

CONFESSIONS OF A NEW COVERT TO THE GERI-KOOMBO CLAN-FAMILY

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This is the story of my recent dramatic, almost mystical conversion to the noble Geri-Koombo clan-family. What bizarre private agencies of enlightenment and pleasant beneficence that drove me into abandoning my Leelkase kin and embracing the Geri will take a psychiatrist to divine. But before dwelling on my impulsive, inexplicable adoption of the Geri as my new clansmen henceforward, let me cover a few unattended bases.

By any standard of measurement Somalis have, in the matter of clanism and clan allegiance, proven themselves to be a schizophrenic species: on the one hand, if you so much as dare to utter a clan name in a group of multi-clan Somalis, they are liable to be alarmed to the point of hyperventilation: their eyes will begin to dilate and dart about excitedly, expanding at the orbs, their nostrils will fitfully flare up, their teeth will shake animatedly, chattering like the rattle of a lid on a boiling pot, while the mouth, generally, goes gaping idiotically like a she-camel in heat. It is, in other words, a confirmed taboo to intone aloud a clan-name before a clannishly mixed crowd of Somalis.

On the other hand, leave a single clan to themselves, and they are likely to engage in a murderous clan banter, exulting in their rare qualities, while trashing the reputation of other clans and inquiring of each other: how do we loot Reer-Hebel's (thus and such enemy) clan's belongings? (Reer Hebel see baan u bililiqaysanaa?). The mention of a clan publicly, that is, troubles their moral sensibility, while privately "hoostay ga guuxayaan" "privately, they can't help intoning: clan, clan, clan!". What they say does not issue out of what they think but where they are coming from with respect to clan dynamics. If this ain't a case of a split personality, well, I don't know what is!? For example, I chanced the other day on a Somali gentleman—Abukar Maxammad "Garyaqaan" ("He who dispenses justice") Geytaano—on a Toronto Somali TV channel called Todobaadkaan iyo Toronto, or "This Week and Toronto." His demeanor and bearing bespoke a radiance of dignity: he was impeccably suited, and spoke loquacious Somali, brilliantly—and painfully—articulating a moving tale—that of the unspeakable oppression inflicted upon his people by a predatory cluster of alien-clan invaders. Mr. Garyaqaan told a stomach-turning story of a people denuded of their all—everything they owned: their territory occupied, their corner of the river taken, their farm homesteads confiscated,

their able-bodied men slaughtered, their livestock seized, their maato (the weak and helpless) driven into the wilderness and hunted down, the elders rounded up, corralled and burned alive, the fasting(Sooman) matrons raped en mass. Throughout his tale of terrors—and this is the telling point above—he only once mentioned by name the identity of the victims of these atrocities as the Biyamaal clan in an interview of forty-five minutes; while he never identified the clan names of the perpetrators of these crimes, No, he would not name names publicly. It is a taboo do so. Still, most Somalis know the clan name of these murderous thugs (Parenthetically, the parliamentarian, singer and social pundit, Sucaado Cali, is alleged to have been gunned down last week, cowardly and in cold blood, because she dared, bravely, to denounce in parliament the persecution of the Biyamaal. As is always the case with the vagaries of human existence, she paid for her bravery with life and limb).

Having gotten the above load off my chest, with clannishness towards all, and patriotism towards none, I hereby break my vow of Omerta—a venerable mafia appellation meaning “Code of Silence”—and herewith renounce my membership in the Leelkase clan cohort in favor of the “Great Commonwealth” of the Geri-Koombo clan-family. No doubt this boiling perfidious betrayal of the Leelkase will earn me the vituperative wrath of my former kinsmen, branding me a quisling, a traitor, a deceitful good-for-nothing, a shameless, self-serving opportunist and a doer of treasonable deeds against his kith and kin—the noble Leelkase! Still, they are unlikely to move against me physically, thanks to the Bald Eagle, Uncle Sam’s insignia that insures my protection. Hence, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Against all odds, I am particularly attracted to two outstanding features of the vast “planetary pull” of Geri-Koombism: First, the Geri remain one of the few Somali clans that can be said to have a history, thanks to the Geri chronicles recorded in [First Footsteps in East Africa](#) by the romantic/eccentric globe-trotting Richard (later Sir) Burton. In 1854, the British explorervisited the Somali coast all the way to the ancient emporium of Harar. (En passant, the claim that attributes history exclusively to the Geri, on the face of it, may sound a nonsensical, arbitrary assertion, prompting the repartee that since all Somalis have a common origin in a single founding ancestor, the so-called Samaale, all Somalis must surely have an equal stretch of history. This is a mere specious objection, and seems to me to be based on a misunderstanding of the term “history.” Why do we speak of, say, the country of Egypt as having a long history, while sub-Saharan Africans, including the Somalis, as possessing practically none? Indeed, does not the whole of humanity descend from Zinjanthropus, the African Ape-man, and therefore own equal tenure on the earth? The answer: because Egypt’s is a written record

extending back all the way to the pharaoh Menes --also known as Narmarke--who unified the two Lands of Egypt in 3100 B.C., i.e., Upper and Lower Egypt—with the cobra as the royal emblem of Upper Egypt and falcon as that of the Lower. By contrast, sub-Saharan Africans, with the exception of Ethiopia and the East African Swahili coast, show no evidence of having had an alphabet, and therefore no writing; so precious little is known of how they chanced upon the earth! Well, so much for the excited effusions of a pretender to history who can't resist any opportunity to cogitate about the field).

Be that as it may, Burton in the course of his travels in Zayla', Geriland and Harar, reports his hair-raising adventures among wild Somali clans. This began with his arrival in Zayla' (1854), disguised as a Muslim merchant, al-Hajj Abdullah. Such was his command of Arabic and mastery of the niceties of Islamic theology and doctrines that he conned the pious Muslim denizens of Zayla' into appointing him as their prayer-leading Imam. No mastery, however adroit its masterfulness, can let you get you away with a con-manship forever. Something will not fit the cut sooner rather than later, because, surely, the con job will catch up with you by and by; and so it was with the British globe-trotter. According to legend, Burton was found in a wood shed nearby to the mosque urinating, while standing!--something no practicing Muslim would do. Eventually, he was forced to flee from the port of Berbera with a ghastly gash on his jaw, pursued by Somali spearmen! (Note: the same legend is recounted about his impostor/adventures in the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina. Which legend proves true remains to be discovered).

To return to the account of Geri-Koombism, Burton gives an excellent teach-in on the ways of the Geri in and around the Agajin hills, of which the Maraar plains are the prime real estate. Unlike the Allah-cursed dry burning sands of Mudugh and the parching wilds of Ogaadeen country (especially Qarri-Jaqood), in both of which I tried a career in camel-herding, Agajin and surrounding lands are, by the standards of Somali climate, the envy of the earth. The latter is a place of plenty—herds of camels and cattle galore, flocks of sheep and goats, flowering farm homesteads, the Garad and Garada, attended by their slaves and domestic servants. (As an aside, it may be pointed out that Emperor Minilik alone, in one go, gave the Garad an estimated one hundred slaves hauled off from southern Ethiopia. Royalty largesse to royalty, noblesse oblige). The Garad, or the Chief of the clan, and the Garadah or Chieftainess, elders and senior notables lived the good life, in ease and comfort and they “indulged.”—interpret as you choose the sense of the word “indulged” here.

Burton estimated the fighting numerical strength of the Geri, as he put it, at “5,000 spears” (circa 1854), the warrenleh or spear-bearers. Now if you guess the section of spear-bearers a quarter of the population, you arrive, in a somewhat unscientific reckoning, at 20,000 souls. If you calculate a 10% increase per annum since the middle of the 19th century, but also allow for losses to drought and warfare, including Minilik’s and Haile Selassie’s raids that hauled off thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, you may arrive roughly at 100,000 living Gerians today. Add this to my recent conversion to the clan, and you have 100,001. So I swelled Geri numbers, roughly, by 1/10 of 1%,--not an insignificant achievement for this renegade former son of the Leelkase! Thus, the formula yields 1/10 of 1%x100,000=100,001. If this algebra confuses you, it is intended to do so! Confusion serves as the handmaiden of creativity, inventiveness and ever increasing knowhow. Look at Sigmund Freud: confusion, if not cocaine, inhabited his soul as a second nature.

The second inimitably meritorious Geri quality relates to their name: it harks back to pre-Islamic times when Somalis, like other sub-Saharans, were TOTEMIC—that is, being named for your animal alter ego, the animal that inhabits your collective soul. Totemism is a widespread phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. The Baganda of Buganda, for example, today consist of 22 totemic tribes, with each tribe’s alter-ego animal ranging from the elephant, to the water buffalo, to the rat clan, to the crocodile, etc. Even with the Somalis, despite the corrosive effect of Islam on paganism, you still sense a residue of totemism in such names as Geri, Biciidyahan, Cawl-yahan, Ugaar-yahan, etc. And when it comes to elegance of appearance, no clan can come near the Geri in good looks, especially the females: towering height, stately, noble of bearing and copper-colored like the animal they are named for—yummy! That is why I converted to Geri-Koombism, as well as, why Brigadier-General Smith, of all the Somali matrons he had access to, chose a Geri Beauty. To use a Britishism, one could declaim : “old man Smith knew beauty when he saw one!” (To digress for a moment, I used to clerk in the late 1960s for the veteran Somali diplomat, Omar ‘Arte Ghalib, during his stint as ambassador to the court of the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Arte stood impressively with a breathlessly winsome physique: a strapping 6’/6”, reddish copper hair parted gingerly on the side, he walked the earth like a colossus; Abyssinian lasses, including Haile Selassie’s royal progeny, used to faint at his feet. Only later did I learn that he had a Geri mother).

Geri Beauties, alas! Or could I have gotten it wrong? Could it be, perhaps, that bloody little Machiavellian, Faisal A. Roble, managed to trick me into taking up a Koombism identity? At any rate, I stand now in dreadful trepidation of the coming Leelkase reactive fury at my abandonment of their ranks. Perhaps it won’t be worse than that of the then

young cameraman, Awes Ahmed(?), a Leelkase loyalist who, upon reading the account of my encounter with the late Leelkase warrior one, Abdisamad, showed up at my office one day along with others. Awes, sly and soft-spoken, approached as spokesman for the others. “Uncle, Said,” said the smooth-talking Awes, “May I bring up a Somali allegory?”

“Yes, go on,” I said, somewhat intrigued.

“The allegory has it that, once upon a time, a young Somali woman gave birth to a deaf and dumb boy.” Awes grinned rascally and continued, “For years the distraught hapless mother made sacrifices and prayed to Allah to give her only son the faculty of speech. Allah obliged! and in due course at 25, the boy opened his mouth: The first words that came out of his mouth intoned: ‘Hooyo...’ too raw to finish off the sentence, which doesn’t matter because most Somalis are conversant with the risqué fable. “The totally flummoxed mother, said,” Awes added smoothly:

“Ilaahow iga aamuse.” “O God, shut up his mouth again, quickly.” Awes smiled mischievously and said, “For years, we’ve been praying to Allah to open up your mouth with a view to showing in your writings and speeches the great merits of the Leelkase. You finally opened up your mouth on the Leelkase in your back-and-forth with Abdisamad. Well, now maybe we should pray to Allah to have you cease and desist from commenting on the Leelkase!” I was encouraged that he did not say, “For God to shut you up.” Awes is too polite and gentle to say the latter! I now put before you, witnesses, an extract of the commentary that generated so much ill will among my former kinsmen. Those of you who read it a score years ago could use some refreshment; those who haven’t, are in for some amusement:

A LEELKASE CAPTAIN AHAB

As a product of the literary imagination, Captain Ahab is the major protagonist in Melville's novel Moby Dick, the classic work often cited as ushering in the coming of age of American literature. At once diabolical and ambition-crazed, Ahab is the poetic archetypal figure representing Western Europe's lust for power, glory and gain--in short for conquest. He is descended, fictionally and spiritually, from the incomparable Dr. Faust, as well, the literary creation of the German playwright, Goethe. In a memorable scene in Goethe's play, Dr. Faust makes a historic bargain with Lucifer, dean of the satanic host, in which he offers his soul to the devil in return for the devil's grant to him of mastery over the world. Hence, the famous scriptural cautionary tale, "for what will it

profit a man if he shall gain the whole world but lose his soul," does not resonate with Dr. Faust. He would gladly relinquish his soul to hell for the conquest of the globe.

Dr. Faust and Captain Ahab are one and the same in spirit and imagery portraying the satanic side of the West that catapulted Europeans not only into a 500-year global hegemony enslaving, colonizing and ruthlessly exploiting the nations of Africa and Asia but also installing their absolute open season on the world, pillaging, raping and ravishing everywhere they went, leaving it desolate and devastated.

Unlike the physically wholesome Dr. Faust, Ahab is a cripple with a wooden leg, a withered arm and a host of other assaults on his body sustained in the course of life-time of pursuing the elusive white whale through the high seas. His body may be battered but his spirit is indomitable. It was therefore a matter of unforgettable astonishment to encounter a latter-day Captain Ahab in Seattle, Washington, April 5, 1994. His real name is Abdusamad, ethnically a Leelkase and therefore my own kinsman. Let me say at the outset that the likening of Abdusamad to Captain Ahab in the ensuing remarks is only metaphorical and that there is no intention to call my kinsman a devil. If anything he struck me, when in his best mood, as a gentleman's gentleman; still, he did radiate a lot of Ahab-like characteristics which call for comment. In the crazy crisscrossing quilt of ethnicities that make up Somali society, the Leelkase are composed of a small clan of mullahs (my kinsmen are likely to disown me for saying this) constituting a sub-lineage of the Daarood clan-family. There are tantalizing bits and pieces of evidence that suggest the Leelkase to have been almost completely wiped out in a massacre that occurred in some ancient, prehistoric time. For example, there are hills of human skeletons in eastern Somalia that are called "Lafa-Tanade," or the "Bones of the Tanade,"--Tanade being another name for the Leelkase. Who massacred them and why will probably never be known. In order to survive, the solitary remnants of the Leelkase then turned to religion, permanently leaving the struggle for material power and influence to larger clans. To paraphrase Professor I. M. Lewis, where Somalis fail to acquire power in the physical world, they seek it in the spiritual. Another name for the Leelkase is Xer, literally "Qur'anic disciples." They often specialized in setting up catechistic Qur'anic centers throughout Somalia teaching the diin, or religion, solemnizing marriages and receiving, in return, gifts (siyaaro) of livestock and tokens of honor from the host clans. It appears that in their role as wadaads(men of religion) and fiqihs (scholars of sacred law) the Leelkase prospered and multiplied in numbers; for by the middle of the century they took to trusting more to the sword than to the diin. They got into various and sundry feuds to the east with 'Umar Mohamuud Majeerteen and to the west with the Habar Gidir Hawiye. It was in a particularly lethal feud with the 'Umar Mohamuud in 1964-5 that Abdusamad,

my Captain Ahab, enters into history as a legendary warrior, leading a Leelkase militia to fight off the powerful 'Umar Mohamuud to a standstill (this is the Leelkase version; the 'Umar Mohamuud claim they stopped short of finishing off the Leelkase for fear of divine retribution). Whatever the true version of events, the Leelkase came out of this feud with renewed confidence in their capacity to defend themselves by the sword. Abdusamad apparently played a major part in the Leelkase holding their own. And so it was he who, shortly after this feud, triumphantly boasted in a poetic couplet:

“Allow iyo aayadii ka baxno
Afdiinlaan ku aarsanaynaa.”

“We, the Leelkase have ceased and desisted from our vain pleas to Allah for protection, Instead we now employ the gun to avenge our dead!”

Those who served with him describe him as a warrior's warrior whose tactical maneuvers in the field can only be matched by his death-defying bravery: he was left for dead at least once, his entire body is polka-dotted with bullet marks, his right leg blown off by a bazoka blast and his arm withered like a stunted branch. One should imagine that a man with so many assaults on his body would permanently quit warring. Not Abdusamad. When clannish violence broke out in earnest in the collapse of the state in early 1991, he was at the head of a Leelkase militia duelling it out with Habar Gidir militia. The Leelkase claim(a claim which is more of a boast than substance) that they have single-handedly driven the Habar Gidir from their grazing grounds in Mudugh province into Benaadir province where the latter under General Aydiid have wreaked havoc, variously, on the Abgaal, Hawaadle, Murursade and Rahanwayn.

Again Abdusamad was hit, this time in the head with one eye shot off and the forehead re-arranged from the effect of flying shrapnel. How he ended up in Seattle remains a mystery, but there he was all right that morning when I arrived at the shiny lecture hall of Seattle Pacific University to deliver a talk to rosy-cheeked American students. The gist of my lecture was to try to put a semblance of logic on the Somali muddle to a mildly bemused roomful of Americans, wondering why their boys got killed in a distant and savage place called Somalia. The audience's questions during discussion bore a striking resemblance to Chancellor Bismarck's near the end of the nineteenth century: when asked to provide fresh troops for the conquest of New Guinea, the Iron Chancellor replied with characteristic bluntness, "New Guinea head-hunters are not worthy of the healthy bones of one Prussian grenadier!" Was Somalia worth the healthy bones of one American Ranger?

After the lecture Abdusamad was introduced by three other Leelkases as the "General." The General? This withered shade? I reflected. We drove to a five-star hotel in downtown Seattle. The car parked, we got out and when he attempted to walk, he wheezed and rattled and shuffled, dragging the wooden leg after the other. I began to see that half his body was made up of wooden supports, the original organs having been blasted off by steel. Our waitress was a luscious blonde with radiant skin and sumptuous eyes whose comings and goings coupled with imagination served to whet the appetite. The lunch (which one of the Leelkases paid for) was not, as it turned out, the point of our gathering; it was in fact a ruse designed to rough me up by Captain Ahab aka Abdusamad. As soon as we were seated, he rounded on me with the one working eye sparkling. Said he:

"Are you a man with xiniinyoo (balls)?" More disoriented than annoyed by the forwardness of his manners, I said, "Pardon me!" He learned the tone of irritation in those two words, for he stammered and said with less force:

"We Leelkases have proven our fighting capabilities in the recent explosion of clan warfare that followed Siad Barre's fall. We do not initiate fights, but when fights are forced upon us, we punish mightily; every clan that picked up a quarrel with us came to regret it. We vanquished--" he rattled off a series of clan names, and tapped vigorously on the wooden leg with the edge of his palm, and by God, it was hollowed out and had the reverberating acoustics of a durbaan, or drum! Did he do this for effect to freak me out?

I said, "Enough. I do not want to hear the gory details of one bloody tribal skirmish after another." He said, "Do you know the new names of the Leelkase, as a result of our prowess in the recent feuds?"

I said I did not.

He said, "One name is gaas-dhagoole," which may be translated as the "deaf legion."

I said, "Why gaas-dhagoole?"

He said, "Because once the Leelkase take up the field, they become deaf as to the rumble of shells. When in action we become deaf and mute to death. We defy death, knowing this mortal body can go but once." This reminded me of Julius Caesar's legendary

cogitations on life and death: "Cowards die many times but the valiant never taste of death but once." By all the stars, when Caesar made those words famous he had just vanquished the Iberian peninsula and Gaul, the name then for the territories now making up France, Switzerland, half of Germany and all the lands adjacent to the English Channel, thus making possible the conquest of Britain by the lame emperor Claudius. In other words, Caesar would die in the forging of empires, reducing cities and compelling nations to bow before him; whereas my kinsman would glorify death in a senseless, soap-opera-like, endless and purposeless cycle of tribal violence.

"Really?" I said, incredulously.

"When we take to the field," the shade continued, "we would not abandon it, come what may. We'd die to the last man."

"In that case," I said, "count me out."

"Are you a coward?"

"Pardon me!"

One of the others interrupted with some gratuitous remark designed to provide comic relief. Captain Ahab started off again, "Do you know what the other name is?"

I said, "Indulge me."

He said, "Darbe-Daarood," which translates as: "the Daarood Wall." "Because," he said, squinting the one serviceable eye, "when the Daarood were in desperate trouble on all sides in the recent wars, it was we who stood between them and other clans." "Ask the Warsangali [another Daarood sub-clan]," he continued, "to confirm the truth of what I am saying. It was they who dubbed us, 'the Daarood Wall,' in grateful recognition of our defending role."

The luscious white chick returned to clear the table; kids (white and black) toyed on the electronic Star Wars box. The jacuzzi fountains made plangent caressing sounds. The people, the streets, the cars, the lights--the city hummed outside. And here we were four Leelkases engaged in a cosmological clan discourse. This was surreal, I thought.

Captain Ahab continued to harass me. Said he, "We are as good in peace as in war. Because we are men of religion, we deal honestly with others. We do not double-talk. Our word is as good as faith itself." Ahab paused, wheezing; then began again, "We'd prefer to have our necks cut off than break our word. That is why," the serviceable eye glistened, "we are universally trusted by all other clans. There is a great future for us in Somalia as power brokers, if not power holders in the country."

"A great future for us in Somalia!" I could hardly believe I heard what I had heard. "Maledetto te, pazzo," I cursed in Italian under my breath. Fortunately for my skin, knowledge of Italian did not number in his satanic C.V., otherwise he would surely have bounced on me, wooden limbs and all!

"Now, as for you," the shade opened up again, "We need you. Are you going to play an honorable role in this future? Are you going to lend us your academic thing and international contacts? Are you going to join us?" He gave me a look that froze me, making me feel creepy all over. "Are you going to be part of us, or simply satisfied to fatten off of American food stamps?"

"The sucker," I cursed again. "Does he think I am on the dole?"

He must have noticed my angry scowl, for at this he began to let up, warming up to me and judging it necessary to inform me, "The Fiqih Ismaa'il [my own sub-branch of the Leelkase] have always demonstrated qualities of leadership in the clan." What was he buttering up to me for? There was no way of knowing, because he broke off and went into a trance (he was also suffering from Khat withdrawals), spewing out a stream of primeval monologue, half poetry, half singsong, mumbling the words:

"Alla waan hawoonayoo, alla hawa na haysa, ee."

"Alas, ambition—ambition stirs in us, ambition--ambition we seek."

Back in my hotel room, I transcribed the outlines of the visit into my diary. Then I was assailed with one impulse and two thoughts. The impulse:: this wraith of a man whose broken frame is pitted through and through with the mark of steel, only the one eye remaining whole of his entire body, and yet so animated, so lively, so resilient, his spirit so indomitable. The Somali civil war was not overabundant with examples of valiance in its purest essence, but this one was courage personified. I was awed! To paraphrase Mark Anthony on the slain Brutus, "All the elements unite to say this was truly a man."

But my awe, even admiration was thoroughly dissipated by my growing scorn for his mad ambition. I learned by and by that he came to the U.S. on a refugee asylum program, that he was resettled in Seattle to start up a new life, that his needs in shelter, food and medication were met by American generosity, the cost of his upkeep being split between the state of Washington and the Federal Government. As such, one should suppose that with this largesse, he'd settle and end out his remaining days in peace and tranquility, living off America's kindness, gazing blissfully on the busty, leggy blondes that populate the swank avenues of Seattle. No, his heart was not in these but in "ambition" and thoughts of "a great future" in Somalia! What a mad son of a gun! If the whole world were offered to him on a silver platter, what good would this do him, given that he is so wasted? How could he, in the broken condition of his body, savor the ease, the comfort and delights of power, to say nothing of coping with its cares--this apparition of re-arranged wood and mended skeleton? “

It appears that the Leelkase got exercised over my referencing them as a “Small clan of Mullahs.” In Somali eyes power rests on the numerical strength of your clan, that is, the number of spears—nowadays Ak 47s—that you can bring to the field. But with technology, this is passé. Look at the 5 million Israelis lording it over 300 million Arabs.

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