

## Why I wrote a book about *Qaraami*?

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*Qaraami* is the Somali Classical Music produced in the decades of 1940 - 1960. The decision to write a book about *Qaraami* comes from a decade-long conversation with myself on the future of music and entertainment in our society. A debate that was going on among different sectors of the same society, some of them *pro* and others *contra* for a reason or other, an important debate that sometimes I hosted and facilitated without being formally part of the conversation. This fundamental debate is taking place in other societies as well, mainly of Muslim heritage. The purpose of this book project is not to enter that debate, although I am in favour of music. I realized, however, that in the meantime, something essential is being lost, and this time for good, if not documented now, and shared with the current and future generations, to be prepared for and be part of that ongoing debate. The typical entertainment industry lost its prestige a long time ago in the Somali context, also due to the new technology that moved part of the responsibility on social media, but most importantly because of the overall destruction of the infrastructure (theatre, school of art, home for art and culture, protection for artists, etc) in the late 1980ies created a vacuum. Hargeysa, a capital city that hosts almost 1.2 million population, living in progressive peace and prosperity for three decades, and not having a national theatre is a testimony of the difficulty around the revival of music and artistic expression in our society. Let us start then by exploring “what is being lost?”

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It has been said that music is the universal language of humanity, and what is no longer in doubt is the fact that music is a cultural product in which each society has its own (with or without words) and varies more widely both within society and between societies. Music is produced within the boundaries of a society, which makes the ownership significant, but the music produced transcends boundaries and takes on a sense of universality as mankind perceives and interprets the same way wherever the music arrives. A study by Harvard University in 2019 showed that by analysing a song's acoustic features, such as tonality, ornamentation, and tempo, it's possible for people to understand its meaning, regardless of their cultural background. I asked camel herders in Somaliland how camel work songs are helpful to man in making his camels behave, for example when they are being watered, and the man wants the camels to act on taking water or when he wants the camels to move quickly (or slowly) on their long journeys? They replied that, obviously, camels don't understand the beautiful words in song lyrics, that is for men talking to each other for entertainment, but what camels react to is the pitch and rhythm of the type of song. They explained when the owner wants camels to move quickly, to behave and line-up, and to drink water, there is a fast rhythm which goes with the path of the lined-up camels. Vice versa, when camels are already full and had enough water, but the owners still want them to drink in order them to put as much water as possible in their belly, he changes the rhythm and moves in to more relaxed and slower tempo. The words of the lyrics change and reflect on what the owner wants to communicate, however, according to the camel-herders, what the camels react to is the tonality, ornamentation, and tempo of the song. Likewise for human, whether you are listening to a dance track, love song, healing song or lullaby, it seems a song's psychological purpose can be easily identified, as the Harvard study explains. If music is lost, an important universal medium of communication will be lost. A self-expression tool carrying sentimentally coded messages will be lost.

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The music is also a cultural product but not "a fixed inventory of cultural behaviours" of the society that produces it. As the Harvard study says, music is rather "the product of underlying psychological faculties that make certain kinds of sound feel appropriate to certain social and emotional circumstances." Music is linked to specific perceptual, cognitive, and affective faculties, including language since in their songs, all societies put words, motor control since people in all societies dance, auditory analysis since all musical systems have signatures of tonality, and aesthetics. Their melodies and rhythms differ and strike a balance between monotony and chaos. The beauty of music, therefore, lies between the universality of human understanding of music and its production which makes it local to the society that produces it to express sentiments and share feelings.

Love is a feeling, and every society historically has its own way of expressing it. Love songs and their musical interpretations have always played the lion's share of the literary production and musical arrangements of every society, and in modern Somali art, *Qaraami* (the category of music this book deals with) have played that role. *Qaraami* lyrics and melodies were coined exclusively to express love, and that new kind of literature in Somali oral poetry that began in the 1940s and 1950s finally laid the foundation for the new modern Somali song. The decision to document in written form *Qaraami* music, therefore, is to make that bridge from orality to written culture.

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In the process of bridging, I always believed that any attempt to radically transform our society should begin with morphing our rich oral tradition into a well-sustained culture, based on reading and writing. This I hold as an essential requisite that would eventually enable our people, mainly the young generation, to have access to the various fields of knowledge and thus keep abreast of their dynamically advancing world and contribute to its ongoing development, but also to have access to the history and identity they belong to. This measure definitely entails a long process demanding collective work, dedication, endurance and relentless strife, but first and foremost requires imagination. This imagination bases itself on facilitating space for the transformation of the orally held traditions and customs in the form of narration be it as a book entry, novel or academic publication that comes back to the community, or musical notations for authentic melodies. At the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, we uphold this central mission and train youth in creative and academic writing with space to present and exchange inspiration from the old to the young generation. We train also in playing *Oud* and other musical instruments. *Oud* or *Kaman (Kaban)* is considered the companion of *Qaraami*, in general of love songs, and as Christina Woolner puts, its "sounding evokes sentiments of love-suffering and its relief, war and its complicated aftermath, frustration, pain, joy, and desire."

The number of publications that are part of the written document of the Somali community is increasing especially after the introduction of the yearly trainings as part of the Hargeysa International Book Fair. We uphold the promotion of this smooth transfer from oral to written especially on aspects which are in high danger of losing. The production for preservation is more impactful when it is presented in the local language, yet this needs more effort because it is not standardized yet, and the development of its lexicon is linked with the advancements within the community and the inevitable impact of globalization. Most of the critical historical and social indigenous knowledge of the community is still in the oral domain. *Qaraami* is fundamental part of this production, and it needs to be preserved in written form, and this book aims for that.

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I witnessed another change in our society caused by climate change and urbanization which affects the way of thinking and producing literature. The massive movement that is changing the nomadic way of life, the global impact of urbanization and technological intervention could be considered visible impacts for the transformation and even for the loss of art-based expressions. There are several artistic elements that used to be hallmarks of the Somali community but are now invisible. One such example could be observed in pottery, in which a young person can only see and understand that these were part and parcel of the way of life and everyday tools at home. The change in the commercial space that has replaced the pots with ceramic and plastic utensils has not just removed the pots from the space but also the tradition of pottery making and related performances which are not properly documented as we stated as it is orally maintained. The disappearing art performances are not only by the push of the advancement in technology but the stereotypical cultural description of the handcrafts as a deemed activity of alienated groups with lower status in the community also played a central role. This has eroded the culture and value that could have been source of income. If this natural transformation is putting at risk forms of art, the entertainment practice has one more challenge.

In fact, the music is not saved from this inevitable change pattern affected by all the above listed factors. The danger is much more significant on musical performances that are core

tradition in the pastoral community. These include the songs mothers used to sing for their babies; be it to entertain them or make them go to sleep peacefully. The work songs that people used to sing while working together such as while helping in building traditional houses, while looking after camels or while going to fetch water are not visible as they used to be and unfortunate that the penetration of urban culture has eroded them even in rural areas. One of the aims of writing this book is coming also from our intervention at the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, with a project of Soundscape whereby we attempted to record, collect and preserve such sounds which are fading or are at high risk of disappearing, we deem necessary efforts to make sure we have some tangible evidence to narrate the story of our community and also to inculcate the essence of a proud identity among the younger generation who are deprived of this magnificent mark of identity. The emerging extremism and war against music exhibited in the form of shaming artists, and prohibiting musical performance even at ceremonies such as weddings are worrisome activities that are endangering music.

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In conclusion, writing a book on *Qaraami* was and remains instrumentally helpful in documenting artistic identity, preserving an essential page of the Somali modern art, to promoting music production of the younger generation of today by relying on and learning from the past. Change is inevitable. Nevertheless, documenting and reviving what is a defining character of our society is the responsibility of each and every one of us in different aspects. Understanding the venerability of orally archived cultural and social heritage is the foundation for this book. Documenting this authentic, powerful, and enchanting element of Somali society is like planting the seed of rejuvenating the performance and beautiful scenery it exhibits. With *Qaraami*, we continue the intergenerational dialogue on art production. In an era where the second orality is coming into force through social media, having a richly documented musical notation for the *Qaraami* (and in general Somali music), helps this society to share with the rest of the world one of its great contributions to the humanity.