

OF TAMARIND & COSMOPOLITANISM

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IN THE VICINITY OF THE COURTS IN SOMALIA, it is common for one to see clutches of men loitering with intent. Some of the men who hang around at the entrance to the courts are there to help you write your letters because you happen to be illiterate; some to find you a lawyer at short notice; but the majority is there to bear false witness. Decently dressed in a manner that attracts no attention, the men wait as patiently as vultures perched on the highest point of a roof in the neighbourhood of an abattoir. Actors manqués, they entertain themselves with humorous anecdotes about many a vulnerable client, now satisfied, whom they served on the payment of a fee. These professional men are so alert they stir into action at the sight of a gullible man or a woman with a problem. And they offer their services for a price and in cash. That they can tell the pregnable state of the person as soon as he or she comes into view is an advantage that serves them well. When you come to think of it, it is all part of an act: the judges know the men who bear false witness, as do the jurors and the public too. We allude to ‘Carais Ciise’, in the region of Somalia where I come from, when we wish to imply that So-and-so is bearing false testimony, or tells lies knowingly, and benefits from doing so.

I can think of many such witnesses, among them a number of well-known writers. Not committed to telling the truth and lacking deep knowledge of the areas about which they write, these givers of ‘false testimony’ are easily discerned, especially by locals. But not so for many of their readers, least of all those who are unfamiliar with the faraway areas about which these false witnesses write. I won’t mention the names of these writers, because it would not be good etiquette to do so.

What I would like to do, instead, is to give another kind of testimony in times when the notion of truth suffers unimaginable abuse at the hands of an entire community or a group of professionals and when truth is compromised. I am referring here to the commentaries and other forms of reporting by journalists, writers or political analysts, who offer us misguided testimony when it comes to Somalia, when they should know better.

My argument is that much of the commentary on the Somali civil war is based on a false premise in the form of a cliché, an easy peg on which to hang a misguided theory. We are told again and again that the Somali civil war is the consequence of an age-old clan conflict that has only lately gone awry. The clan is viewed by many of the commentators as the single most important issue, pitting one family or groups of families related to each other through blood against others who are not related to them by blood. This view is also erroneously held by a large

number of Somalis, who ought to know better, but who don't, for reasons to do, I think, with a sense of intellectual tardiness.

Of the landmarks of Mogadiscio I remember the Tamarind Market most. As is often the case, misnomers abound in a city with an ancient oral history and with a memory far more complex than the lives of the peoples currently residing in it. Try as you might to trace things to their origins, you will find that nobody has the slightest idea why the market, which isn't a market in the sense that we understand when we speak of an African market, was called Tamarind Market. Driven by your obsessive search for the explanation forever eluding you, you come across other misnomers along the way. In fact it may even surprise you to hear that the term Tamarind itself is a misnomer, comprised as it is of two Arabic words: timir and Hind, meaning 'dates' and 'India'. Now what features do dates and tamarind have in common? But before you answer the question, if you will pardon my digression, let me ask another question, at the risk of being indiscreet. Do you in actual fact know what tamarind is? Have you seen it, eaten it and tasted it? Or do you know of it only vaguely, in the way a child growing up in the tropics 'knows' of snow in the sense of having seen it on TV, or having read about it in a folktale? In other words, have you asked yourself why the Arabs, who 'knew' dates and grew them in abundance, gave the name 'dates of India' to the thing we now know as 'tamarind'? Perhaps we are engaged in a prosaic comparison between two unlike items, one known to those bestowing the name, and the other unknown, and we should just leave it at that? Equally, we could assume that the sticky mélange that the Arabs named 'dates of India' is what the Indians knew as tamarind. Unfortunately that doesn't seem to be the case!

Anyhow I remember the enthusiasm of the seventies which all Somalis were in joyous celebration. In those long-gone years, we were enthusiastic about a number of things. We were highly enthusiastic about the political independence that was only a decade old then. We were enthusiastic, too, about our particular cultural and linguistic legacies and the enviable fact that ours was the only country on the continent of Africa with a sizeable population whose people spoke one language, Somali. Many of us would also mention another important point of which we were very proud. We knew that the city we lived in, Mogadiscio, was not only one of the prettiest and most colourful cities in the world, but also that it was decidedly the oldest in sub-Saharan Africa and older than many of Europe's most treasured medieval cities.

One of Mogadiscio's best-kept secrets was the shopping complex locally known as Tamarind Market. This was always abuzz with activities, its narrow alleys filled with shoppers. You could see entire families pouring into its alleys and plazas soon after siesta time, some shopping for clothes, others wishing to acquire what they could find in the way of gold or silver necklaces, many made to order. Stories abounded in which you were told that some of the shoppers came from as far as the Arabian Gulf to strike bargains, well aware that they would pay a lot more for the same items in their home countries in the Emirates or Saudi Arabia. In those days, no bride would get married without a collection of custom-made gold and silver items bought from one of the artisans there. And, for your tailoring needs, you went behind the market, where you would be fitted for your shirts, dresses, trousers, caps, jackets or a pair of leather boots, all to be had at bargain prices.

The history of Mogadiscio, how it came into being and what became of it after it went up in flames following the civil war, are to my mind all tied up with the history and destiny of the small cosmopolitan community who ran the Tamarind Market. The presence of this small community dates back to the tenth century, at which time Mogadiscio existed as a city state and boasted a negligible level of administration run for the benefit of the bourgeois elite, many of whom came from elsewhere: Iran, India and Arabia. As more and more foreigners migrated to it from other countries over the years, the city assumed an unmistakably cosmopolitan orientation.

It was an open city with no walls, to which anyone could come, provided he or she lived in harmony and at peace with those already there. It was as small as many other cities in other parts of the world then, probably no bigger than four square kilometres. And it was prosperous, thanks to its residents, many of them artisans hailing originally from the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent.

Parallel to the open city, within the radius of a few kilometres in any direction, there resided a pastoralist community made up entirely of Somalis who for all intents and purposes were peripheral to the city's residents and their cosmopolitan way of life. Traffic was principally one-way, with few and then later more pastoralists taking up residence in the city so as to benefit from the educational infrastructures there. Otherwise, the urban and the rural communities existed apart from one another, except when either was selling something to the other. But they regarded each other with mutual suspicion. The pastoralist Somalis, who are by nature urbophobic, saw the city as alien and parasitic, and because it occupied an ambiguous space in their hearts and minds, they gradually accumulated hostility towards the city until they became intent on destroying it.

The sacking of the city in 1991, when the Tamarind Market fell victim to the most savage looting, was not the first time that a conglomerate of pastoralists acting under the command of city-based firebrands set on dispossessing the city of its 'foreign' elements, laid waste to it. The same sort of thing occurred more than four hundred years ago, between 1530 and 1580, according to oral historians. The manner in which the sixteenth-century city was laid to waste had uncanny similarities to the 1991 sacking: in both cases, contingents of disenfranchised herdsmen, led by city-based men and armed with ancient injustices newly recast as valid grievances, visited havoc on the city.

In retrospect I would say the recent sacking had a lot to do with the Italian colonial presence, which brought about massive changes in the city's demography. After all, it was Italy that recruited many Somalis into its army to fight in its colonial war of expansion into Ethiopia. That many of those co-opted into serving in the police and armed forces were from regions of Somalia other than the communities adjacent to the city would in a perverse way upset its demographic balance. Following the Great War, further influxes of migrants swelled the rank of those already there, and those whom I would describe as 'semi-pastoralists', because they had one foot in the rural area and the other in the urban, accounting for the largest number of arrivals. By the time flag independence came, more pastoralists were poised to move towards the towns and then to the one and only city in the country, Mogadiscio. And the pull towards the city and away from the seasonal droughts and crop failures meant that there would be tremendous demographic upheavals, giving Somalia one of the highest urban migration rates in Africa. In the late seventies, after another war between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden, a massive number of refugees, in addition to a huge internal migration from the regions with depressed economies, helped to make the urban growth reach alarming figures. Somalia by then had become a state with one city, ruled by a single tyrant, Siyad Barre. It came to pass that in the late eighties the city moved toward its own extinction, because it no longer had any of the amenities one normally associates with cities. In spite of this, everyone gravitated towards it: to find jobs, to be where the action was, where the industries were, where the only university was, and where you could consult an eye-doctor or a heart specialist. Power was concentrated in the figure of the tyrant: and he was there, too.

Local orature has it that in 1989, just before the armed militias invaded the city, close aides to the 'Mayor of Mogadiscio', as the tyrant was known then, suggested to him that he quit the city. His arrogant dismissal of the suggestion now seems prescient, for he is rumoured to have responded that if anyone tried to run him out of his city, then he would make sure that he took

the whole country along with him to the land of ruin.

There are very few things that we know with absolute certainty when it comes to Mogadiscio. A city with several names, some ancient and of local derivation, some hundreds of years old and of foreign origin. The city claims a multiplicity of memories and sources, some of which are derived from outside Africa, others native to the continent. However, no one is sure when the name Mogadiscio was first used, or by whom. Does the name consist of two Somali words Maqal and disho, meaning, in Somali, 'the place where sheep are slaughtered', and indicating that it was once an abattoir? Or is the etymology non-indigenous, derived from Arabic, at one time the lingua franca of the city-state? In other words, is it the composite word Maqcadul Shah, meaning 'the headquarters of the Shah'? Does its local name Xamar define a city built on 'red sand'? Or does the red colour implicit in the word Xamar refer to a people of reddish hue?

Myself, I find it fascinating that there are arguments and counter-arguments and claims and counter-claims about the history of the city to the extent that we cannot shrug any of them off, nor accept any at face value. However, if there is one thing of which we are absolutely certain, it is that the relationship between the urbophiles and the pastoralists was a vexed one, regardless of whether we think of the sixteenth century or the 1991 sacking. In both sackings, what took the cosmopolitan communities several hundred years to build was destroyed in a very short time by the invading hordes of pastoralists and borderline city-dwellers, both groups being hostile to the cultural *mélange* of the city.

The 1991 sacking was more destructive, because by then Mogadiscio had become the factotum-state of a nation, and all the country's available resources were poured into it. But it was similar in important ways to the city's sixteenth-century precursor, because it too was a city-state set apart from the austere cultural landscape of the country surrounding it, a cosmopolitan city with a negligible level of administration. So far as most Somalis were concerned, the power inherent in the city was invested in people who were alien to them, 'foreigners' of a kind and elitists at that. Perhaps what the warlords and their irregular armies managed to destroy in Somalia was not the infrastructure of the city, of which there was very little, or the foundation of the state, of which there was hardly any worth saving. Rather, they destroyed the spirit of a place like Tamarind Market, murdering the people who ran it, chasing out those who frequented it, in short demolishing the idea of cosmopolitanism.

In my most recent visit to Mogadiscio, I was at a loss for words when I saw what had become of the Tamarind Market, a place of carnage. For me, there was a cause to mourn: the murder of the cosmopolitan spirit of the Market. In its place, another market to serve the needs of a city now largely emptied of cosmopolitans has been created: the Bakhaaraha Market. At this newly established 'Market of Silos', for that is how its name translates, market forces prevail, and 'the clan' reigns supreme. It is the height of a nation's tragedy when those who pillaged and therefore destroyed a city's way of life are allowed to turn murder into profit. Militarised capitalism is on the ascendancy, and the idea of cosmopolitanism is dead and buried.

The destruction of the Tamarind Market augurs badly if, like me, you've invested in the metaphoric truth implicit in the notion of Tamarind, an evergreen tree of the pea family, native to tropical Africa. The seeds of the edible fruit are embedded in the pulp of the tamarind, which is of soft brown or reddish black consistency, and used in foods as much as in medicines. Not so the Bakhaaraha Market. To me, a silo suggests an entity that takes pride in its separateness, intolerant, parasitic and unproductive.