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Tifatire guud / Editor in chief
Dr. Jama Musse Jama, jama@redsea-online.org

*Tifatire xigeen iyo tifatiraha cadadkan / Associate Editor and Guest
Editor of the issue*

Tirsit Yetbarek, tirsit.yetbarek@redsea-online.org

Wakiillada/Country representatives

Ka eeg <http://www.redsea-online.org/dhaxalreeb>

Qoraalka ku socda tifatiraha / Articles to the editor

Email: dhaxalreeb@redsea-online.org

Buugaagta / Books for review
Jama Musse Jama

Via Pietro Giordani 4, 56123 Pisa, Italy or Xarunta Dhaqanka ee
Hargeysa, Sha'ab area, Hargeysa, Somaliland.

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List of contributors

ABDIAZIZ Mahdi Ahmed “Guudcadde” is a student of human psychology, translator and author based in Hargeisa, Somaliland. He studied psychology at Frantz Fanon University, in Hargeysa. He translated some critical literature into Somali, including but not limited to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Dr. Mohamed Aden's *Back to Mogadishu*, Dr. Abdourahman Barkat Good's *Portrait of the New Being*, and many more.

ABDULHAMID Abdulahi Ahmed is a resident scholar at the Hargeysa Cultural Centre and a doctoral candidate in Ethiopian Philology at Addis Ababa University. He is a prolific author and researcher who specializes on the history, language, culture, and heritage of the Harari people. Among his noteworthy achievements are his presentations at international conferences on the use of the Sabeen alphabet in the Harari language and his linguistic examination of old Harari. Along with local academics, he co-authored Harari dictionaries in both monolingual and multilingual (Harari/English/Amharic/Oromifa) languages. Abdulhamid gave a talk on Ethiopian Islamic manuscripts and visited different Qur'anic schools in Harar and Hargeysa for comparism studies. Mr. Abdulhamid Abdullahi trained at the Hargeysa Cultural Centre on "ajami manuscripts of the Horn," and he is the author of two books devoted to Harari heritage.

FATHI Jama: is a writer specializing in the political and cultural dynamics of the Horn of Africa. His work focuses on regional affairs, with particular attention to Somaliland and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Horn.

JAMA Musse Jama is an ethno-mathematician with a PhD in African Studies specialising in Computational Linguistics of African Languages. He is the Director of the Hargeysa Cultural Centre in Somaliland, and has a Researcher position at *Istituto Linguistica Computazionale* (ICL),

Centro Ricerca Nazionale (CNR), Pisa, Italy and University College London, UK. A fellow of RVI, Dr Jama Can be also reached @JamaMusse on social media.

MOUSTAFA Ahmad holds a Bachelor's degree in Global Studies and International Relations from New Generation University College, Hargeysa, Somaliland. His research interest are the politics, governance and cultural heritage of Somaliland.

Nasra Dahir Mohamed is a multidisciplinary professional with an MPhil in Public Policy from Riphah International University in Islamabad, Pakistan. She holds dual Bachelor's degrees in Political Science and International Relations from the Civil Service Institute in Somaliland, as well as a BSc in Medical Laboratory Science from Edna Adan University. She has extensive experience in research coordination, translation, and transcription, having worked with a range of international organizations, local institutions, government agencies, and Ph.D. researchers. She has a strong academic and personal interest in Somali culture and poetry, with a focus on its role in shaping identity, memory, and social transformation.

RICHARD Atimniraye Nyelade is a scholar and part-time lecturer at the University of Ottawa, contributing to sociological and anthropological studies. He holds a PhD in Sociology from Shanghai University and is pursuing a second PhD in Anthropology at the University of Ottawa, which he expects to complete by this year (2025). His current research centres on his dissertation titled "Navigating Sovereignty in a Hostile World: Stratagems and Representations by Diplomats in Taiwan and Somaliland.". Richard's academic and research endeavors are deeply rooted in decolonial theories, state and power coloniality, and African politics, with a particular emphasis on postcolonial theory.

ROOBLE Mohamed is a Communications Specialist and the Editor-in-Chief of Red Sea Maritime Journal with a background

in journalism, media, and public diplomacy. He has worked across government, academia, and international organizations in Somaliland. His interests include maritime security, foreign policy, and regional development in the Horn of Africa. He can be reached at rooble.mohamed@gmail.com

TIRSIT Yetbarek Seme is Head of the Somaliland Centre for African Studies at the Hargeysa Cultural Centre. 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

The Making of Hudeidi: Crafting an Icon of Somali Qaraami Music

Fathi Jama Dahir

Abstract

Ahmed Ismail Hussein, known as Hudeidi or Xudeydi, transformed Somali music with his unparalleled mastery of the *Oud*. His legacy, marked by melodies of love, longing and revolution, endures through the generations. His contributions to Qaraami have had a lasting impact on the history of Somali music. This article features the highlights of his contribution to music, as well as his life, from a rising star in music to one of the pillars of modern Somali art.

From Yemen to Zeila: The *kaban*'s Entry to Somaliland

Entering what was then British Somaliland from Aden, Yemen—a city that had immense and enduring influence on the Somali cultural fabric—the *Oud* (Lute) known in Somali as the (*Kabanka*), has been a fundamental instrument in Somali music. Through the *Kaban*, early poets and melodists reshaped and redefined the mould of nomadic Somali sounds into a song form. Given its significance in Somali music, some even assert that it was the cornerstone from which modern Somali music later emerged—a weighty claim that risks discrediting communities who had traditional instruments, including strings and pipes. For instance, the coastal city of Zeila in Somaliland, was the first known place where musical instruments such as tambourine (*daf*) and the Lute (*Kaban*) were introduced and performed in the Somali lands. These instruments were brought from Aden—by Arabian musicians, while the flute (*Foodhi*) contributed by an Indian musician known as Raw (Johnson, 1974).

The *Kaban* became the heartbeat of Somali Qaraami music, central to its emotive depth and melodic richness. According to Hudeidi, in a 2009 interview with ETN TV, the *Kaban* was first introduced to Somaliland by a Yemeni musician named Mohamed Salah Antari, who came to perform in the northern

coastal town of Zeila. This moment marked the beginning of the *Kaban*'s profound influence on Somali musical traditions.

In a separate interview, Abdulahi Qarshe, one of the pioneers of modern Somali music, recalled to Mohamed Rashid that when he arrived in Hargeysa in the middle of 1940s, the city's musical scene was largely dominated by Indian and Arab musicians. He specifically mentioned two individuals—Ina Beenaale, an Indian violinist, and Abdo Yusuf, a Yemeni violinist (See Mohamed Rashid interview). It was during this period that the Somali Belwo genre began to emerge, leaving a lasting impact on urban areas such as the city of Borama and later on Hargeysa.

Inspired by these few non-Somali musicians, Abullahi Qarshe was motivated to learn the *Kaban*. He would go on to become the first Somali to emerge as a professional musician, earning a lasting legacy as a pioneer of Somali music. His embrace of the oud marked a turning point, as the instrument soon became a foundational element in Somali musical expression—particularly within the *Qaraami* genre, where its rich, melodious tones added captivating and emotional depth.

With the introduction of the *Kaban*, the musical landscape transformed dramatically, infusing Somali songs with a new level of emotional depth and instrumental richness. However, when it comes to the *Kaban*, many great Somali musicians have played—and continue to play this twelve-stringed mystic instrument. Yet almost all of them agree that very few stand as unrivalled masters. One of those was Ahmed Ismail Hussein, known more popularly as Hudeidi and revered as “*The King of the Oud*.”

The Life and Musical Journey of Hudeidi

Born in Berbera, British Somaliland, in 1928, Hudeidi was taken to Yemen at a young age, where he spent his early childhood. It was in Yemen that he learned to play the *Oud*, which would later become the hallmark of his musical career. Even before fully embracing the *Kaban*, Hudeidi had developed

a deep passion for music. He fondly recalled how, as a child, he would drum with his tender hands as an expression of that love.

In an interview with the *Hanoolaato* YouTube channel, Hudeidi said that his musical journey was shaped by encouragement from people around him, which sparked his hope and determination. One of his most prominent supporters was Abdullahi Qarshe—the pioneering musician who is often credited as the first person to bring the Oud into Somaliland and to sing in Somali while playing an instrument. Hudeidi remembered being fascinated by Qarshe’s *Oud*. One day, Qarshe asked him: “What did your father buy for you when you went to school?” to which Hudeidi responded, “A book and a Pen.” Qarshe then advised him to buy an Oud (*Kaban*) and a pick (*Riishad*)—advice that lit a new path as a musician which would secure him a lofty place in Somali culture.

An interview Hudeidi expressed his profound interest in music while he was young—whenever he saw a police playing their instrument that he ran and walked with them, losing everything he had—for the sake of music. (Ahmed, 2018).

In addition to mastering the *Oud*, Hudeidi also learned to play the violin, known in Somali as (*Dhexyar*). In his musical journey, Hudeidi was mentored by two individuals: Abdi Handulle and Hassan Nahari—the brother of renowned composer Mohamed Ali Nahari.

Hudeidi’s first major performance took place in Aden, Yemen, where he competed against participants from various communities. He was the only Somali contestant and stood out—not only for his authentic Somali attire, but also for his resilience when a string broke mid-performance. His solo representation of Somali culture and his performance earned him first place, marking a significant milestone in his career. (See *Hanoolaato* YouTube channel).

In this regard, Hudeidi’s passion for experimentation and his unwavering dedication helped him develop a unique style, technique, and musical sensibility. His approach to the instrument was unlike any other, captivating audiences with a distinct sound and deeply expressive melodies. His contributions

to Somali music extended beyond performance—his compositions and innovations continue to shape and inspire contemporary Somali music, solidifying his legacy within Somali musical heritage.

Qaraam Tunes and Hudeidi's Masterful Rendition

Qaraami music traces its roots to the traditional Somali folklore genre known as “*Hees*” (Jama, 2023). Therefore, *Qaraami* lies at the core of Somali music, providing both its structural foundation and a rich vessel for the country's poetic and cultural expression. Emerging between the 1940s and late 1960s, *Qaraam* songs are marked by their melodic intricacy and emotional intensity—qualities that set them apart from simpler musical styles.

The modern era of Somali music took shape in 1943 with the rise of the Somali Belwo band, led by Abdi Deeqsi Warfaa, better known as Abdi Sinimo. He composed one of the earliest Somali classics, “*Belwooy Hooy Belwooy*”, which based on the Somali traditional dance—genre of Hirwo (Jama, 2023), signaled the birth of the *Belwo* genre—a concise, lyrical style that later laid the groundwork for more elaborate musical forms. Abdi Sinimo's contributions helped define the soundscape of early Somali music.

The emergence of *Belwo*, however, marked a turning point in the evolution of modern Somali song. Despite its artistic innovation, *Belwo* faced strong resistance from religious leaders, known as *Wadaaddo*, who condemned it as sinful and declared it *Haram* (forbidden) under Islamic principles. The term “*Belwo*” itself is believed to have originated from the word “*Balo*,” meaning (evil) or (misfortune). Nevertheless, *Belwo* continued to resonate with the broader community, gradually gaining popularity. Over time, it laid the foundation for what would become the modern Somali music scene, marking a significant turning point in Somali musical and artistic evolution.

Beyond this musical transformation, a major artistic shift followed in the 1950s with the formation of a band named *Walaalaha Hargeysa* (The Hargeysa Siblings), spearheaded by

Abdullahi Qarshe. This collective transformed Somali music by combining performance, poetry, and stagecraft, introducing a multidisciplinary approach that revolutionized Somali cultural production. *Walaalaha Hargeysa* didn't just perform songs—they created an immersive cultural experience that blended narrative, music, and theatre in a way that deeply resonated with audiences and left a lasting legacy.

It was within this creative surge that Hudeidi rose to prominence as a master of the *Oud*. Revered for his expressive playing and emotive compositions, Hudeidi played a defining role in shaping the sound and soul of *Qaraam*. His music, both technically skilled and emotionally charged, elevated the genre's stature and influence.

Qaraam emerged during this period as an intentional effort to fuse traditional Somali oral poetry with structured melodic arrangements and instrumental accompaniment. The *Kaban* became central to this new sound, and the music shifted from oral, improvised performances to composed pieces that could be repeated and reinterpreted. The songs carried the metaphor-rich language of Somali poetry while embracing trendy musical themes of longing, romance and vulnerability.

Artists like Abdullahi Qarshe and Hudeidi reimaged traditional themes through compositions, creating songs that became timeless. One of Hudeidi's best known pieces, "*Riftoon*", exemplifies this: a haunting love song played with aching elegance on the *Oud*. Though composed decades ago, it continues to be performed by new generations of Somali artists—each adding their own touch while remaining faithful to its original essence.

This enduring relevance is a hallmark of *Qaraam*. Like classical or jazz standards *Qaraam* songs are rarely rewritten—they're reinterpreted, allowing space for personal expression without altering the song's foundation. This dynamic has kept the genre vibrant and alive, adapting to each new era while preserving its historical and emotional core.

Over time, a shift in language and perception has occurred. The term *Qaraami*, derived from *Qaraam*, has come to be used

more broadly in everyday speech to refer to “old Somali songs.” Today, people often refer to all music from the 1950s to 1970s as *Qaraam*, regardless of its specific genre. While *Qaraam* is the precise name of the genre, qaraami has become a nostalgic umbrella term for the golden age of Somali music—a testament to the lasting power of these early innovations.

Hudeid’s playing captured this essence. He often performed pieces composed by Abdullahi Qarshe—works he considered among the finest in the *Qaraam* repertoire—with exceptional grace and precision. These include *Beerdilacshe*, *Laac*, *Ciil* and *Nugul*.

In an interview alongside his mentor Abdullahi Qarshe, Hudeidi revealed that he had composed the iconic song “*Raaxeeye*” even before fully mastering the *Oud*. By the time of the interview, the song had undergone four generational evolutions—despite the type of *Raaxeeye* popularly called “*Raaxeeye Burcaawi*” being credited to Hassan Aden Halla. Hudeidi demonstrated these stages during the conversation, offering a rare insight into his musical mind.

Beyond *Raaxeeye*, one of Hudeidi’s most notable compositions is *Uur Hooyo* (“Mother’s Womb”), a poignant duet performed by many artists, both Somali and non-Somali. Hudeidi not only composed the music but also wrote the lyrics, dedicating the song to his brother. It remains one of the veiw and most interested Somali songs to directly explore the theme of brotherhood.

Another iconic piece, as mentioned above, is *Riftoon*, composed in 1952 and inspired by a woman he fell in love with—whom he would eventually marry after fifty years. The lyrics include:

“Ufada Roobku Ruuxda waa u Dawee, Riftoon baa Urayee,
Ma Ruunbaa?”

*“The pre-rain breeze soothes the soul, I smell Riftoon—is it
you, O Ruun?”*

Riftoon was a popular French perfume at the time, making the song even more evocative for those familiar with its scent.

Why Hudeidi's Oud Playing Style was Unique and Exceptional

Hudeidi's mastery of the *Oud* was distinguished by his percussive playing style—so refined that he could produce rhythm using only the strings of the *Oud*, evoking the beat of a drum. This signature element allowed him to perform without the need for additional percussion; his *Oud* alone carried the full rhythm and emotion of a composition.

Among the many styles he mastered, Hudeidi was particularly revered for his performance of *Qaraam* songs, including classics such as *Ciil*, *Laac*, *Beerdillaacshe*, and *Nugul*, originally composed by Abdullahi Qarshe as said previously. His interpretation and improvisations infused these songs with profound sensitivity and emotional nuance.

One defining aspect of Hudeidi's craft was his ability to tailor his oud playing to suit the unique vocal tones and scales of each singer. Whether accompanying Omer Dhuulle or Mohamed Moge, he adjusted the *Oud's* resonance to match their distinct voices, enhancing their performance with precision and artistry.

Throughout his career, Hudeidi collaborated with the most prominent Somali singers—Mohamed Kuluc, Mohamed Sulaiman Tubeec, Ahmed Ali Dararamle, Mohamed Moge Liban, Halima Khalif Magol, Khadra Dahir Cige and Fatima Cabdillaahi Maandeeq, among others. His accompaniment added depth and richness to each collaboration. Notably, his work with Mohamed Moge on songs like *Gelbis* and *Haatuf*—the latter inspired by the love story of Elmi Bodhari and written by the celebrated Somali poet Mohamed Ibrahim Hadraawi—remains among the most cherished in Somali music.

Beyond his classical contributions, Hudeidi also composed for a new generation of Somali artists. One of his modern compositions, *Ifraah*, was performed by the Somali artist Aar Maanta. The song's lyrics and melody are exceptionally captivating, reflecting Hudeidi's ability to blend traditional Somali musical elements with contemporary sounds.

Another example of his brilliance is the song *Dabeecad*, composed by Mohamed Ali Nahaari. Hudeidi's rendition showcased his technical mastery, melodic intuition, and emotional clarity. In an interview with (BBC London, 2003), Hudeidi reflected on his lifelong relationship with *Oud*. During the interview, he played several pieces, including the *Banaadiri* song made famous by Ahmadey Abubakar. His interpretation of this song demonstrated his versatility and deep cultural awareness.

In 2020, alongside many monumental figures in Somali and international art who were taken by the pandemic, the final chapter of Hudeidi's vibrant life came to a close. But his legacy—woven into the strings of the Kabanka—will never fade.

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