

MY BOYHOOD IN THE OGADEN

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During my boyhood, I lived in a small town in the Ogaden called Wardear. My grandfather, a well-respected religious leader among whose numerous progeny I lived, owned a large, fenced-off compound in the eastern sector of town. He also maintained a *harun*, a gathering place by the great stucco mosque with the tall swaying minaret at the center of town. Further west was a walled fortress above which flew a green, gold and red banner with an emblem-bearing lion embossed at the center. This was the place where the Ethiopian soldiers lived. The fortress was said to have been built about 1917 by the Somali nationalist, Ina Abdille Hassan also known as the Mad Mullah of Somaliland. The Italians, during their fascist rule of East Africa (1935-40), added to the Mullah's fortress, providing office buildings as well as a handsome residence for a governor. The British inherited the fortress from the defeated Italians in 1941 and quietly surrendered it intact to the Ethiopians in 1948 through some sort of complex international deal. Once the lair of Somali freedom fighters, the historic fortress now became the retreat of an Ethiopian *fitaurari* and his Somali mistress. The woman was said to have converted to the Christian faith at the behest of her master. We youngsters would sometimes tag along behind her, hoping to catch a glimpse of the insides of her mouth which was rumored to have turned

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red from eating too much raw meat and hot peppers.

We never quite understood the presence of the Ethiopians in our midst. They spoke a different tongue, adhered to a different faith; and their diet and social manners were opposed to our own. In those days the Sheik Noor brood, as we were known, were full of mischief and our mischief was mainly directed against the few Ethiopian civilians in town. I remember one incident in particular. On our way to Koranic school each day, we had to pass the establishment of a middle-aged Amhara woman who kept a brothel for the Ethiopian officers. We never liked the smell of rotting meat and brewing *dtagi* (a potent Abyssinian brew) which emanated from the place. So, when early one morning we discovered her squatting by a trash pit, we sneaked up behind her and pushed her over the edge. Dashing off for the safety of our *doogsi*, we soon left her angry screams far behind.

The Ethiopians made their presence strongly felt by establishing a large and well-armed garrison of dark-skinned soldiers. The soldiers, isolated and homesick, would on occasion get drunk with *dtagi* and descend upon the town with their machine guns blazing. On such occasions, woe to any native caught out of doors. In the event of a tragedy, the kinsmen of the slain would protest to the civil authorities. Blood compensation would be promised by the Emperor's representative and the whole affair would be hushed up.

These senseless massacres became

more frequent, however, as winds of change swept Wardear from south of the border around 1956, as the former Italian Somaliland—already self-governing—approached total independence. Many of Wardear's youth were irresistibly drawn to the sky-blue banner with the white star at the center, Somalia's national flag with each of the five points of the star representing one of the Somalilands, including the Ogaden. Those who stayed behind found themselves harassed more and more by the Ethiopian authorities who must have viewed Southern Somalia's impending independence as a threat to their national sovereignty. My grandfather, though especially favored by Emperor Haile Selassie (having personally met the old Lion of Judah) and salaried by the Ethiopian Government as one of the prominent local leaders, was eventually driven into exile to the former British Somaliland where he died in 1961. However, before my grandfather left he saw many of his sons flee Wardear for the freer towns of Somalia. I, too, though still a youngster, found myself caught in the general drift southward, traveling to Galkayo in central Somalia and finally to Mogadiscio where I worked and studied for the next eleven years until my departure for the USA. 1957 was the year I left Wardear, never expecting to return again. Now I read in the news that Wardear (literally, The Place with the Famous Name) is once again completely in Somali hands. The circle is complete, and my grandfather's soul is finally at peace.