

## OF GOATS AND GREAT HOPE

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**HARGEISA IS A CITY** where the streets have no names and the houses have no numbers. But no one here is lost. Of course this precludes a postal system; but snail mail seems particularly passé. Hargeisans are at the cutting edge of the information age and are highly connected both locally and globally. In bizarre pastiche, apparently ‘pre-modern’ nomadic pastoralism meets ‘post-modern’ cyber-connectivity. Most Hargeisans carry a mobile phone or have access to one. The tallest building in Hargeisa is the seven or eight storeys of the mobile phone network provider. And tall glass buildings, like obelisks before them, seem to be some kind of phallic index of power and progress. Make what you will of the happy coincidence of cyber-connectivity and multi-storey development. The number of internet cafés by far exceeds the number of traffic lights – there seems to be only one malfunctioning set. But hang on to your handbag if you get googled by a goat. Hundreds of goats appear to have the freedom of the city; along with stray dogs, skunks and baboons which venture in for scraps from a countryside which, for a number of reasons, faces gradual desertification. (Unlike other urban spaces, the border between country and city in Hargeisa is porous.) The goats, incidentally, are pets kept not for slaughter, but for the pleasure of children who also drink their milk. So goat milk in a sense is on tap, while water for most people is not. Water in Hargeisa is a precious commodity. Well water is supplied from metal drums drawn by mules. Piped water is something of a luxury enjoyed by the elite and the well represented NGO community.

Banking Hargeisa-style is an absolute cinch. Apart from the state bank, the only operator in town is the money remittance company, Dahabshiil. (The other company was put out of business in the early, excessively zealous days of the paradoxically named War on Terror.) Here you can enjoy a limited range of banking services at a fraction of the cost of the service charges of ‘proper’ banks. Apart from livestock, the Somaliland economy relies on remittances of Somalilanders in the diaspora, for whom the call of kinship (at the moment) remains strong. The money remittance company has branches in eighty countries in the world and operates based, believe it or not, on trust in the largely non-literate nomadic regions of Somaliland. If you’re inclined to do your banking outdoors, buy foreign exchange from the currency hawkers on the street – pronto! – with no filing through x-ray security doors, no tellers behind shatterproof windows and best of all, no queues! (Not that they need any of this in Dahabshiil either.) They use wheelbarrows here for cash in transit. There are no heists. At worst the wheelbarrow, loaded to twice its height with banknotes, can overbalance in a pothole. Potholes occur with an alarming frequency and an even more alarming magnitude. Old women also hawk thousands of dollars’ worth of gold jewellery in the street with only plastic sheets to guard against the

rain. Hargeisa experiences some petty crime, and the rate of violent crime is extremely low. The security checkpoints at the main routes into the city are a safeguard mainly against the political banditry of the south which threatens to spill into Somaliland. The Somaliland judicial system mirrors the political system, which is a dynamic (and sometimes uneasy) equilibrium of state, Islamic and traditional law.

If, in other African cities, the 4x4 is frequently the only accessory which offsets with adequately garish consumerist verve bling-bling jewellery and his-and-hers pointy shoes, in Hargeisa the 4x4 is an absolute necessity. Most city streets constitute rugged terrain and where the roads are ‘tarred’, often they are the product of community initiatives and community funding. The city is intersected at two points by a river. There used to be two bridges which spanned the river at these points; now there is only one. The other bridge was bombed by the dictator, Siyad Barre, in the late 1980s. To reach Hargeisa University one needs to cross the riverbed, which becomes something of a survivor challenge after rains which have been coming less and less frequently.

They say that the city never sleeps. If cities are man-made spaces which fundamentally flummox diurnal rhythms, rendering day-time and night-time indistinguishable, Hargeisa by contrast is very different. By about lunchtime, most of Hargeisa grinds to a business but not social halt. By the early afternoon, most Hargeisan men seek the sociality of the little green leaf called *qaat*. *Qaat* is flown into the city daily and constitutes a significant percentage of trade with Somaliland’s big neighbour, Ethiopia. *Qaat*-chewing suppresses the appetite, slows down the body and focuses the mind. *Qaat* has since time immemorial been used by Somalis, but what has changed are the social rituals and economic context of its use. It is reported that ninety per cent of Hargeisan men chew *qaat*, with the habit growing in the shadows among increasing numbers of young women. *Qaat* is sold openly in the streets at little stalls. There are tea shops and dedicated *qaat*-chewing dens where men assemble in conviviality and conversation. If this sounds like a latter-day version of the coffee shops of Habermas’s eighteenth-century public sphere, perhaps it is, but at a disturbing social cost. The prevalence of *qaat*-chewing means that the working day in Hargeisa essentially ends at lunchtime, with chewing and talking going on late into the night and the hangover lasting until late the next morning. A large part of breadwinner income also goes into supporting the habit, creating family discord and domestic abuse. Significant health risks also attend continuous *qaat* use. To return again to the ubiquitous city goats; stalks and tough *qaat* leaves are frequently fed to the goats to increase milk production. The milk is fed to the children ... say no more.

The ‘public sphere’ centred on the tea shops is extended by the relatively lively print media and somewhat constrained electronic media. Three daily Somali-language newspapers are published in Hargeisa, and one weekly English-language paper called the *Somaliland Times* – a remarkable achievement for a society that is predominantly oral, with a script and orthography for Somali standardised fewer than four decades ago. Interestingly, all four Hargeisa papers, which are distributed throughout the country, have the same editor who appears signally unafraid of courting controversy. The electronic media exist through state subsidy, perhaps explaining a noticeable failure of imagination. In the post-World War II era, Hargeisa was a renowned Somali cultural centre, with a thriving theatre. The bombing of the Hargeisa theatre in 1988, together with the ravages of the civil war, brought theatre culture to an abrupt close. Theatre has not been revived, but will hopefully be resuscitated in a few years’ time on completion of the theatre building on its original site, a project undertaken by the Somaliland Ministry of Culture and Tourism in conjunction with a philanthropist in the Somaliland diaspora. The theatre structure at present is about waist-high. (Incidentally, apart from self-help, the philanthropy of Somalilanders who have managed to make it accounts for most successful Hargeisa projects.) The Hargeisa of about five decades ago was also the Camelot of oral poetry. In fact, the most important ‘modern’ genre of Somali oral poetry, the *heello*, developed in Hargeisa. Most Hargeisans lament the decline

in orature which, they claim, had its golden age about twenty years ago in the resistance to the authoritarianism of the Barre regime. Clearly, the art–politics dichotomy is not a consequence of the way in which poetry figures in this society. There is also in Hargeisa a handful of poets and novelists who quite mind-bogglingly write in English in a society mainly Somali-speaking and oral. English, for these writers, appears more suited to represent what is styled ‘modern’ experience and is an escape from the sometimes rigid strictures of traditional art and political criticism. In other words, these young artists can say what they like in a language their elders don’t understand. These self-reliant young writers create their own opportunities where none exist. Not only do they self-publish, but they also organise social gatherings (much like big and festive weddings) to read their work. And on the topic of weddings, weddings among the Hargeisa elite are much the same interface of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as elsewhere in Africa, with bride and groom constrained in sweaty satin and razor-sharp suits, looking like they’d much rather be on a trek across the desert in *jilaal*, or the dry season. As almost everywhere else, the most widespread entertainment (apart from *qaat*-chewing, that is) is satellite television – and, yes, even in Hargeisa the regime of Hollywood is challenged only by the coup staged by Bollywood.

Hargeisa is a relatively young city, having been founded only in the late 1800s by a Sufi sheikh. It had to be rebuilt in the 1990s, quite literally out of the ashes of its 1988 bombing by Siyad Barre, based in Mogadiscio in the south. The city’s inhabitants have felt the fallout of the Ogaden war in 1977, which witnessed so many refugees fleeing into Somaliland that Somalilanders themselves were obliged to seek refuge elsewhere. Many of the refugees of the Ogaden war remain housed in Hargeisan school and municipal buildings. Hargeisa has endured the economic and political domination of the south, culminating eventually in brutal persecution. Most Hargeisans tell of life in a refugee camp, or of a family member killed or incarcerated. All Hargeisans know about the ‘Hargeisa Group’, a group of twenty-eight professionals whose initiatives to improve schools and hospitals were deemed seditious by Siyad Barre. They were tortured and held in solitary confinement for a period of almost seven years, during which one of their number tapped out in a kind of Morse code for his troubled neighbour in the adjacent cell all of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, his copy of which had not been removed by the guards. They have known resistance, insurgency and civil war.

Hargeisa is a city which has been reconstructed by Hargeisans upon mass graves of their kin. It is the capital city of a country which is a testament to a peace negotiated wholly through autochthonous Somali conflict-resolution techniques. Since self-declared independence in 1991, it has with varying degrees of success sought to integrate traditional principles of egalitarianism and pastoral democracy into the inevitability of a modern state formation. Class differentials have been inescapable. It is not internationally recognised, so has not enjoyed any of the benefits of bilateral aid and has not been able to develop the economic foundations of the modern state it seems it must become in order to survive.

What one sees on the streets of Hargeisa may not be much, but it is the product of the initiative, will and co-operation of Hargeisans, the people themselves. But Hargeisa, for various reasons, has reached an economic impasse. The position of Somalilanders in the international community is dependent upon the African Union, which has been put in the position of gatekeeper. Ironically, the policy of the African Union is to respect colonial boundaries to which Somaliland does conform. Hargeisans are holding their breath for change. But, as the self-reliant people of this city like to say ... God willing.