings, purposes and not least a cause. For instance, globally well-known transnational readers and writers like the late Palestinian-American academic, Edward Said, in almost all his life focused on the Palestinian struggle, national loss and the dynamics of life in exile. Similarly, the British-Tanzanian transnational Nobel prize winner, Abdulrazak Gurnah, focuses his work on the struggles that transnational migrants and refugees confront in constantly balancing the gulf between “cultures and continents”.
- G) In approaching the task of writing properly, T S Eliot recommends “extensive reading” “longer time of thinking” and “less and concrete writing”. Herewith “Tafakur” and reflection remains crucially indispensable for reading and writing. In other words, you partially write what you read and what you think. In addition, writing and reading can be used for private issues as well as for public concerns. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o suggest writing can empower and “*liberate individuals as well as societies from servitude*”. In attempts of resisting such liberating tendencies, the elites and the aristocracy also deploy reading and writing strategies and processes designed to manipulate the marginalized and the wider public.

Finally, oral expression remains the core of Somali culture. A culture, that has yet to produce a mainstream systematic guidance of reading and writing- as the culture often does with speaking. The legendary poet Mohamed Ibrahim Warsame- Hadraawi (aun), in the poem “Sirta Nolosha” (Life’s Essence) praises the art of oral articulation and expression: “*Hadalkana sar weedhiisa. Una saaf qofkii waaya. Ha ka tegin sarbeebtiisa. Hana gelin sursuur oodan. Hana lumin sargoyntiisa. Hana liqin sangaabtiisa. Ha ku saxan badheedhkiisa. Runta sogordoh haw yeelin. Ha suldaarin dooddiisa. Sisibaa wadaaggiisa. Sababee abbaartaada. Hana badin su’aashiisa. Sarrifkiyo tilmaantiisa. Saddex erey halkii dooni. Soddon yaanay kaa qaadan. Siddi-qabaxi yay raacin. Sare haw dhig-dhigin luuqda. Gacantana ha saydh-saydhin. Hana odhan wax sawliila*” (Always weigh your words well; make things clear to the uncomprehending. Don't forget your similes and figures, nor get into confusions, losing your argument's thread; Don't swallow its essence. Avoid hesitation - the clarity of your facts should not sit in the shade. Your argument must be plain, so take care of its coherence. Your approach must be reasoned; So, limit your questions whenever making key points. If three words suffice, don't stretch things to thirty. Leave boastfulness behind, don't speak arrogantly, or wave your arms contemptuously. Never utter an inappropriate speech).

Though Hadraawi with these penetrating poetry instructions refer to talk/speech/expression, the method could partially also be relevant to the equally demanding process of reading and writing.

ⁱ This is a summary of a presentation for the occasion of Laashin-Halabuur’s 9th anniversary celebration of reading and writing.