

Art-centered community building, knowledge production & sharing platform: The Hargeysa International Book Fair

by Tirsit Yetbarek



Introduction

After the devastating civil war Somaliland faced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the need to rebuild all institutions even to the level of rebuilding homes was a daunting task the community had to focus on. The nation had lost both its human and infrastructural elements by aerial bombardment of the then Somali Republic government state apparatus. The capital city Hargeysa was literally flattened to the ground (War-torn Societies Project', (2005); Bradbury, (2008); Kaplan, (2008)). The efforts after reclaiming independence in May 1991 were invested in the rebuilding of the social, political, and economic situation of the country. The effort was a successful experience that brought a functional homegrown government system and government, political stability, and hopes for community-led development. While this macro-level nation and community development granted transition, aspects of the social fabrics such as the cultural and artistic social elements were not given as much attention as they deserved. It was well understood that it was not the priority at that turn of the national situation but it was also important to make sure the central cultural identity is not lost in the making.

The concern was pressing as the efforts of rebuilding the nation came after the mass migration and foreign destination of the leading artists who were the voices of the community in the nationally praised literary act mainly poetry. The fact that the community had to migrate to all corners of the world exposed the people to different cultures and ways of life. This has interplayed in the concern and the need to capitalize on what defined the community before the tragic civil war. It is in this aspiration of preserving the identity, art, and culture of the community along with the belief that “art and culture is what makes a society human”, initiatives were started by concerned Somalilanders in the diasporas. Among these initiatives that became successful and managed to lead the centralization of art and culture in Somaliland is the Redsea Cultural Foundation which was established in 2001 and gave birth to the Hargeysa International Book Fair, which has become the biggest art and cultural festival in the Horn of Africa, and Hargeysa Cultural Center which is now a permanent space for social debate and cultural performance (Economist (2019), Anglo-Somali Society Journal (2019).



While the Redsea Foundation started its activism and service through a printing press in Italy using the publishing house of Ponte Invisibile, the Hargeysa Cultural Center built itself in Somaliland Hargeysa starting in 2004 by practically campaigning for the restoration, preservation, and promotion of the art and culture of the society along with creating space for reading for social development physically in the community. It also envisioned using art and culture as a means to rebrand and keep Somaliland on the world map through the soft diplomacy of the cul-

tural festival where the Hargeysa International Book Fair become the channel.

The Hargeysa International Book Fair and The Hargeysa Cultural Center

As indicated in the introduction, the birth of the two pillars; Hargeysa International Book Fair and the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, came as a response to the fear of losing the Somali art and cultural expressions such as poetry and theatre due to the destruction that forced the community to refuge including the leading artists. The need to see seeds of identity preservation and place the nation on the global map facilitated the realization of the mission. Currently, The Hargeysa Cultural Centre runs the Hargeysa International Book Fair, a Research and knowledge development Institute, and the Redsea online publishing.

I was one of the fortunate who is in Italy and found both the time and privilege to fully become conversant with the world around me and the drastic changes being brought about by the dynamic development of science and technology. I was imbued with the deep conviction that only by moving from oral culture to a culture based on reading and writing can the Somali society recover its identity, preserve its history and keep pace with the rapidly changing world. (From an upcoming book by Dr. Jama Musse Jama, 2022)

In 2014, Redsea Cultural Foundation (RCF), the institution that initiated the Hargeysa International Book Fair (HIBF) in 2008, felt the need to make a permanent hub for Somali culture, and with the partnership of Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and with the support of European Union (EU), established the Hargeysa Culture Centre (HCC). The main aim of the Centre was to promote the culture of reading and writing and foster a culture of tolerance through reading among the young generation of Somalilanders and create an enabling space for the youth and wider society to have a platform for discussion and expressing themselves. The Centre targeted youth and women intentionally, but because of the political situation of the country (i.e. unrecognized), it turned out to be the flagship interface for the international community to connect to Somaliland and vice versa. It became an open window for the young to the world, but also for the international community to engage with Somaliland people when political restrictions do not allow direct engagement with the government. This has made a significant

impact as so many people identified Somaliland with the Book Festival and the Cultural Centre, and vice versa (The Economist (2018), The Guardian, (2019))

The aim of the Centre hence is, on the one hand, to foster internally a strong cohesion among the sectors of a fragmented society (intergenerationally, gender-wise, economically, and in terms of class, through unhealed, post-conflict traumas, etc.) to nurture and cultivate just, democratic, tolerant and enabling spaces that release full intellectual and spiritual capacities. As the lack of space for discourse and interaction creates a poverty of thought, well-being, and personal development, the Centre provokes young people to learn, to allow themselves to acquire their own space, and not to infringe on the space of others. On the other hand, the aim of the Centre is to connect an otherwise isolated society to the rest of the world by showcasing its art and heritage by inviting visiting artists and scholars via cultural and artistic exchanges.

Prior to having the permanent physical space of the HCC located now, Hargeysa International Book Fair come into existence in 2008 enabling the first physical gathering of the community to celebrate art and culture at a rented space in Hargeysa. At the start, the initiative was surrounded by many questions including the relevance and if it is even realistic for such initiatives for a community that has had so many pressing issues. This was a well-understood context even by the organizers but it had its long vision of planting the seeds for tomorrow's big tree that shades the identity, culture, and social fabrics of the community.

After many years and effort in the diaspora, it culminated in the inception of the Hargeysa International Book Fair in 2008, in Somaliland; but our aim was much more than what the name simply suggested – an exhibition of books for mere commercial purposes, for our society had

no money and did not even value books. Art, culture and books were certainly not a priority, and to most seemed even a little crazy, but we strongly believed that in the short term, arts and culture could help with the recovery and healing of our society and in the long term be truly instrumental in the cultural transformation of the semi-literate Somali society. (Excerpt taken from an upcoming book by Dr. Jama, 2022)

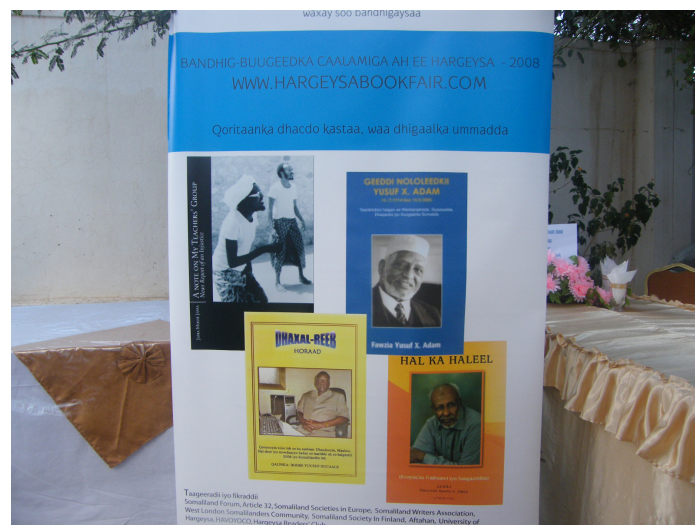
This fear of not being a timely matter and might not even work was also shared by people like Dr. Edna Adan, the patron of the Hargeysa International Book Fair. Dr. Edna has shared her reservations at the beginning days stating that; “a book fair in

Hargeisa? Who would come?” (Dr. Edna Adan, 2015 at Hargeysa International Book Fair) She as a patron now is an ambassador to the event speaking that it has defied all thoughts and become a true space of internal and external coexistence. The consistency in hosting the Fair with an ever-increasing number is a testimony for the call to have the

festival was a well-tough action. In gross numbering, it can be said the book fair so far had more than 70,000 people engaged as indicated in the Yearly reports of the Center.

The book fair has set its own structure for the events. Two of the main elements are the theme of the year and the Guest country. The theme of the year sets the main discussion point of each year's Book Fair. The first fair had the theme of Freedom in 2008 followed by censorship in 2009. The remaining themes up to now included Citizenship, (2010) Collective Memory, (2011), Visualizing the future, (2012), Journey, (2013), Imagination, (2014) Spaces, (2015), Leadership & Creativity, (2016), Wisdom, (2017), Connectivity, (2018) Coexistence, (2019), COVID19, (2020), Neighborhood, (2021) and Solidarity for 2022.

The Guest country format mainly follows the theme of the year and brings representatives from the country selected for the year to highlight the relationship and sharing of what makes the guest country unique. It also is a



way to inform the guest country representatives who in most cases are artists who have a wider influence in their countries, so that they can become an ambassador for Somaliland by sharing their experience at the Book Fair. The guest countries hence have been, Djibouti, Malawi, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Rwanda, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Senegal for this year. The guest countries are all from Africa since the festival wants to stand in harmony with the Pan-African ideology of stronger continental cultural and community relations that will foster better development and coexistence. This ideology is not limited to the invitation of guest countries but also it is manifested in the collaborative work the center has with other literary festivals. The partnership includes but not limited to African literary events including StoryMoja (Kenya), Kwani?(Kenya), Writivism (Uganda), AMLA Network (Continental level), Music In Africa Connects (South Africa), as well as non-Africa-based African literary network including Africa Writes (UK) and African Book Festival (Berlin). The most notable partnership is the one with the annual Somali Week Festival held in the UK, which enables to bring representatives of local Somali artistic productions including books, music, and paintings as well as their producers to the UK to participate in the week-long events and get international exposure to the Somali Diaspora community and their host countries.

Academic Role of the Center and the Hargeysa International Book Fair

The Cassette Archive

While creating a permanent space for cultural and art promotion, HCC has enabled the preservation of not only the contemporary cultural art production in all forms but it also has become a depository for the past productions especially those which are no more in circulation. For instance, the Centre's role in the preservation and promotion of Somali music by building an archive with more than 14000 cassettes collection that has diverse historical, traditional, and other significant sound collections is a major knowledge store and production tool. 4000 of these cassettes were already scrutinized and cataloged and the digitation process is ongoing. This collection has served in the production of contemporary written and audio-visual documents such as the "Sweet as broken dates" label produced by Ostinato Records (USA) in 2017, which is one of the typical examples of the many contributions the sound collection provided. Scholars in

contemporary art and humanities use the music archive regularly. The archive is also part of the digitalized sound archive that is the base for the translation, academic articles, and also references to the change in the music pattern and industry. Dr. Christian Woolner has done her Ph.D. research using this archive (Christina, 2016).

The great contribution of the Centre in terms of music is also exhibited in the grand project of Qaarami songs project the Centre implemented in 2018 and has evolved into the establishment of the Muusdanbeed, a council of Somaliland prominent artists, poets, and musicians in the traditional Somali songs. Providing space for the young musicians during the book fair, and specially arranged events for their performance is a major part of the activities in the music sector.

Manuscripts Research and Preservation

Another prominent contribution to the academics and preservation of indigenous knowledge is through the research and collection of manuscripts. The center has more than 198 rare manuscript collections which are a primary source for ongoing research regarding the cultural and religious development in the region and in the nation, which has not been yet utilized. The digitalization process along with the academic articles to be published based on this available national treasure is something the Centre sets as an assurance for the maintenance and preservation. The research and collecting of manuscripts now extend to the Horn of Africa. An academic discussion by leading Islamic and manuscript researchers is a constant panel structure for the Book Fair. The maps collection is also a rare collection that is helping in informing concrete historical developments in nationhood and border-based identity formation.



Academic Dialogue in Hargeysa (ADIH)

Academic Dialog in Hargeysa (ADIH) is a discussion platform run by the Hargeysa Cultural center that also brings

the experts pool for the academic panels taking place during the Hargeysa International Book Fair. This has been a major part of the center's activity starting in 2017. The aim of the dialogue platform was initially to be a networking platform for researchers in Somaliland and also for researchers coming to the region to do research on Somaliland and the region of the Horn of Africa in general. The platform had 71 presentations by researchers mainly at a PhD level. It was a physical presentation and discussion system until the covid-19 pandemic forced to change it to a virtual engagement, especially in 2020 and 2021. In late 2021 and 2022 after the global restriction for public gathering is lifted, it went back to its physical gathering but kept also the virtual platform as it has created a technology-assisted togetherness beyond space limitation. The series Africa 40&40 which covered academically the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was a bigger part of the center's regional and global contribution. Currently, the platform is run as a hybrid of virtual and physical gathering to share knowledge and develop the co-creation of knowledge between south-south and South-North researchers.

Bibliography of Somali Studies (BOSS)

Bibliography of Somali Studies is a comprehensive online system meant for the scholars and researchers of the field of Somali Studies to browse and the aim of BOSS is to offer an open-access database, containing indexed bibliographic data of Somali Studies. The bibliography is established to help scholars and researchers in the field of Somali Studies to browse books, articles, reports, and conference proceedings relevant to their research projects. BOSS is planned to produce an electronic annotated bibliography of the Somali Studies field. So far the database has more than 1693 authors, a 1964 bibliography, and 645 subjects, and these subjects are divided as such; 133 books, 1637 articles, 68 chapters, 26 general, 73 theses, and finally 15 conference proceedings. (HCC archive, 2022).

Pre-HIBF courses

One other developed feature of the center and the Book Fair which is partly academics but also has its leg in the art and cultural preservation is the pre- Book Fair courses. Organizing courses in the knowledge and skill-sharing schema of the center has enabled the organizing of more than 15 courses in partnership with regional and



international institutions. Courses such as Library management are provided in collaboration with Information Africa a Kenya-based knowledge management institution, the Oral History research methods are organized in collaboration with Rift Valley institute and South Sudan University, and the Summer Lab Urban Development workshop training in collaboration with University College London, and the Academic and Creative writings in English in collaboration with Bristol and Exeter universities are once that are delivers with international and regional partners.

While these have been significant knowledge and skill-sharing courses, the most significant ones that are addressing the mission of transforming the community from the oral to the writing and reading culture is the Creative writing in Somali training given every year as a pre-HIBF activity. The training has been there for 10 years led by the most prominent Somali scholars such as the late Seid Hussein Jama, Macalin Said Salah, Rashid Gedweyane, Sh. Mohammud Shakh Dalamar. This course has enabled the creation of local young authors who are producing books both in Somali and English. In the 15 years of the Book Fair, more than 300 local books are produced. Every year the number of training participants increased the last one being 175 participants in 2021. The trainers also have grown in number by bringing talented young Somalilanders to be leading trainers through the years. This includes Mona Omer, a female Somali art and culture writer, and blogger. The impact of the creative writing in Somali also in turn also facilitated the establishment of a printing industry that was not in place in the first years of the book fair history. Currently, there are at least three publishing houses in Somaliland; Saganjet, Hill Press, Color Zone and Sahan Books.

Conclusion

The Hargeysa International Book Fair and the Hargeysa Cultural Center illustrate the possibility of creating a public space and leading a literary movement that will be owned and nurtured by the community it stands to serve. It is an example of a well-executed mission that lived for its vision of being a safe space for discussion at all levels, a place for cross-generational knowledge sharing, transmission, and preservation. has become a public space for discussion, knowledge sharing, preservation, and dissemination. The stages it has evolved from being a small gathering to a fully flagged institution leading research, capacity building, and democratic value development attest to its well-grounded long-term plan. The Book Fair has served its mission of being a window for the nation to engage with the wider world and for the world to see through a nation that wouldn't have been visible as the global space prefers recognized entities. Most importantly, the Book Fair has become a soft diplomacy tool with consistent delivery of pan-African-centered themes and guest countries. The unintended impact of the Book Fair which is multiplying its feature beyond the national border is another important contribution it has made. Currently, there are 6 regional book fairs with a similar mission of bringing the community together to discuss social issues, celebrate art and culture and produce knowledge. Few to mention are the Mogadishu International Book Fair, Jigjiga International Book Fair and the Rwanda Book Fair are among the list. The continental mission can also be considered an enabler for the envisioned regional and continental integration. It can be concluded that the Book Fair and the Centre are as stated beyond the name and serve a higher purpose that needs to be given due attention to replicate with contextualization and capitalize on the soft human aspect of the community.

Tirsit Yetbarek Seme is the research and academic programs director of the Hargeysa Cultural Center. She is also the Host of Academic Dialogue in Hargeysa an academic platform that facilitates networking and knowledge sharing and exchange platform. She comes from a language, literature, journalism, peace and security, and sociolinguistics academic and research background. She is interested in the development and political dynamics of the Horn of Africa. she can be reached at tirsit.yetbarek@redsea-online.org

References

- Anglo-Somali Society Journal (2019) <https://www.anglosomalisociety.org.uk/>
- Christian, W. (2016) *The Labour of Love Songs: Voicing Intimacy in Somaliland*. PhD Dissertation. UK: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge.
- Drysdale (1994). *Peace In Somaliland: An Indigenous Approach to State-Building* Burao, Borama, and Sanaag Conferences. Academy for Peace and Development Hargeisa, Somaliland.
- Kaplan, S. (2008) 'The remarkable story of Somaliland', *Journal Of Democracy*, 19 (3), pp. 143157 [Online]. Available at <http://www.sdwo.com/Somaliland.pdf>
- Mark, B. (2008), *Becoming Somaliland*, Progressio/James Currey, London/Oxford
- Michael, Walls and Steve, Kibble (2011). *Somaliland: Change and Continuity*. http://www.somalilandlaw.com/Somaliland-change_continuity_2011.pdf
- WSP (War-torn Societies Project) International (Ed.). (2005) *Rebuilding Somaliland. Issues and possibilities*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press.