

COURAGE

CONVICTION & CHARACTER

The Biography of Dr. Aweis A. Ali



Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD

Courage

Conviction & Character

The Biography of Dr. Aweis A. Ali

NAOL BEFKADU KEBEDE, MD

**BLAZE
GOLDBURST**

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Email address
Naolbooks@gmail.com

Naol Befkadu Kebede asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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BIOGRAPHY



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www.Somalibiblesociety.org
info@Somalibiblesociety.org

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reversedorderexistence.com by Blaze Goldburst

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Dr. Tibebe Haileselassie (1947 - 2012), a pioneer Ethiopian medical missionary to the Somalis.

WHAT OTHERS SAID ABOUT THIS BOOK ½

What an amazing life journey, gracefully steered with mindfulness, faith, courage and love! A perfect response to Paul's words of challenge in 1 Corinthians 16:13-14. Aweis is vivid evidence of how powerful the Lord's "I am with you always" promise, given to all his followers more than two thousand years ago, is. God prepared this man for the mission in awesome ways.

Dr. Eugenio Duarte
General Superintendent
Church of the Nazarene

In keeping with Dr. Aweis' long-standing work of collecting proverbs, this biography offers story after story from which wisdom, both folksy and godly, can be gleaned. Read it for insight into Somali culture, African church and mission dynamics and God's providence in a believer's life.

Erik Redelfs
Formerly Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies
Evangelical Theological College, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Brother Aweis came to Addis Ababa in the summer of 1996 after he had fled from the persecution in Mogadishu. Soon after his arrival, I invited him to attend the Lambaret Church of the Nazarene. We both joined the Evangelical Theological College and remained active leaders in the Somali ministry. Aweis has proven himself to be a faithful follower of Jesus who excels both in his ministry and academic studies. I know Aweis like the palm of my hand and I vouch for the accuracy of the contents of this book. I look forward to the day I can minister with Aweis again in the Horn of Africa.

Quule M. Egal
Somali Christian Elder

Dr. Aweis has proven himself as a church leader and missiologist. His transformational story is only possible through the power of Jesus. He has weathered great persecution in his personal life and he has been victorious. You will be blessed to read his life testimony in this book. You will be amazed at the power of God.

Dr. Louie E. Bustle
Global Mission Director, Retired
Church of the Nazarene

In December 2021, I read Aweis Ali's book, *Understanding the Somali Church*. It really opened my eyes. I prayed more than before for Somalia and I wanted to know more. I finally read the draft manuscript of this book so I could endorse it. I read through the whole biography within a few days. I praise the Lord because I learned so much about the biographee. He is indeed a true and committed disciple of Jesus Christ. I recommend this book to everybody who wants to understand the Somali church and culture.

Stig Magne Heitmann
Director, Open Doors Norway

For certain, *Courage, Conviction and Character: The Biography of Dr. Aweis A. Ali* provides an excellent window into Somali culture and Somalis' dominant religion of Islam, plus so much more. Even from infancy, multiple times, the hand of the Lord has spared him from death "for such a time as this." Dr. Aweis' dedication to Jesus, discipline, truth-telling and resilience in the face of martyrdom for many friends and threat to his own life will challenge readers to follow his example. I have enlarged my prayers since reading this book.

Barbara Keener Reed
The author of *Standing on Holy Ground and Some Not So Holy: A Memoir*

Courage, Conviction and Character: The Biography of Dr. Aweis A. Ali is a courageous and inspiring testimony of a Muslim background believer. The bold witness in this book will encourage the Christian community everywhere. Dr. Naol Befkadu Kebede has beautifully illustrated that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church.

Rev. Mohamed Gurhan
Somali Lutheran Church

You have in your hands a book that will give you insight into some of what it is like to be a Somali-born Christian. Read and be amazed and blessed.

Ruth Myors
The author of *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia*

FOREWORD

I first met Aweis A. Ali in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1998. This was two years after he escaped from the great persecution in Mogadishu, Somalia, where twelve members of his house church were martyred for their faith from 1994 -1996. I felt God’s fingerprints were all over him. He was humble, courageous and gifted. In fact, Ruth Cope described Aweis as “humble, meek, [and] gentle....”¹ Aweis’ integrity was above reproach and his confidence was astronomical. Aweis excelled in his theological training at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa while staying active in the Somali ministry in Addis Ababa and the Somali peninsula. A year after graduating with a B.Th. degree, he traveled to the United States in 2001. While in the United States, Aweis earned an M.Div. degree and then returned to Ethiopia in 2005 to continue serving the Lord. Aweis’ prompt return to Africa proved once more his impeccable reliability – he could have remained in the “promised land” and chased after the proverbial American Dream.

Despite belonging to two different denominations, Aweis and I became ministry partners to take the gospel to the Somali people in Ethiopia. Though Aweis is proud of his denomination, his lack of sectarian tendencies and his ecumenical view are impressive. I personally observed Aweis’ fearless witness in 2006 when we were shot at twice and then detained by the Ethiopian military who mistook us for contrabandists. During the twenty-four-hour detention and interrogation in two military camps (Dhanaan and Gode), Aweis never ceased sharing his faith with the military men who were assigned to guard us and the military intelligence officers who were interrogating us.

Even after Aweis was detained and interrogated two more times in the restive Somali region of Ethiopia, his commitment to continue serving in Ethiopia was not shaken. I used to wonder why Aweis did not remain in the United States to minister there. The opportunity to prosper and the possibility of upward social mobility are part of the American national ethos. Even after earning his PhD, Aweis continues his ministry in Africa and has never been interested in living in the West to pursue comfort and material riches. He believes he is most needed in Africa and I agree with him.

Anyone who wants to understand the history of the Somali church, ministry and mission work from 1983 - 2022 should read this book. The biographee is the undisputed linchpin of the Somali ministry in the Somali peninsula in the 39 years mentioned above. Aweis was an active seeker from 1983-1985, an amateur evangelist from 1986-1992 and a full-fledged minister of the gospel starting from 1993. The Somali church faced its bloodiest persecution and experienced its fastest growth in that timeframe and Aweis found himself in the middle of these two extremes.

Kudos to Dr. Naol Befkadu Kebede, the author of this book. His expertise in telling complex and cross-cultural stories is impressive; he is an undisputed wordsmith who beautifully narrates the life story of the most prominent living Somali Christian. Only the best of the best can be

¹ Ruth Cope, “Biography Manuscript.” Message to Aweis Ali. 28 April 2022. Email. Ruth Cope (pseudonym) is a senior missionary among Somalis in East Africa and an expert on Muslim-Christian relations.

entrusted with writing such a story. The author produced a biography that reads like a thriller. He demonstrated truthfulness, humility and deep respect while retelling a complex story.

Abdi Osman
Evangelist
Trinity Baptist Church

PREFACE

“We want to send two missionaries to Somalia by the end of 2019.” This was part of the vision of Saris Berhane Wongel Baptist Church, the local church to which I belong. That vision was cast in 2014. I read the blueprint of the vision after a premed class one day. I do not know why, but I felt something stir in my gut. I did not expect a single statement to shape one’s life. But it did. Not only could I not stop meditating on how I could become a missionary to Somalia, but it also ignited in me a passion to reach my Somali neighbors who lived in and around Saris and Bole Mikael, Ethiopia, the so-called “little Mogadishu.”

My passion to become a missionary to the Somalis reached its climax after the publishing of *Tibebu Yemidrebedaw Eregna* (Tibebu the Desert Shepherd), the biography of the late Dr. Tibebu Haileselassie by his widow, Lishan Agonafir, in 2013. I also read that book in 2014 while I was a first-year medical student. The book narrates the life and ministry of Dr. Tibebu, who was also once a student at the Addis Ababa University (AAU) College of Health Science where I was studying.



Dr. Tibebu Haileselassie
Photo credit: Hakimoch News

Dr. Tibebu’s missionary endeavor in Kebri Dehar, the Somali regional state of Ethiopia and then as a prisoner of war in Somalia from 1979 to 1990 and his mesmerizing testimonies and efforts inspired me to envision myself as a medical missionary in Somalia.² Dr. Tibebu led a life that I and many of my peers would love to emulate. In fact, Dr. Tibebu could be called the pioneer Ethiopian medical missionary to the Somalis. He loved the people and served them relentlessly, both with his profession and with his faith. It is to commemorate Dr. Tibebu’s noble accomplishments that I have dedicated this book to his life and ministry.

Unlike Dr. Tibebu, however, I withdrew from medical school in the middle of my second year and began theological studies under the supervision of my pastor. I wanted to equip myself to become both a medical missionary and a missiologist. I rejoined medical school after finishing my theological degree at Bright Hope Theological College in Addis Ababa. Thereafter, in 2018, I was accepted for the program of Intercultural studies (World Mission) at Leadstar Theological College, where I did my thesis on the socio-cultural barriers against missionaries working among the Somalis in the Somali region of Ethiopia.

In doing this, I substantially increased my study of the culture and lifestyle of the Somali people with specific relevance to the *missio dei*. After that, I began my PhD in Christian Leadership at

² To learn more about Dr. Tibebu’s story, please read: Naol Befkadu Kebede, “The Desert Shepherd: The Life and Ministry of Dr. Tibebu Haileselassie.” *Somali Bible Society Journal*. Volume II, Issue 1, (June 2021), 128 - 137. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SBS-Journal-Vol.-II-Issue-1.-June-2021.pdf> (accessed 06 October 2022).

Vision International University, with my dissertation focusing on leadership and mission. Throughout the years, my love for the Somali people and my understanding have been growing. However, since I do not consider myself an expert on the culture and people, I continue to learn daily.

Seven years since the time of that first stirring, the trajectory of my life had taken me through doing a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies with a concentration on Somali missions to pursuing a PhD in Christian Leadership, with my dissertation focusing on missional leadership and the challenges faced by evangelical mission agencies and missionaries. In addition, I earned my medical doctorate (MD) from the Addis Ababa University College of Health Science at the time of writing this book. The publishing of this biography comes at a time when I am realizing my vision of becoming a medical missionary and missiologist to the Somali people.

Over the years, I have published several books, mostly on missions and intercultural communication, in English and Amharic. I have also published numerous well-regarded articles on missions, culture and public theology in English in various magazines, journals and on websites. I have also contributed to the Somali Bible Society Journal.

Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD, PhD – candidate
Berhane Wongel Baptist Church

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Aweis A. Ali's name includes a patronymic. The book therefore properly refers to him by his given name, Aweis and not as Ali. Other Africans mentioned in the book are also referred to by their given name or nickname. The few Westerners cited in the book are often referred to by their last names unless a pseudonym is assigned to them.

Full names of individuals in the book are rarely used. Very common names among Somalis include Mohamed, Abdulkadir, Ahmed, Abukar and Ali. "Abukar" is a Somali corruption of the Arabic "Abubakar." Different people in this book have the same first name. Some people are not named in this book for privacy or security reasons.

Some of the dates expressed or implied in this book are approximates based on the recollection of the sources. Most excerpts quoted from Somalis were originally in the Somali language and have been translated by competent translators. Quotes and citations from English speakers are not always verbatim but are based on the sources' recollections. While this book is about the biographee, it is also about the Somali church and the missionaries who minister to the Somalis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people spent time and energy on this book. The contributions received include editorial assistance, proofreading, fact-checking and providing general guidance. While it is impossible to mention them all, I would like to thank the following people for their indispensable assistance: Ruth Cope spent many months editing the manuscript and suggesting invaluable content improvements; her patience and perseverance are greatly appreciated. Hannele Secchia, a professional editor, edited and proofread the manuscript. Dr. Helmi Ben Meriem and Rev. Mohamed Gurhan pointed out early weaknesses in the manuscript; their input improved the quality of the work. Ruth Myers and Dr. Rodney L. Reed made suggestions so that the stories of individuals and organizations mentioned in the manuscript could be more charitable and less adversarial; their divine wisdom positively contributes to the Kingdom of God. Rev. M. M. Mohamud and Rev. Ali Adawe examined the manuscript and found it safe for publication; their gift of discernment is priceless. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all these amazing people. I am also extremely grateful to all the people who endorsed this book; your profound faith in me or in the biographee speaks volumes. Similarly, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the dozens of people who chose to remain anonymous for security or other personal reasons. I must unequivocally add that any shortcomings found in this book are entirely mine.

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GLOSSARY	

Creative access: The strategic approach in Christian ministry by which persecuted Christians minister and are ministered to.

Dariqah: Religious order or path. The most prominent Somali *dariqahs* are: Ahmadiyyah, Qadiriyyah and Salihyyah.

Fatwa: A binding Muslim religious decree.

Hijra: An Islamic theological term which means migration or departure from an inhospitable place to a more accommodating location.

Madrasa: A Muslim religious school.

Sharia Law: The literal meaning of Sharia is “the clear and well-trodden path to the water.” Theologically speaking, Sharia Law is seen by Muslims as the perfect and immutable code for living for all Muslims.

Sufi: A Muslim who practices a peaceful traditional form of Islamic mysticism.

Tariqa: Religious way, path, spiritual learning.

Ulema: Trained and credentialed Muslim clerics.

Waaqism: An ancient monotheistic Cushitic religion.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CNC: *Codka Nolosha Cusub*
DMV: Department of Motor Vehicles
EMQ: Evangelical Missions Quarterly
ETC: Evangelical Theological College
IAS: International Aid Sweden
KCC: King's Conference Center
MM: Mennonite Mission
NKJV: New King James Version
NTS: Nazarene Theological Seminary
SCR: Swedish Church Relief
SMC: Somali Mennonite Church
SIM: Serving in Mission
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
UNOSOM: United Nations Operation in Somalia
YWAM: Youth with a Mission

PROLOGUE

The purpose of this biography is to document the life of an ordinary boy who became an extraordinary man. Aweis, courageous yet humble, did not want this biography to be written, but he was dragged into it kicking and screaming. He finally relented and reluctantly started cooperating. This work is intended to benefit present-day and future generations of Somali Christians and the expatriates who love the Somali people. This biography is also a reminder to Somali Muslims that the notion “to be a Somali is to be a Muslim” is erroneous. While I had access to the biographee’s personal voice and contacts, I had the final say in the tone and the content of this book.

This book is captivating and the time you spend reading it will be well spent. The personal stories, history and theories expressed in this book will stay with you for life. If anyone has a doubt or needs confirmation that hard work, determination and discipline pay off, then this book is for them. Aweis grew up in a home where one decent meal a day was a struggle. In his preteen years, he washed cars by the roadside and sold loose cigarettes and chewing gum to earn money for much-needed school fees. By sheer discipline and an impeccable work ethic (with some divine providence or simple luck), Aweis eventually found work with coveted employers, including the United Nations and the European Union. He later became a full-time minister of the gospel. Aweis has traveled to some thirty countries on multiple continents.

While this book is fascinating, I do not sugarcoat anything. I unapologetically state facts, describe events, tell stories and back them all up with reliable sources. Some of the subjects mentioned in the book could find some of the narratives about them discomfiting, albeit I am using pseudonyms for them. I did not write this book to be comfortable but to be respectfully accurate. My intention is not to harm or offend. I have striven to be both respectful and accurate in all accounts. The book also reflects the subject’s outspokenness, as well as humility and some readers will certainly find it unnecessarily provocative. In contrast, others will welcome its much-needed contributions to the history of Somali mission work.

As the author, I had the final say about what to include or not to include in this book. I communicated with dozens of Somali Christians and Muslims who know Aweis. I also reached out to non-Somalis who know the biographee. I went to all this effort to produce this accurate, engaging and awe-inspiring biography, the first of its kind in the history of the Somali church. While a limited number of biographies on missionaries to the Somalis have been published, no biography on a Somali Christian has ever been published, according to multiple Somali Christians I contacted. The Somali church boasts the presence of several heavyweight Somali Christians in politics, business and ministry. Many of these prominent local Christians are now deceased.

Readers of this book will get an unfiltered Somali perspective on Somali ministry and its expatriate workers. Somali mission work is often told from a missionary viewpoint, but this book is unique in offering the perspective of an indigenous Somali believer. Somalis have a rich oral tradition, but they are not known as writers. Aweis is an exception – he is the most prolific Somali Christian writer in history. This biography will fill a void in Somali Christian literature

and will be an asset to the Somali church. Because of Somalia's membership in the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Aweis' biography stands to benefit all Muslim background Christians in the Muslim world.

Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD, PhD – candidate
Berhane Wongel Baptist Church

CHAPTER 1: ABOUT AWEIS A. ALI

“God is great and anyone who believes in him is powerful.”³
-Somali proverb

Introduction



Aweis A. Ali

Why do some people succeed despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles while others who face the same challenges fail? Without getting caught up in the nurture-nature debate, Aweis attributes his success to honest persistence until he achieves his goal. He finds tenacity, trustworthiness and delayed gratification indispensable components to real success. Aweis’ Christian faith and his denomination’s emphasis on holiness fuel his conviction that success does not happen by accident but through the implementation of impeccable principles and purposeful actions. He also exudes confidence which has produced competence and resourcefulness.

You will read here some of the challenges Aweis magnificently overcame, challenges that would have frustrated the majority of people. One vital asset Aweis identifies as a key ingredient in his accomplishments is his good interpersonal relationships. His ability to get along with people serves him well to this day. He is also a skilled communicator and a reliable man with deeply cherished integrity. All these qualities facilitate his networking prowess and ability to trust others. Aweis is also an ardent believer that a high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and great Emotional Quotient (EQ) are a sure recipe for success.

Challenging beginning



A traditional collapsible Somali hut

No one knows exactly when Aweis was born, but it is certain that he was born among cattle and camels which are not known for their record-keeping proficiency. He was born to nomadic parents either in 1968 or 1969. His mother gave birth to him in a collapsible grass mat hut without the convenience of modern medicine or equipment. The illiterate traditional midwife who delivered him had a poor track record of successful births. Many of the children she assisted with in her long career died quickly; others survived with serious health issues because of oxygen deprivation during their deliveries. Some of Aweis’ age mates were snatched as infants by wild animals, including foxes and hyenas; some were rescued alive, but others were never recovered, a boon for the hungry animals and pain for the grieving parents. One of those rescued from the jaws of a hungry fox was Dahabo, Aweis’ relative; she was later

³ In Somali, *“Allaa weyn, ninkii aaminaa awood leh.”*

nicknamed Dahabo Dawa'oo, Dahabo the Fox.⁴ The infant mortality rate in Aweis' birth village was about 40% at that time. In fact, Aweis' mother raised four children to adulthood but lost two toddlers and a few pregnancies to preventable causes.

Somali-style healthcare

Aweis never visited a doctor or dentist until he broke his arm in a freak accident at the age of sixteen. The experience at the hospital was so off-putting that the family's prejudice against the modern medical establishment appeared justified. The doctor did nothing right to mend the badly broken arm. The doctor's shabby job was rectified by Raage Dhoojiye, an illiterate village medicine man and a distant relative of Aweis. Even after his family moved from the village to the capital city, they continued to use natural remedies for ailments that included persistent coughs, bad colds, strep throat, fever, pain, skin conditions and stomach issues. As fiercely independent nomadic pastoralists, Aweis' parents viewed modern medicine and the government which promoted it as alien intrusions and an infringement on their liberty.

The Somali government embarked on a mass immunization campaign against cholera for children when Aweis was about five years old. A medical team visited Aweis' neighborhood in Mogadishu to immunize the children. Adults quickly warned the children of the impending "danger" and those who were old enough to run fled for the hills. Some parents also either hid or escaped with their children who were too young to run away from the forced immunization campaign. Aweis was one of the children apprehended by much faster medical assistants; they were all vaccinated against their will in the left forearm. Once the vaccinators left, the adults told the few vaccinated children to squeeze the "poison" out of their arms; they did the best they could to expel the inoculation from their arms.

Close calls

Like any other Somali child growing up in Somalia, Aweis' life was threatened in a variety of ways. He was almost buried alive because his family thought he was dead after a brief illness. He also survived when a sand tunnel he was digging collapsed. Although he lost his cousin in the incident, Aweis was the survivor of a shark attack as a young boy.

Later on, he was targeted in Mogadishu by fundamentalist Muslims because of his Christian faith. The radical Muslims killed twelve of Aweis' house church of fourteen members between 1994 and 1996.⁵ The thirteenth member of his house church, Abukar Hared Taakow, died prematurely at the age of thirty-seven because of the stress of the persecution. Aweis is therefore the only survivor of the Mogadishu-based fourteen-member house church he co-pastored in the mid 1990s.

⁴ Dahabo and Aweis were born a week apart and hail from Mesagawaay village, Ceeldheer district in the central Somali region of Galgaduud. Dahabo survived the fox attack with prominent facial scars caused by the fox bites.

⁵ The names of the martyred believers are: Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, Ahmed Ayntow Gobe, Saleban Mohamed Saleban, Isma'el Yusuf Mukhtar, Mohamed Aba Nur, Ali Kusow Mataan, Mohamed Abdullahi Yusuf, Nurani Madey Madka, Khalif Dayah Guled, Bashir Mo'alim Mohamud, Prof. Haji Mohamed Hussein and Mohamed Sheikdon Jama. "Martyr's Corner," Somalis for Jesus, <https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2008/11/martyrs-corner.html> (accessed 15 June 2021).

Where there is a will, there is a way

Aweis' father was a Muslim preacher, *madrasa* teacher and a clan elder.⁶ He died in 1983 at the age of forty or forty-one from a severe asthma attack. Aweis' birth family was poor – their home lacked running water and electricity. When they still lived as nomads in central Somalia, he recalls his father walking for days with his camel to collect water.⁷ Aweis understood from early on that water was life; there were people close to his family who died of thirst in the inhospitable deserts of southern and central Somalia. As a small boy, Aweis walked miles to collect water using a twenty-liter jerry can. Carrying so much weight on foot took a toll on the growing boy. The family was later able to afford to pay a donkey cart to collect water. Even at a young age in a poor neighborhood in Mogadishu, Aweis knew that the cycle of poverty could and should be broken with formal education, hard work and resilience. He vowed that his future children would have a better life than he had. To realize this, Aweis developed a passion for higher education, foreign languages, work ethic and impeccable integrity. He understood his abilities from the time he was young and the naysayers could not hinder his trajectory to success.

When patience is not a virtue

While growing up, Aweis rarely missed an opportunity to contribute to the family finances. One way he did this was to maintain a productive garden in the family yard. Aweis grew corn, sorghum, vegetables and watermelon. He harvested his first watermelon when he was ten years old and he was exuberant! He hid one growing watermelon from everyone else to see how big it could grow. Aweis dug the garden soil and buried the watermelon; he would discreetly check it periodically to evaluate its progress. He finally harvested the precious fruit, which had stopped growing two months earlier and joyfully handed it to his mother. She noticed the fruit was rotten and not edible. “You are too patient and too disciplined,” she said. “You were supposed to harvest it three months ago!” Aweis learned an important lesson that day.

Early responsibility

Aweis and his elder brother knew early on that they had to contribute to the family finances to alleviate the family's dire financial situation. Both boys regularly earned some extra cash by dumpster diving, washing cars, hawking, etc. Aweis would bring home any cash he earned, while his brother would often use the money he made to buy any food items he thought the family needed. When he was about ten years old, Aweis came home with twenty shillings and gave them to his mother, who showered praises on her thoughtful boy. A woman who witnessed the matter chastised Aweis' mother, “That is only twenty shillings, not two hundred. You are making a big deal of it.” His mother shot back, “Twenty shillings given to me by my son are better than two hundred given to me by anyone else.”

⁶ Aweis' father was a *Hafiz-e-Quran*, a memorizer of the Qur'an who could recite the entire Qur'an, about the size of the New Testament, by heart. Shortly before his untimely death, he was hired by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a *kadi*, a religious judge, to preside over Islamic courts in accordance with Sharia law. In Islamic Somalia, such courts deal with family affairs including marriage, divorce and inheritance matters.

⁷ As a young man, Aweis' father trained as a nurse aide in Mogadishu and operated a one-man mobile clinic. He treated underprivileged patients for free until his premature death in 1983.

Ahmed, Aweis' elder brother, once made some money by dumpster diving. The brother bought a big watermelon with all the money he had; he walked all the way home for more than two hours. When he was close to home, he dropped the watermelon out of sheer exhaustion. He salvaged the shattered pieces of the precious fruit and handed them to his mother, feeling dejected. She received the gift, thanked him and said, "Just bring the money next time; don't buy anything." The twelve-year-old boy heeded his mother's advice. Ahmed is now the owner of four successful businesses in the USA and the first millionaire in the family.

A mischievous boy

Aweis often herded the family goats and cattle when he was not busy with school. He would take the animals to various pastures early in the morning to graze and return them home in the evening. Aweis was bringing home the family cattle one evening when he was about twelve years old. He had a "brilliant" idea as he approached home. He tied together the tails of two of the cows which were walking side by side. Out of the blue, the cows started veering apart very quickly. He frantically attempted to keep them together, but failed miserably. The tail of the younger cow ripped clean off! That particular heifer did not stand a chance against the more robust cow. Aweis' mother chastised him for his foolhardiness. The heifer healed fast and its truncated tail became its trademark.

Once, when Aweis was about thirteen years old, he was returning home with several neighborhood friends after watching a movie at a local cinema. Aweis and his age mates noticed a young couple standing in a dark and secluded corner off the main road. The boys agreed to disrupt the amorous couple for the fun of it. Aweis led the pack of boys to invade the couple's privacy. The man got mad, pulled out a pocketknife and stabbed Aweis in the left eye. He screamed with pain and fled with the other terrified boys. The man, after more blood, chased after them, but they outran him in the dark. The scar on Aweis' left eye, slightly above the eyelid, reminds him to this day of the stupidity of trying to interrupt a courting couple. That imprudent act almost cost him an eye.

Education and achievements

Aweis attended college in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, and university in Nairobi, Kenya, where he earned a PhD. He is a prolific author. He has written or edited twelve published books and has three others in the pipeline, which will be published by 2023. Aweis is the founder of the Somali Bible Society as well as the biannual Somali Bible Society Journal for which he serves as Editor-in-Chief. Aweis is also the founder and Series Editor of the annual *Maansada Masiixa* (Anthology of Somali Christian Poetry). Aweis recently founded a new media organization, Lifting Up the Horn, that invites gifted people to record a talk to be posted online for free. The slogan of this media organization is "a divine wisdom for all people."

He is arguably the only living Somali Christian polymath. He draws on an intricate body of knowledge to address specific issues. Aweis' ability to simplify complex problems and solve them is impressive. Furthermore, he is an accomplished poet whose poetry on peace and reconciliation was first published by *Maanta* (later *Soomaalida Maanta*) in the mid 1990s.

Maanta was the official newspaper of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Many of these poems were later published (with English translations) in 2020.⁸ Aweis is also a paremiologist who has been collecting and translating proverbs since 1991. He published, in 2021, what is possibly the largest collection of proverbs ever. The 21,574 proverbs represent various cultures and languages across the world.⁹

Aweis' persistence and resilience, coupled with his high motivation, paved the way for his accomplishments. His habits of lifelong learning and continued improvement serve him well spiritually, academically, as well as economically. His knack to live within his means frees him from unnecessary financial burdens which often hamper one's ministry. From when he was a little boy, Aweis never drifted aimlessly in life. He nurtured his relationships with people and was careful not to antagonize anyone. He understands that success requires harnessing multiple investments and opportunities, as well as being a person of integrity.

Mending a fractured church



Senior Christian leaders who were delegated to attend the reconciliation meeting

Aweis is a peacemaker; he has an aptitude for helping people focus on what unites them rather than what divides them. His latest major accomplishment was when he facilitated the end of an eleven-year-old church conflict that devastated his denomination's work in Ethiopia. Aweis built an honest, skilled team from within the divided church and ended the brutal conflict. The reconciliation process took two years and finally succeeded, despite the opposition of some powerful players. Some of these were profiting from the conflict and others thought reconciliation was too good to be true.

⁸ Aweis A. Ali, *Rag iyo Rabbi: Suugaan Nabadeed Soomaaliyeed* (Men and God: Somali Poetry on Peace) (Nairobi, Kenya: Maandeeq Publishing, 2020).

⁹ Aweis A. Ali, *A Proverb is Worth a Thousand Words: A Paremiography From Around the World* (Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021).



Some of the reconciled Christians praying to the Lord.

Dr. Daniel E. Miller, a former senior leader in Aweis' denomination, wrote:

Reconciliation has occurred because Aweis has been able to put aside his own sense of injustice and to approach the conflict in Ethiopia from a new perspective. Reconciliation begins with the premise that both sides have wronged each other and that mutual wrongdoing has created division. Reconciliation is worked out when two leaders approach each other in mutual confession over their wrongdoing to the other and then lead their people to recognize their need for mutual confession. Reconciliation is consummated when neither leader is willing to

hear the accusations of wrongdoing against the other that are sure to continue to well up among their followers in the wake of their mutual confession.¹⁰



Aweis speaking at the reconciliation meeting in 2020

Pastor Melkamu Gezahegn Geleta, the General Secretary of the National Board of the denomination in Ethiopia said, "I observed him struggling to unite the church's leaders rather than pursuing his own personal goal. He played a key role in bringing leaders from the two extremes together and encouraged them to sit down at a table and discuss their differences."¹¹

Pastor Nekatibeb Mekonnen Zeamanuel, the denomination's education director for Ethiopia, wrote in detail about Aweis' "conflict resolution skill" that resolved the long battle in the church. The pastor concluded his remarks by saying that the conflict was "resolved with mutual reconciliation."¹²

Dr. Anbessu Tolla Feyissa, a key figure in the reconciliation process, stated that the church endured eleven years of conflict in which members dragged each other through the courts. Anbessu

continued on to say:

It was Dr. Aweis Ali's firm determination that stopped all court cases in Ethiopia in 2019 and his tireless effort to bring these two groups to unity and reconciliation. Because of Rev. Aweis' leadership as Mission Coordinator there is no conflict among brothers in

¹⁰ Daniel E. Miller, "Too Good to Be True! But I Have Seen It with My Own Eyes, And I Testify That It Is!" Message to Aweis Ali and Anbessu Tolla Feyissa. 22 November 2021. Email.

¹¹ Melkamu Gezahegn Geleta, "Re: Request." Message to Aweis Ali. 22 November 2021. Email.

¹² Nekatibeb Mekonnen Zeamanuel, "Re: Request." Message to Aweis Ali. 22 November 2021. Email.

Ethiopia now and the church has totally returned to its original mission which is proclaiming the good news of our Lord Jesus to all people groups in Ethiopia.¹³

Aweis' denomination in Ethiopia is at peace today after eleven years of bitter conflict.

Other achievements

From 1993 to 2000, Aweis reconciled warring factions of tribal militias and successfully negotiated four hostage situations in the Somali capital without the payment of any ransom. Most of the poems Aweis composed from 1991 to 1995 illuminate to the Somalis the evils of the clan ideology which usurped the Somali state.¹⁴

Aweis' Somali translation and transliteration of the Qur'an will be published in 2023. His English translation of the Qur'an will also be published by the same time. Both academic translations took several years to complete. The quality and the integrity of these two translations have been affirmed by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islam. Aweis is the first Somali Christian to ever translate the Qur'an into any language.

Aweis is an accomplished songwriter whose songs on love and dedication are a staple among Somalis. He is also a hymnologist who composed dozens of meaningful Christian songs and poems published by the *Maansada Masiixa* (Anthology of Somali Christian Poetry) series. In addition, Aweis is a vocalist who sang and recorded some popular Somali Christian hymns with the *Codadka Iftiinka* (Voices of Light) band.

Finally, he is a gifted missiologist, educator and a dedicated minister of the gospel. As a visiting scholar, he taught systematic theology at the Evangelical Theological College, his alma mater.

Conclusion

Aweis faced plenty of difficulties right from after he was born because of the family's arduous nomadic way of life, a lifestyle that only the fittest survive. Aweis withstood challenges that took out many of his peers. While his discipline and determination helped, it was the hand of the Lord that aided him to thrive against all odds. The Lord God protected Aweis, even though he did not know Him until the age of eighteen. Aweis believes he can achieve almost everything he puts his mind to and acknowledges the virtues of hard work and personal responsibility. Aweis, a seasoned peacemaker, cherishes friendships and honors authority as taught in the Bible.

Aweis' strenuous upbringing and the fact that he lacked basic necessities many take for granted prepared him to later become a visionary leader, a master delegator and a courageous minister of the gospel. Aweis' Christ-like humility and self-confidence positively contribute to his success on the mission field and in his interpersonal relationships. Aweis' ability to think outside the box often generates opposition from otherwise good and godly people; most of these people eventually acknowledge that there is merit in Aweis' perceived madness, for example, when he

¹³ Anbessu Tolla Feyissa, "Re: Request." Message to Aweis Ali. 24 November 2021. Email.

¹⁴ Aweis A. Ali, *Rag iyo Rabbi: Suugaan Nabadeed Soomaaliyeed* (Men and God: Somali Poetry on Peace) (Nairobi, Kenya: Maandeeq Publishing, 2020).

started a ministry to people with mental disabilities in eastern Ethiopia. Even Aweis' critics acknowledge that he sometimes thinks differently and unconventionally but that his new perspectives often advance the Kingdom of God.

CHAPTER 2: A VISIONARY LEADER

“A person who does not know what will happen in the future does not also know what is happening now.”¹⁵
- Somali proverb

Introduction

The age-old debate of whether visionary leaders are born or made is a false dichotomy; while great leaders are born with charisma, decisiveness and kindness, leadership skills require regular honing. Aweis is without doubt a visionary leader according to fellow Christian ministers who served with him in sub-Saharan Africa. Below are seven qualities these ministers attributed to Aweis.

1. He is a farsighted visionary who helps his people understand that what many see as impossible is indeed possible.
2. He displays a genuine passion for his ministry and he inspires fellow Christians to find purpose and fulfillment in their faith and ministry.
3. He listens to learn, without any prejudice and he encourages others to be great listeners.
4. He delegates well, which helps him not to burn out by overworking. He instills in others the value of teamwork.
5. He never stops learning and encourages others to always learn new things.
6. His confidence is astronomical and teaches others the importance of self-belief.
7. He is a uniter who helps people to focus on what unites them. The people who minister with him understand the importance of unity.

One concept I repeatedly heard from ministers who serve with Aweis is that, unlike positional leaders, he leads with authenticity. He gets along well with the people he works with, which makes him a relational leader. In other words, Aweis is being himself while leading; he is not playing a role. This leadership style makes him an accomplished visionary leader.

A master delegator

The most influential missional leader who shaped Aweis' views on leadership and delegation is Dr. Howie F. Shute, the father of the Islamic ministry in Aweis' denomination. Dr. Shute expanded a small but growing ministry in the Horn of Africa into a church planting movement in six countries. How Dr. Shute was able to turn a handful of struggling local churches into thousands of thriving churches in a few years is for the history books to study. Dr. Shute, a farsighted visionary missionary, developed competent leaders through delegation and on-the-job training. Aweis admires and attempts to emulate the leadership skills of Dr. Shute.

Aweis likes to say that leadership and delegation go hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. Like any competent leader, he understands that he cannot do everything single-

¹⁵ In Somali, *“Waxa soo socda nin aan ogayn, waxa joogana ma oga.”*

handedly, therefore, he staffs his weaknesses and surrounds himself with capable leaders. Aweis understands that delegation saves time for leaders and inspires team members to improve performance. He chooses the right people who are faithful, available and teachable. Aweis also makes the necessary resources and training available to these team members so they can succeed in their tasks. According to a close associate of Aweis I spoke to, there is no confusion when Aweis delegates; there is clarity in the tasks he delegates. Another church leader who serves closely with Aweis described him as “an encourager who lifts up his people.” Aweis supports his team members in the ministry and takes their feedback seriously.

Aweis’ delegation skills help his teammates in the ministry to feel appreciated and empowered. He is also known for his ability to trust people as he coordinates the work of his church denomination in six countries. Aweis is very careful in his selection process so that the person he delegates is the right person who can get the job done with minimum supervision. His faith in people and ability to provide guidance from afar cement his reputation as a master delegator. Success is not often one hundred percent guaranteed when it comes to delegation. In the last twenty-five years, Aweis had to replace two local ministers he delegated for an important ministry assignment. The removed ministers were assigned to other ministerial positions that were within their capabilities and they flourished in their new assignments.

One evidence of Aweis’ effective delegation is how easy he finds developing successful leaders in the ministry. Aweis is a firm believer that thoughtful and timely delegation are essential to leadership success. For example, Aweis handed over a challenging but rewarding ministry to one of his long-time assistants in 2001. This ministry to Muslims in the Somali peninsula continued to flourish under the new leader. This leader knew how to lead the ministry because Aweis repeatedly delegated to him in the past, thus helping him acquire vital training. Aweis was impressed in 2005 when he returned from the United States after seminary training – the ministry he handed over four years earlier had grown beyond his wildest imagination.

Aweis does not make any important decisions without consulting with qualified people who are well-versed in the subject matter, according to multiple coworkers I spoke to. According to these colleagues, Aweis’ ministry success is directly tied to his ability to seek wisdom from the right people. Proverbs 15:22 (New International Version - NIV) guides his search for wisdom, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” Aweis praises the Lord for the wise men and women of God whose wisdom he depends on daily.

Claiming an entire Somali town for Jesus

In 1998, Aweis requested permission from his mission director to be allowed to give evangelistic priority to a Somali town in Somalia where, at the time, the residents were one hundred percent Muslim. The population of the historic town was about 10,000. Several residents became disciples of Christ after two years of extensive evangelism. However, worsening security in this famous town and Aweis’ travel to the United States in 2001 halted the ambitious ministry. The resumption of this ministry is now being considered. Aweis’ initial vision was for a clear majority of the residents to follow Jesus within fifty years. This would have made the town the first Christian-majority town in Somalia. There are currently only two house churches in this town.

Several Somali Christians and a few missionaries with an influential parachurch organization considered Aweis' vision unattainable, if not outright dangerous. Criticism against his vision continued unabated even as Muslims in the town started coming to the Lord. The idea of giving evangelistic priority to one town or village with the intention of turning its population into a Christian majority in the foreseeable future was never seriously considered since the formal inception of Somali ministry in 1881. Aweis' vision, therefore, lacked a point of reference; this might explain why some godly Christians considered the vision certainly unachievable and probably too perilous.

The resumption of this ministry is around the corner and Aweis is convinced that the majority of the Muslim residents in this town could become followers of Christ by 2073, long after he passes into glory. When this vision bears fruit, it could be the greatest church planting movement since Pentecost. Aweis is not planning to put expatriate ministers on the ground to evangelize and disciple; all the ministers on the ground doing the ministry would be local Somalis from the same region where the targeted town is. The evangelists and other church leaders would not be on a salary, they would earn their livelihoods as tentmakers.¹⁶ This would give these evangelists and other ministers credibility in the Muslim community they serve.

Ministry to people with mental disabilities

Aweis commenced a new ministry in eastern Ethiopia in 1999. He focused on Dire Dawa and Harar towns. His vision to lead men with mental disabilities to the Lord surprised many people. One difficulty was that all these men were homeless, without any fixed address. Finding them for follow-up ministry sometimes took days. Aweis' ministry to them included regular prayers for the men; they welcomed this unsolicited spiritual care. Some of the men were healed of their illnesses; others found the prayers very amusing. Aweis believes that people with mental disabilities need to hear the Good News even if their mental capacity is very limited. The Great Commission includes all people regardless of their mental capacity.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28: 18-20 (NIV).

Before Aweis started his ministry to these people, he consulted with local mental health experts and pastors. The counsel he received from them helped him in this difficult ministry. The strategies Aweis employed in this outreach include:

1. Extensive prayers and fasting by those in the ministry
2. Recruiting prayer warriors for this ministry

¹⁶ Tentmaking is a general term which refers to the work of Christians who are in ministry but financially support themselves by performing full time "tentmaking" jobs they are qualified to do. These jobs may include business, education, or any other trade. The concept of tentmaking comes from the apostle Paul, who financially supported himself by making actual tents while evangelizing in Corinth (Acts 18:3).

3. Asking the people with mental disabilities open-ended questions and listening carefully without interruptions
4. Offering them spiritual and medical care
5. Letting them share about themselves as much or as little as they wanted
6. Involving the local community (of all faiths) in this ministry

These strategies served the ministry well. Aweis was able to listen to the men without prejudice. He often allowed them to lead the discussions and asked them if there were any friends or family members they wanted to contact. He also made known to them that spiritual and medical care were readily available to them. Aweis secured first aid for four of the men when they hurt themselves. His ministry won praise from the local communities and government authorities who recognized the importance, as well as the uniqueness, of it.

One of the men who lived in the streets of Dire Dawa had a habit of killing cats and using their fresh carcasses as hats and ornaments; the smell was horrendous. While Aweis had the full support of his mission director at the time, some local Christians did not see the viability or the significance of witnessing to men who lacked the faculty to comprehend the essentials of the Christian faith. These concerns did not deter Aweis – he continued this outreach until he moved to the United States for seminary training in 2001.

Based on available data, Aweis was the first to ever formally minister to people with mental disabilities in Ethiopia without housing them. No other ministry exists to this day that reaches these marginalized and underprivileged people. Since Jesus died for all people, including people with mental disabilities, all deserve to hear the Good News in a way they can understand. How much they can comprehend about the salvific message of Jesus Christ is beyond the scope of this book. However, there is sufficient evidence in the Bible of Jesus ministering to people of diminished mental capacity because of demonic influences.¹⁷ Some of the men Aweis ministered to were possessed by demons because they were healed after Aweis and his ministry partners prayed for them. However, there were others who did not show any visible recovery after weeks of prayers. Some hospitals Aweis approached refused to treat these men without the request of their next of kin. These men could not even remember their names and no one knew where they were from.

¹⁷ Healing at the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21–28 Luke 4:31–37), healing of the Gerasene demonic (Matthew 8:28–34, Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:26–39) and healing of the demon possessed boy (Matthew 17:14–21, Mark 9:14–29 and Luke 9:37–49).

Ministry to nomadic Muslim camel herders

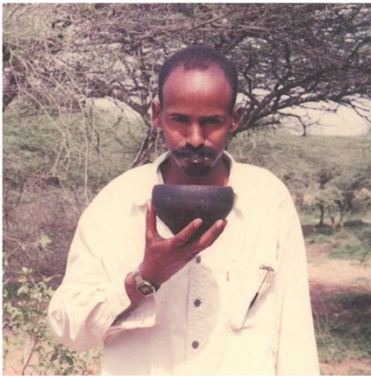


A Somali camel herder evangelist in the Somali peninsula

Aweis put a proposal to his leader in 2013. The vision he shared with his leader was so radical that it appeared out of this world. Telling an American missionary that the church should buy some camels and commission camel-herding evangelists to reach Muslim nomadic camel herders was met with great interest. Aweis' proposal was so detailed and so practical that the church adopted it with great enthusiasm.

Aweis proposed that every trained evangelist receive six church-owned camels so that he could travel with the nomadic Muslim camel herders who crisscross the Somali peninsula. Aweis' church has so far commissioned several camel-herding evangelistic teams and their ministry is bearing fruit. These teams sell the camel milk when they are around inhabited areas. They use some of the money for their sustenance and the wellbeing of the camels. They save the rest of the money for the camel-herding creative access ministry. Aweis published an impressive article on this ministry.¹⁸

Camel herders always carry guns with them to make sure that no one steals their camels. Camels without protective gun-owning herders do not last in the Horn of Africa. While the primary reason for keeping guns is to discourage camel rustlers, lions sometimes attack camels and camel herders use their weapons to scare away the hungry and aggressive predators. There are rare occasions when lions kill camel herders who fiercely protect their precious possessions.



Aweis drinking camel milk outside the Somali capital in 1999 while ministering to Somali camel herders.

Aweis' leadership talent is deeply rooted in his upbringing and community expectation. Somali men are culturally required to lead with courage, confidence and kindness. Visionary leaders are deeply admired in this culture, while weak ones are despised. Aweis' father also trained him as a boy so he could one day succeed him as a Muslim cleric, a plan that fell apart when Aweis became a follower of Christ at age eighteen. All these contributions in his life prepared Aweis for the visionary leader he later became.

Conclusion

While Aweis is generally a consensus leader, he is also known as a decisive trailblazer who leads from the front when it is necessary. The people he leads follow him because they trust his

¹⁸ Aweis A. Ali, "Jesus as the Good Camel Herder: The Somali Nomads as the Final Frontier." EMQ, Volume 58, Issue 1. January - March, 2022. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/jesus-as-the-good-camel-herder/> (accessed 05 June 2022).

foresight and integrity. Examples of this include when he sought to win an entire Somali town for the Lord and when he put in motion the ministry to the camel herders. While some found these ideas unrealistic, both ministries have demonstrated varying degrees of success. One ministry in North Africa has recently established a ministry that witnesses to local Muslim camel herders. This ministry was inspired by Aweis' ministry.

People from more reserved cultures can sometimes perceive Aweis as hawkish and somewhat stubborn. These people may perceive his passion to get the job done and his high self-esteem as overconfidence or pride. Despite spending decades outside Somalia, Aweis is still a Somali at heart. Somali culture requires men to be strong and go-getters. Needless to say, this culture has some un-Christ-like elements, like pride and the inclination towards revenge and violence. The culture also considers humility a feminine trait and frowns upon male humility. Somali poetry and proverbs eloquently demonstrate this problem.

CHAPTER 3: MASCULINITY IN SOMALI CULTURE

“Without men is like without God.”¹⁹
 - Somali proverb

Introduction

The dominant Somali culture evolved in the inhospitable and resource-scarce peninsula of the Somali nomadic pastoralists. Only the fittest of men thrive in this hostile environment. Revenge killings and egotism are therefore rampant among dominant Somali clans. Characteristics frowned upon in this culture include male humility and excessive religiosity; the Somali proverb, “You cannot fight men and fear God at the same time” illustrates this tradition.²⁰ God is removed from the equation when Somali men fight; it is a dog-eat-dog culture in this instance. Everyman quickly learns his place in society when the gloves come off. No family or country can depend on men who lack courage, coordination, stoicism, strength and testosterone.

Subordinate men are ranked below women and children in Somali culture – not a covetable place in an inhospitable man’s world. Masculine traits cherished in Somali culture, such as violence and self-importance, are alien concepts in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ-like qualities propagated in the Christian faith, such as humility, turning the other cheek and not taking revenge on one’s enemies, are seen as feminine attributes. Aweis asserts that “The tame men Western Christianity exalts end up at the bottom of the food chain when chaos manifests itself.” If Aweis’ premise is accurate, then the church must not demonize natural masculinity, self-defense and civilized aggression.

Hawkish culture

In a popular Somali song, the female singer mocks a man she considers a beta male. Selected stanzas of the classic song say:

Goor iyo ayaan	<i>All the time</i> ²¹
<i>Wallee gooshkaan wiilal kacay Garqabad reer ma hantiyaan Mid baan iri; gacaliyow Sidee xil u gudan kartaa Gankaa ma iska celin kartaa Wuxuu yiri; Gankayga maxaa dagaal Aniga goroddayda suray</i>	<i>By God, the men of this generation Cannot lead a family I said to one man Can you perform your duties? Can you defend yourself against men? Then he said to me “Why do I want to fight? Why should I be violent?</i>

¹⁹ In Somali, “*Rag la’aani waa Rabbi la’aan.*”

²⁰ In Somali, “*Rag iska dhici iyo Rabbi ka cabso meel islama galaan.*”

²¹ The vocalists are Hassan Adan Samatar and Sahra Abukar Dawo. Lyrics by Mohamed Ali Kaariye. Composed by Jiim Sheikh Mumin. Instrumentalists: Durdur Band, 1982.

<i>Ninkii gardarro u socdee Gujo iyo feer i la dhacayow Boliiskaan dacwada u geyn Ma kaasaa geesiyoo Gayi iyo qoys toona dhiqi?</i>	<i>If a man transgresses against me If he punches or slaps me I will accuse him to the police” Is that really a brave man? Can he lead his family or country?</i>
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The dominant Somali clans are often hawkish and fierce yet friendly. The Somali clan system encourages revenge killings to restore compromised family honor. Somalis practiced Sufi (popular) Islam for centuries. Radical Islam is a newcomer among Somalis. The Somali *ulema* (Muslim clergy) of the Sufi tradition are among the humblest people one will ever meet and lay Somalis despise them for that. A popular Somali adage says, “Are there more men or more women?” The answer is, “If you include the *ulema*, then there are more women.”²²

Diriye wants revenge

Oliver, a young Canadian missionary, was once leading a Somali Bible study group in Addis Ababa in the mid 1990s. The topic on that day was forgiveness and the philosophy of turning the other cheek. The missionary described how Jesus forgave his crucifiers while he was still on the cross.²³ Diriye explained that he could not forgive the Muslim men who repeatedly shot him in Mogadishu because of his Christian faith. This man lost an eye in a hail of bullets that almost ended his life and he wanted retribution. The missionary stressed that it was imperative that Diriye forgive because of his Christian faith. A heated argument ensued and Diriye walked away from the Bible study and never returned.

Retaliation is considered manly in traditional Somali culture. A Somali proverb that best expresses the Somali obsession with revenge says, “A man who does not seek revenge returns to his mother’s womb.”²⁴ Violence is also seen as a legitimate form of communication as the Somali proverb, “Unless your spear first enters a man, he will not heed your words,”²⁵ illustrates. Another similar Somali proverb states, “Unless your fist first protects you, no law will defend you.”²⁶

A man who has a son

There is a general belief in Somali culture that you do not mess with a man who has a son, even if that son is still in his mother’s womb. The message is that the boy will one day find you to put you in your place. A hooligan shot and killed a man while robbing him in Mogadishu, Somalia. The 1992 incident sent shockwaves through the neighborhood because the young victim was an outstanding family man and a devout Muslim. By divine provision, the victim left behind a seven-year-old son. The widow always reminded her only son how his father was ruthlessly murdered by the neighborhood lowlife.

²² In Somali, “*Ragga iyo dumarka yaa badan? Haddii culimada lagu daro dumarka ayaa badan.*”

²³ “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.,’ Luke 23:34, NKJV.

²⁴ In Somali “*Nin aan aarsan uurka hooyadii ku noqoy.*”

²⁵ In Somali, “*Nin aan warankaagu gaarin, warakaagu ma gaaro.*”

²⁶ In Somali, “*Nin aan shantaadu kaa reebin, sharci kaama reebo.*”

The murderer later appeared to have changed his evil ways; he attended mosque prayers regularly and gave up his criminal activities. Whether this was a genuine transformation or an attempt to hoodwink his past victims and their families is hard to tell. While coming out of a mosque after afternoon prayer, the murderer came under a barrage of bullets from an AK-47 assault rifle in the hands of a fourteen-year-old boy. The 1999 revenge killing was hailed as a heroic act by the local community. Maybe there is merit in the saying that you do not mess with a man who has a son.

Humility and the Somali man

Humility is arguably the one Christian doctrine that Somali Christian men struggle with the most. Forgiveness becomes a walk in the park when compared to humility, which Somalis consider a feminine trait. Aweis has heard many Somali Christian converts complaining that they feel castrated since coming to the Lord. Many of the qualities associated with manhood in Somali culture are incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Revenge, violence, egotism, polygyny and the “my way or the highway” attitude are in the realm of the flesh. Aweis believes Somali Christian men are duty-bound to find godly ways to define manhood without giving Satan a foothold.

Conclusion

Somali culture venerates masculinity so much that Somalis cannot imagine God doing anything good without the help of men. When Somalis see a big problem that needs to be solved, they say, “We need men and God to resolve this problem.”²⁷ Somalis’ love affair with strong masculinity permeates Somali culture. Beta males are relegated to a position slightly lower than that of females, not an enviable place for any man. Somali culture values stoicism and testosterone-fueled strength. No wonder Islam found among Somalis fertile ground to grow very deep roots. However, much of Somali culture is not compatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Aweis’ upbringing in this culture benefits him well, but he had to abandon certain aspects of Somali culture that were not compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Aweis was introduced into this macho culture when he was forty days old; this is when he was initiated by the most violent man in the village. However, Aweis refused early on in his preteens to emulate the man who initiated him; he found his character lacking. Unlike the brawler he was expected to mimic, Aweis developed a taste for formal education and became a law-abiding citizen. He also developed an impeccable work ethic and was known even as a child for his honesty and integrity.

²⁷ In Somali, “*Rag iyo Rabbi ayuu arrinkani u baahan yahay.*” See Aweis A. Ali’s book, *Men and God (Rag iyo Rabbi)*, Maandeeq Publishing, 2020, IX.

CHAPTER 4: INITIATION AND EARLY EDUCATION

“To be without knowledge is to be without light.”²⁸
- Somali proverb

Introduction

Aweis faced two major challenges in the first seven years of his life. First, he was expected to emulate the man who initiated him as a newborn baby in central Somalia. This man would have been in prison (for thuggery and murder) if Somalia was a land of law and order. Even as a boy of about ten years old, Aweis knew that lionizing his initiator was a wicked idea. This refusal to become like his initiator irked Aweis’ relatives, including his mother. When there is not a government that can maintain law and order, people take the law into their own hands and the line between good and evil becomes blurred.

Second, Aweis was registered in primary school too early. He started grade one when he was about five years old. He was the youngest child in the school and some of his fellow students were five to ten years his senior. Because of his inability to understand anything taught in class, he was labeled as dumb by both students and teachers; Aweis believed that lie, which temporarily compromised his self-esteem. The first two years of his formal education were therefore characterized by pain and suffering. The torturous experience ended two to three years later when he became old enough to understand the school subjects.

Failed indoctrination

Aweis’ mother selected a distant relative of his to initiate him when he was forty days old. She chose Hassan W. because he was a warrior and oral tradition has it that he never lost a fight. Hassan was a big risk taker with an unsavory history, which is too grotesque to mention here. Aweis’ mother wanted him to be brave, strong and fearsome like Hassan, but she soon realized he was nothing like the man who initiated him. His mother never hid her disappointment in Aweis. Instead of being a brawler, he was bookish. His mother regularly reminded him of the characteristics of the “valiant” man who initiated him; she wanted him to imitate and emulate that man, but he had other ideas. He did not want to be like him. The more Aweis learned about him, the more he was appalled.

To his mother’s displeasure, Aweis was polite, quiet and largely invisible compared to Ahmed, his elder brother, who was a typical Somali boy. Aweis preferred to stay at home when he had no compelling reason to be out. Unlike his brother, he often avoided trouble like the plague. When he was around ten, his mother once told him to leave home and find other children to play with. He left and walked towards the exit of their property, when he heard his mother calling him, “Come back now.” He returned and reminded her that she was the one who told him to leave and

²⁸ In Somali, “*Aqoon la’aani waa iftiin la’aan.*”

find children to play with. “You walked by the chicken coop like a girl, instead of jumping over it like a boy”, she yelled. “Now go and jump like a boy,” she demanded.



Traditional Somali chicken coop

Aweis jumped over the chicken coop to please his mother, but it was a disaster. A traditional chicken coop is made by cutting a metal barrel in half and vertically inserting it into the ground until a quarter of it is buried. He could not clear the barrel and fell right into the dirty and smelly coop littered with chicken droppings. His ill-fitting hand-me-down trousers did not help his attempted jump. Aweis came out of the coop messy and badly bruised. This experience opened his eyes. He decided to be who he wanted to be regardless of what his mother or anyone else thought. Aweis’ mother thought he was acting like a girl instead of a rough and tough Somali boy. She wanted to toughen him up.

Aweis’ mother wanted him to become two different people at the same time – *wadaad* (a Muslim cleric) and *waranle* (a warrior). These two offices are oxymoronic in Somali culture. While the clergy are supposed to be meek and well-mannered, warriors must be rugged and harsh. He chose to be humble and well-mannered. The choices he made early on in life were divine guidance and served him well over the years.

Growing up, Aweis was a pious Muslim. He started praying regularly five times a day by the time he was ten. He began fasting the entire thirty days of Ramadan before he turned thirteen. Aweis recalls a day when he was about eight years old and was herding the family goats in the Bangaariyo neighborhood of the capital. He heard the noon prayer call, found some water quickly and started making his ritual ablutions to pray. Three smartly dressed young women, who were employees of one of Somalia’s financial institutions, saw him. One of them said aloud, “He is so young. Why is he bothering to pray?” The two others laughed at him because a little boy praying of his own accord made no sense to them. The young women were apparently well-to-do nominal Muslims.

Grade school

No one really knows when Aweis was born, but there are a couple of good guesses. He once asked his mother about the year he was born and she told him, “When the president was shot and killed.” His paternal aunt contradicted his mother and said, “He was walking when that man was killed.” Aweis was therefore born in 1969 according to his mother or 1968 according to his aunt. He chose 1968 as his birth year since he always wanted to be older. Birthdays are not celebrated among Somalis and no one really cares exactly how old one is. Good guesses are good enough even if you are ten years off; an older man guessing he is either sixty or seventy is perfectly acceptable among Somalis. Once Aweis adopted an arbitrary birth year, all he needed was a memorable day and a month and it took him a few hours to pick them out of thin air.

The Somali government mandated that children registering for grade one should be at least seven years old. Some schools preferred a minimum age of nine. Aweis was enrolled in grade one when he was too young to start formal schooling. The oldest student in his class was his cousin,

Mohamed, who was about ten years his senior. Another relative, Mohamud, was at least five years older than Aweis. He was set up for failure because of his young age.

Aweis did not learn basic reading and writing until the end of second grade and he struggled with basic math, like multiplication, during his second and third years at the school. Many schools in Somalia had a mean system at the time. Classrooms at his school had three fixed rows of seats. The right-hand row was called *safka damiiniinta* (the row for dumb students) and this is where Aweis sat until the middle of his third year. Students who sat in the row for dumb students were discriminated against. The smart students would not socialize with them or even shake their hands by way of greeting. They would not sit with them during recess because they thought being dumb was contagious. They could not risk becoming dumb by socializing with those known to be “unintelligent” students.

One teacher decided to prepare the students for basic multiplication around the end of the second year. The teacher asked the students what the answers were for 5×5 , 10×10 and 20×20 . Many students answered very quickly. The teacher would ask these questions a few times a week, but Aweis was confused every time. He could not understand why 5×5 was 25 last week and still 25 today. He asked some older classmates if 5×5 was always 25 in every region or even country and they answered in the affirmative, which confused Aweis even more.

Aweis' mind caught up with the education system when he started third grade around the age of eight. He was moved from the row for dumb students, which was a huge relief. His elder brother said to him, “Welcome to the row for smart students.” Aweis was one of the top students in grade four; so much so, that the school administration decided he was too smart for grade five, so he skipped it and went from grade four to grade six. It took Aweis many years to understand that he was not dumb during his first three years at school, but just too young.

Sheikh Muse and the blessed pens

A popular Sufi Sheikh used to visit Aweis' neighborhood for years during the final exam season. Sheikh Muse would go to the home of every family who invited him and bless the pens of their children so they could get good grades. Aweis' mother invited Sheikh Muse during his third and fourth grade and he blessed his and his brother's pens. Children with the “super” pens protected those precious pens with their lives; they knew that any child who stole any of those blessed pens would get good grades and the one who lost the holy pen might fail without it. Sheikh Muse took the credit when Aweis skipped grade five. Aweis told his mother that he would throw away any pen Sheikh Muse blessed because the whole idea of the magic pens was silly. That was the last time Sheikh Muse blessed any pens in their home. Yet the brothers continued excelling in their studies. One of Aweis' American lecturers at the college he attended in Addis Ababa confirmed his conviction that one did not need a holy pen to get good grades. This theologian's often repeated mantra was, “Salvation is by grace, grades are by works.”

A rite of passage & English language schools

The age of majority in the Somali culture is fifteen.²⁹ This is when a boy becomes a man. However, among Somali pastoralists, there is a formal evaluation for boys at age twelve. Any boy who fails in the evaluation is expected to grow up to be a loser or at least a very weak man. A Somali poet explains this important rite of passage in a well-known Somali poem:

Wiil Labo & Toban Jira	<i>When a Boy is Twelve</i>
<i>Wiil labo iyo toban jiraa hadduu, lali ahaan waayo</i>	<i>If a boy is twelve years old but not already tough enough</i>
<i>Marti leyl dhexaad timid haduu, luun ka rogi waayo</i>	<i>If he cannot feed famished guests coming late at night</i>
<i>Lallabaha colaadeed hadduu, leebka ridi waayo</i>	<i>If he cannot fight with arrows in war times</i>
<i>Raganimo liddiis kuma jirtee, liicyaye ogaada.</i>	<i>That boy will never become a man, he has already failed</i>

Ahmed, Aweis' elder brother, passed that evaluation with flying colors. However, Aweis was granted a conditional pass. He believes that his peaceful demeanor and proclivity to formal education were considered unmanly traits in the combative Somali culture. His unsatiable appetite for books was always considered an obsession by his birth family.

Aweis told his parents that he wanted to learn English at the age of twelve. His father was not pleased but still took him and his elder brother to Jigjiga Private School, a one-room English language school, which was located a few miles from their home. Aweis did well in the evening English classes and enjoyed his studies. He felt the language school was too slow for him, so he decided to join a second English language school to satisfy his hunger for it. He knew that he had to learn English well if he wanted to go to university or be gainfully employed in the future. Aweis also knew that his parents would not pay for a second language school. However, he still told his mother about his plans and, sure enough, she objected to it. She told him one English language school should be plenty. She also said that too much learning without enough playtime could drive him crazy.

²⁹ This is probably an Islamic influence where the age of majority for males is also fifteen. There is no agreed upon age of majority for females. Some Muslim scholars hold a view, with substantial following, that a female never reaches an age of majority; they say she is always a minor with adult feet.



Owners and instructors of Al Itihad Institute of Languages. From left to right (standing): Ali Aweis, Mohamed Amin, Osman Muse. (Sitting): Aweis Ali, Abdulkadir Gabeire and Ahmed Abdi

Aweis decided to find a clandestine way to earn money so he could pay for the second school. He started washing cars by the roadside and selling loose cigarettes and chewing gum in the afternoons at a restaurant about two miles from his English language school. The income from this covert work paid for the second one. He graduated from both language schools by age fifteen and joined a more advanced language school, Deeq International Private School. He graduated from this by age seventeen. Aweis and a friend of his opened Amiin Private School, their own one-room English language school, a year later. They recruited four friends who graduated from Deeq International Private School and rented a nice villa where they opened Al-Itihad Institute of Languages in 1987. This was one of the most successful and most well-known English language schools in Mogadishu until it closed in 1991

because of the Somali civil war.

Conclusion

As illustrated by Aweis' initiation ceremony, his birth family had a plan for him, however, God had a better idea for this newborn son. The hand of the Lord was on Aweis even when he was too young or too ignorant to recognize it. Every attempted indoctrination intended to divert Aweis from the right path proved to be futile. The forces of darkness could not impede God's will and Aweis became God's beloved child after he responded to Jesus' call to follow him. Satan did not give up on Aweis after he became a disciple of Christ, but he could not snatch him out of God's hand. Aweis excelled in school despite some early challenges and developed a keen academic and intellectual mind early on.

God's protection of Aweis, physically and spiritually, was visible to anyone close enough to observe it. He survived calamities on land and in the sea that could have killed him many times over. Aweis prospered in Somalia as an upright Muslim boy who always sought to hear from God. Despite her traditional views on things, Aweis' mother was one of the people God used to bless and protect him in a hostile environment to the people of God. The God who safeguarded Moses in Pharaoh's home, shielded Aweis in Islamic Somalia, protecting him from the arrows of Satan.

CHAPTER 5: DIVINE INTERVENTIONS

“Those who trust God enjoy his protection.”³⁰

-Somali proverb

Introduction

The very fact that Aweis is alive and well today flies in the face of every probability. His survival alone frustrates all competent statisticians. Given the circumstances surrounding Aweis' birth and upbringing, he should have been born oxygen-deprived, snatched by wild animals, buried alive, died of a freak accident, caught up in a clannish crossfire, or martyred by Muslim militants. There were several times Aweis could not understand why he did not die. The odds were stacked against his very survival, yet each time he walked away physically unscathed. Aweis attributes his good fortunes to the hand of the Lord; only the Lord God knows why he let him live this long and accomplish so much for the Kingdom of God.

Early 1994 to mid 1996 were difficult times for Aweis. He was still in Mogadishu, Somalia, and facing bloody persecution because of his Christian faith. His favorite prayer at the time was from Psalm 17: 8 - 10 (NIV), “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me. They close up their callous hearts and their mouths speak with arrogance.” Each time Aweis cried out to the Lord, He protected him. During the height of the Somali civil war, Aweis witnessed both innocent Muslims and Christians whose lives were extinguished by evil-doers, yet he was saved during the gory mayhem. He recently said, “The Lord is still kind to me, a kindness I neither deserve nor earn.”

Falling off the camel



*A camel carrying a boy
Photo credit: Master File*

Aweis' nomadic family was on the move again when he was a toddler. A makeshift covered “cradle” was placed on the back of the beloved family he-camel. Aweis was safely put in the cozy camel cot and the family embarked on the long trek to better pastureland for their cattle, sheep and goats. Camels are not known for their smooth ride, so Aweis slipped out and crashed onto the sandy road. His father quickly retrieved the shell-shocked boy and placed him back in the cradle. Aweis was fortunate that he was not hurt badly; he was also lucky to have been found so fast. Some children fall off camels and suffer serious injuries or even death. Others are snatched by wild animals if they are not quickly recovered.

³⁰ In Somali, “*Alle aamin ma iisho.*”

The glance that saved him

Once, as a little boy, Aweis was feeling unwell for a few days. One fateful morning, his mother woke up wailing and summoned some of the neighbors. She gave them the sad news that Aweis was dead. An old Sheikh who could barely see was delegated to check on Aweis to confirm whether he was dead or alive. The Sheikh felt the boy and gently shook him. He did not move, so the Sheikh returned to the waiting crowd to confirm that the child was indeed dead. Aweis' mother and the other women wept while the men put on brave faces. It is not culturally acceptable for Somali men to cry openly like women and children do. Men can cry only if their mouth remains shut. Crying with an open mouth is seen as unmanly.

Several young men with shovels were sent to dig a grave for the deceased boy so he could be buried quickly in accordance with Sharia law. A few hours after the Sheikh pronounced Aweis dead, his mother requested the men in charge of the burial procedure to see him one more time before he was taken out for burial. The men denied the grieving mother's request, citing her uncontrollable wailing as the reason. There are cultural beliefs in certain Somali regions that any excessive tears shed for a deceased person will burn the dead body as a fire; the cruel dictum was probably devised to discourage disruptive crying at funerals. Aweis' mother, petite but fierce, demanded to see the body and gave the men an ultimatum, "You will either allow me to see my dead son one last time or I will forcefully enter the bedroom to say goodbye to my son." The men relented and allowed her in but sent a young man in with her to keep an eye on her. Aweis' mother touched his forehead, moved his arms closer to his body and kissed him goodbye.

She turned to walk away from the body, then glanced back one more time and suddenly screamed, "He is alive, he is alive, he is alive!" She rushed back to his bedside, knelt beside the boy and held him by the shoulders. The young man who was with her assumed she was going crazy and tried to push her away from the boy, but failed. He exited the bedroom and returned with five other men who attempted to forcefully separate the mother from her son. She stopped crying and yelled at the men that her son was alive because she saw him move a leg. The men relented and delegated a middle-aged man to see if the grief-stricken mother was telling the truth or if she was simply being emotional. The man checked the boy and concluded that the mother was right – the boy was indeed alive because he "was visibly breathing and moving."

While the people were overcome with joy, the men who were assigned to dig the grave returned, fully prepared to carry the body off so they could bury it. The men were told, "The boy is alive." One of the gravediggers said, "That is a cruel joke. A boy is dead and you think your joke is funny?" After the confirmation of several men, the grave diggers believed the boy was alive. If it was not for his mother's strong will and disregard for the words of fallible men, Aweis would have been buried alive, a fate faced by many stricken with illness in Somalia.

The sand tunnel

When Aweis was about nine, he dug a sand tunnel in his yard. It took him a few hours to dig a tunnel big enough to sit in. The entry of the tunnel was narrow, but it was more spacious inside. He was so impressed with his craftsmanship that he started enlarging it on the inside so he could share it with some of his friends. After playing in the tunnel for about an hour, he came out to see

if any of his friends were around so they could play in the tunnel together. Within a few minutes of him coming out, the tunnel collapsed. Aweis first felt sad that all his work was wasted before he could show it off to his friends, but it very quickly dawned on him that if he had stayed in that tunnel a few more minutes, he would have suffocated and died!

The shark attack



"X" marks the approximate location of the shark attack.

One fateful early Monday morning when Aweis was about thirteen, he left home to go and swim at the *Mare Morte* (Sea of Death) beach right behind Mogadishu International Airport.³¹ Since he was afraid to go alone, he decided to find someone to go with him. Aweis met his cousin, Muse,³² who was his agemate. Aweis asked him to go with him so they could swim in *Mare Morte*. Muse refused, saying, "It is too early in the morning and we will probably be the only people there." Aweis assured Muse that they would not be the only swimmers there. Muse, who was not the sharpest tool in the shed, reluctantly went with Aweis. Swimming in *Mare Morte* beach was illegal for two main reasons. First, it was full of sharks and the Italian colonial authorities gave it the dreadful name "Sea of Death" after sharks ate too many of their citizens while swimming. The second reason was that the only way swimmers could access the beach was to secretly scale the airport perimeter wall and then cross the busy airport runway to reach the beach.

Muse and Aweis reached the vacant beach at about half past seven. The only person there was a young fisherman who perched on a rock overlooking the water. Muse and Aweis disrobed and proceeded to enter the water to swim. Muse was very scared, but Aweis told him he would take the lead and Muse would be protected if he stayed right behind him. Muse followed Aweis as they walked into the water until they were chest deep. A huge wave came and crashed into the boys with such force that they involuntarily took a few steps backward. Aweis wondered if Muse was safe but before he could look back, he heard an awful deafening scream and a sudden silence that followed. When he looked back, Muse was no more and the water behind him was red with blood. A huge shark had been hiding in the big wave that crashed first into Aweis and then into Muse.

Aweis was terrified beyond measure as he started to swim back for safety. The huge shark was now stuck in the shallows with Muse in its jaws, unable to get back to deeper water without another large wave. Aweis pressed forward to get out of the water, but in his shock and haste decided to try to swim over the struggling shark. In his frantic attempt to get away, he bumped into the shark a few times. He even collided with the shark's mouth and felt Muse's limbs flailing around. He finally managed to escape from the immediate vicinity of the shark and reached dry land shaking and screaming. Aweis ran to the lone fisherman for help. He told him what was happening to his cousin. The fisherman was visibly frightened. He dropped his fishing line, grabbed his bicycle and fled. Aweis later expressed his great disappointment at the flight of that adult man.

³¹ The Somalized Italian name of this beach is "*Maanya Moorto*."

³² Muse was in fact the youngest brother of Habibo aw-Ali, Aweis' stepmom.

Aweis returned to the place where the shark was feasting on his cousin and saw the remains in shallower waters close to dry land. The waves had pushed the body closer. The shark was trying to snatch what was left of Muse, but the water was too shallow for it to get to the body. Aweis collected some stones and threw them at the shark to scare it off; it finally swam away.

Since there was no one else at the beach to ask for help, Aweis ran all the way home to notify the family of what had happened. He crossed the airport runway without even looking if an airplane was taxiing. He climbed over the airport perimeter wall and crossed a major highway. He was not thinking clearly when he took all these risks; he was in survival mode. The first family member Aweis met was his cousin's father. Even though Aweis was terrified and shaking badly, uttering incoherent words, he told his uncle what had happened. His uncle stared at Aweis and said, "I am on an errand now. I will come later." The uncle had some developmental issues (and the low IQ that comes with them) and could not comprehend the severity of what Aweis narrated. Because of his young age and inexperience, Aweis could not empathize with his cousin's father: he was very disappointed in him at the time. Aweis expected the father to drop off everything and run to the beach to retrieve what was left of his deceased son; this did not happen. Generations of inbreeding had taken their toll on this man and his family.

Aweis reached home after leaving his uncle and informed his mother what had happened to Muse. Aweis' mother mobilized several relatives and marched to the beach. They stopped by the Fire Department of the Mogadishu International Airport where they were given a couple of firemen to help them retrieve the remains of the deceased boy for burial. What happened to his cousin had a deep impact on Aweis. In fact, he stayed home for about a week just to recover from the immense shock. However, within a few months of his cousin's violent death, Aweis returned to *Mare Morte* beach to swim. The sharks claimed several other swimmers in the next few years, but Aweis always escaped physical harm.

The rocket attack

Another near-death experience occurred when Aweis was returning one morning in early 1992 from a family visit in northern Mogadishu. While he was trying to find a bus to take him home, a mortar shell hit the main asphalt road at Afarta Jerdiino intersection. The mortar landed about one hundred feet away from him and the flying shrapnel injured a donkey about fifty feet from him. The powerful blast shook him to his core. He watched as the donkey started bleeding to death. He later learned that the intersection was an active target for snipers and shelling that whole morning. This explains why the often-busy junction was deserted, except for Aweis and the poor donkey. This was during the early years of the Somali civil war.

The boat accident

In late 1992, Aweis was working as a supervisor for a fleet of medium-sized fishing boats that were used to ferry goods from ships anchored about a mile from the beach of the Elma'an natural seaport in northern Mogadishu. This makeshift port supplied much of Mogadishu in the early years of the civil war. The captain, two porters and Aweis took one boat and visited a ship that was loaded with foodstuff. They left the ship after doing some paperwork and headed to the

shallow waters by the beach where they could anchor the boat. When they were close to the anchoring location, a big wave came out of nowhere and hit the boat on the side. The boat flipped and beached upside down. The captain and the two porters were thrown off the boat and landed in the water; Aweis was the unlucky one, because he ended up underneath the upside-down boat that was full of water. He was close to drowning when another big wave hit the side of the boat and threw it several feet away off Aweis. He would have died of suffocation if the second wave did not hit the boat that quickly.

The targeted house church



Abukar Hared Taakow

Of all the near-death encounters sustained by Aweis, the most incredible occurred when twelve members of a fourteen-member house church Aweis was co-pastoring were martyred one by one for their faith between 1994 and 1996. The co-pastor of this influential house church was the famous and fearless Somali church leader, Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan. Only Aweis and another member, Abukar Hared Taakow, survived the Islamist assassination spree. Abukar would later die of natural causes, probably hastened by the stress of the persecution. Aweis often wonders why he is the only survivor of an entire house church. He attributes this to divine intervention. The details of this story are described in chapter nine.

The malaria attack

After twelve members of his house church were martyred for their faith, Aweis left Mogadishu in 1996 en route to Ethiopia where he could be safe. A Land Rover smuggled him from Mogadishu to the agricultural town of Jowhar, fifty miles from Mogadishu. Aweis spent the night in a mosquito-infested motel by the Shabelle river. He had a history of malaria, but he always recovered within a short period of time. This time was different. Aweis, who was already underweight and stressed out because of the severe persecution he had been facing, came down with a cold, nausea, shivering, fever and a headache – the classic symptoms of malaria.

He could not eat, so he lost more weight and became even weaker. He could hardly walk by the time he reached the Somali Ethiopian town of Kelafo. It felt like some of Aweis' vital organs were shutting down; he fervently prayed one night and asked God to either take his life or heal him. He could not go on living this way. Within two days of that prayer, Aweis was eating again and was feeling better. Within a week, he gained back much of the weight he had lost and the people traveling with him could not believe the dramatic improvement they saw. This was the last time Aweis had malaria.

If the Lord God had not intervened and Aweis had died during that journey, he would have been buried in an unmarked grave by the roadside with no family or friends ever knowing what had happened to him. Abdullahi Daameey, one of Aweis' cousins, left home one morning in 1992 and was never seen again. He was probably hit by a stray bullet and good Samaritans, who did not know him, buried him in an unmarked grave. The Lord saved Aweis from a similar fate.

The car accident



The 2015 car accident

Aweis was returning to Addis Ababa from a ministry trip in eastern Ethiopia in 2015 during torrential rains. A section of the asphalt road was covered by silt and the sediment made the narrow road slippery. Aweis' vehicle skidded off the road and flipped upside down. He was the only occupant in the vehicle and sustained minor head lacerations caused by broken glass.

Aweis was able to open the front passenger door and crawl out safely but was badly shaken. That is

when he noticed he was not the only one who had an accident that night. A big truck lost control an hour before him and crashed in the same area. Aweis also witnessed another vehicle losing control and being wrecked. That section of the asphalt road was too hazardous to be driven on. Aweis and a few other men mobilized themselves to warn other vehicles for hours. This prevented more accidents from happening.

Aweis knows one thing for certain: it was not luck that saved him so many times or brought him this far. It was only the hand of the Lord God Almighty.

Conclusion

From the day he was born, Aweis faced what appeared to be insurmountable challenges. Every time he came close to losing a limb or life, the hand of God safeguarded him, a protection he says he did not deserve. God used both people and mother nature to shield him from bodily harm or death. He is still mystified by why God chose to protect him and not others who died or suffered injury. An evangelist once told Aweis that God protected him in the past and still protects him today because he wants many to hear the good news through his ministry. While Aweis does not comprehend this, he sees himself as a vehicle for God's glory. The most painful suffering Aweis ever faced was the martyrdom of many of his Somali Christian friends because they refused to deny Christ and return to Islam. The blood of these martyrs was never in vain. More Somali Muslims are now following Christ in Mogadishu, where these martyrs' blood was spilled.

Aweis was raised by devote Muslim parents who thought he would one day become a Muslim cleric like his father. Even before following Jesus Christ, Aweis could identify aspects of Somali culture that were harmful to the welfare of the community. He was also able to identify facets of Islam that were not conducive to the wellbeing of the public. Aweis faced intense opposition each time he mentioned these counterproductive aspects of Islam and Somali culture. However, he found a less intrusive way to raise his concerns without unnecessarily offending his Muslim friends and family members. He achieved this goal by asking questions.

CHAPTER 6: PLEDGES AND QUESTIONS

“Your parents are right when they are right and they are also right when they are wrong.”³³
-Somali proverb

Introduction

There are two important things every Somali learns early on in life: not to question those in authority and to obey one’s parents, no matter what. While Aweis is a law-abiding citizen and loves his parents, blind obedience was never his strength. He also questions harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation and tribalism. His questions were often seen as rebellion against deeply-held cultural and religious values. This did not dissuade him from asking questions and pointing a finger at the socio-cultural sacred cow that he believed should die.



Sheikh Abukar Ali. The only surviving photo of Aweis’ dad

Sheikh Abukar Ali, Aweis’ father, was once teaching his *madrasa* students a lesson on Muslim marriage and divorce. The Sheikh made it very clear that Muslim men could simultaneously be married to only four wives. He said nothing about the unlimited number of concubines Muslim men are allowed to keep. Maybe he thought this would be too detailed for the teenagers he was teaching. However, Aweis knew that the bottom line of the Sunnah (following the Prophet’s example) was to imitate the Prophet Muhammad. The number of wives (not including concubines) the Prophet concurrently kept was seven, nine, or eleven, depending on the sources. So, he asked his father, “Why can’t Muslim men imitate the Prophet and concurrently keep more than four wives?” The way his father stared at him told him he was in big trouble. His father later scolded Aweis and instructed him to never again ask any sinful

questions that could lead him to hell.

His Muslim parents

Aweis’ father was a Muslim preacher and a long-time *madrasa* teacher; he was also a prominent member of the *Xerta Mo’alim Nur*.³⁴ Sheikh Abukar was a respected clan elder and a very generous man. Most of Sheikh Abukar’s income went to the poor, whether they were relatives, neighbors, or total strangers. He was determined to practice Islam to the best of his ability. He cared deeply about his neighbors and he certainly had plenty of them since he often had more than one wife. Islam defines a neighbor as anyone who lives within forty homes in each of the four directions from your own home. Assuming every home contained one family, this means

³³ In Somali, “*Waalidkaa saxdiisuna waa sax, khaladkiisuna waa sax.*”

³⁴ *Xerta Mo’alim Nur* means “Disciples of Mo’alim Nur.” Mo’alim Nur (1921- 2009) was a prominent *dariqah* (Sufi religious order) founder and leader. The *dariqah* established 1,000 *madrasa* schools, 70 religious centers (*mawla’*) and 33 mosques, mainly in central and southern Somalia. The *dariqah* also donated 459,317 square feet of land on the outskirts of Mogadishu to be used as free cemeteries. These cemeteries are known as *Qabuurraha Mo’alin Nur* (Mo’alim Nur Cemeteries.)

that every Muslim has at least 160 recognized families as neighbors. Sheikh Abukar had 480 neighbors when he was simultaneously married to three wives in different parts of the city. The idea of his family eating three meals a day when one of his neighbors was hungry seemed to Sheikh Abukar abhorrently un-Islamic. Islam places a special emphasis on the rights and privileges of neighbors. Aweis recalls many times when his family had to miss a meal because his father decided that some poor neighbor needed to eat instead of his own family.

Aweis' father married multiple wives, but only three bore him children. Aweis' mother was the senior wife. His father left behind two wives and seven children when he died. He was a very pious man who lived an honorable life to the best of his ability. Visitors regularly showed up unannounced to receive advice or simply chat with him. Some visitors would even conveniently show up at mealtimes and they would be given food to eat. There is a teaching in Islam that a meal prepared for one believer is enough for two believers and a meal prepared for two believers is enough for four believers and so on and so forth.

Even though Aweis was not the first-born son, his father decided that he should be the one to succeed him as a Muslim cleric and a *madrassa* teacher. The more his father taught him Islam, the more he realized he may have made a mistake in choosing Aweis. He often asked too many questions. Aweis was not soaking everything up like a sponge; he wanted meaningful answers other than, "God said" or "The Prophet said." Aweis apparently learns best by asking serious questions, even if some might see them as provocative.



Aweis greets his mom in Mogadishu on 11 March 2022.

Aweis' mother, Timiro Abdulle Mohamad, worked very hard to raise her children; she was born around 1939 and lives in Mogadishu to this day. Timiro is known for her impeccable work ethic, generosity and frugality. She is also a very petite woman who has never weighed more than one hundred pounds because she does not care about food. Despite Timiro's diminutive figure, she is a fierce and independent woman who believes she can do anything she puts her mind to. Aweis' mother named him "Aweis" when he was born after the eminent Somali *Sufi* scholar, cleric and *dariqah* leader, Sheikh Aweis ibn Muhammad al - Barawi al-Qadiri (1847-1909).³⁵ Aweis' mother told him she named him "Aweis" hoping he would become a Muslim cleric like his namesake.

³⁵ The Sheikh's first name is also spelled as Aweys, Uways, Awees, Oweys, etc.

The pledges

Shortly after the premature death of Aweis' father, his mother summoned him, his elder brother, Ahmed, and his two younger sisters, Farhiya and Raaha. The two proposals she put before them were:

1. "When you can, I want one of my sons to give me enough money to perform the Hajj pilgrimage. I want the other one to build a mosque in my name so God can have mercy on me and reward me with his paradise because of that *waqf* mosque."³⁶ Aweis' elder brother pledged to build the mosque. Aweis was not a Christian at the time but a seeker. However, he chose to fund his mother's pilgrimage to Mecca. Aweis was about fifteen at the time and his elder brother was close to seventeen. The brothers were broke, so the pledges were faith promises. Aweis fulfilled his promise to his mother long after he became a follower of Christ. He paid for her pilgrimage to Mecca and even told her he could pay for a second pilgrimage if she wanted to; she declined. His mother thought one pilgrimage was enough. Ahmed, Aweis' elder brother, recently purchased a large plot of land in Mogadishu to construct the mosque. Aweis paid for a plot of land adjacent to it so it could be used as a burial ground when their mother leaves this world. Aweis, with Ahmed's blessings, pledged to build a mausoleum for their mother so that her descendants would regularly visit her sepulcher for generations to come to pay their respects to the family matriarch.

Ahmed, a faithful Muslim, now lives in the United States and is the owner of successful businesses. He is loved by his employees, neighbors and the larger Somali community in the United States. Once the construction of the mosque is completed, it will be dedicated to their mother's memory and donated to the local Muslim community as *waqf*.³⁷

³⁶ *Waqf* is an Islamic charitable endowment. It often involves donating property (land, a building, a water well, or other assets, etc) for charitable use with no ability to reclaim the donated asset or assets.

³⁷ *Waqf* is an Islamic charitable endowment.



*Aweis and his mom in Hargeisa, Somaliland, in 2017
Photo credit: LeCrecia Ali*

2. The second proposal was very difficult for Aweis and he respectfully declined to accept it. His mother said, “You are growing up so fast and one day you will be married and live on your own. I want each one of you [the two daughters included] to promise that you will give me your firstborn child so I can raise them. When my children grow up and live on their own, I don’t want to be alone as a cursed woman.” Aweis’ brother pledged to his mother that he would give her his firstborn child. To his mother’s disappointment, Aweis said to her, “I will have to talk to my future wife and ask her what she thinks!” His mother insisted that he should pledge to her his firstborn child regardless of what his future wife would think. He declined. Aweis loves his mother and would lay down his life for her, but he had enough respect for his

future wife that he could not say to her, “Would you marry me? By the way, our first child will be given to my mother. I made this pledge many years ago before I met you!” Their mother’s two daughters also made a similar pledge to her years later when they were old enough to grasp the implications of their pledge.

Aweis’ brother was the first to give their mother his first-born baby, a son who was still crawling. The son died before he was old enough to walk because of a simple preventable childhood disease. Two other babies given to her by her two daughters also died quickly. His mother never pressured Aweis to give her his firstborn child after the sad premature deaths of these three children. Aweis’ mother is not a lonely woman today. Her two daughters live with her in the family home, where they take care of her. There are several grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the family compound which gives their mother special joy and sometimes headaches.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Aweis once flirted with radical Islam for about a year while he was still a seeker. He was fifteen and studying at a prominent *Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslīmīn* (Muslim Brotherhood) mosque. The cleric, Sheikh Osman, taught from the *Sahih al-Bukhari* book and described how it was *halal* (permissible) in Islam to hunt with dogs.³⁸ Aweis asked the Sheikh how to ritually clean where the dog bites the game. The Sheikh scolded him, “The Prophet said you can hunt with dogs, but said nothing about cleaning where the dog bites the game. Asking such questions creates *fitna* (religious discord) among Muslims.” Aweis knew his question had no easy answer in the Shafi’i jurisprudence of Islam which Somali Muslims subscribe to. However, Aweis considered the

³⁸ Sahih al-Bukhari is a hadith collection by the celebrated Persian scholar, Muḥammad ibn Isma’īl al-Bukhari (d. 870), around 846. It is one of the most valuable collections alongside Sahih Muslim in the Sunni Islam tradition. Only the Qur’an has a higher status than Sahih al-Bukhari.

Sheikh parading him in front of other students as an overreaction. He quickly quit the Brotherhood mosque. He wanted knowledge, not indoctrination.

The Islamic Union

Shortly after quitting the Muslim Brotherhood mosque, Aweis befriended members of an even more radical Muslim group, *Al Ittihad Al Islamiya*, (the Islamic Union). After attending several of their clandestine makeshift mosque services, he quickly realized that the top leader was a very corrupt man who was credibly accused of misappropriation of funds. He also advocated for religious violence against the military government at the time. Aweis quit that group, too. He would become a follower of Christ two years later and members from the Islamic Union would kill twelve members of Aweis' house church. These Islamists also attempted several times to kill him, but they were unsuccessful.

Shia Islam

Aweis, a Sunni Muslim, turned to Shia Islam after his brief encounter with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Union. He wrote letters to various religious organizations in Iran. He received a constant supply of *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver Shi'ism) literature. He read several books, asked serious questions and decided that leaving Sunni Islam for Shia Islam would merely be window dressing; he wanted something more substantial. He continued studying the Bible and asking questions.

Asking questions

Asking honest questions is one of the best ways for Aweis to learn. However, he sometimes finds himself in trouble for asking questions some may consider taboo or inappropriate. Aweis' conviction is that any belief system which detests questioning is suspect. Therefore, he never shies away from questioning anything, including his own faith. The answers his questions generate contribute to his ever-expanding understanding of complex disciplines.

The missionary host

Even after becoming a follower of Christ in 1986, Aweis' proclivity to ask questions did not vanish. While training for ministry in a theological college in Addis Ababa, Aweis and a few of his Somali Christian friends visited the late prominent Somali Christian, Professor Ahmed Ali Haile, who was visiting from Nairobi. Benson,³⁹ an American missionary, was hosting Ahmed and Aweis was delighted to be in the presence of the beloved Somali Christian man he had admired so much for so many years. Right in front of the host and everyone else, Aweis asked Ahmed, "What is the single most important thing that attracted you to the Christian faith; something you could not find in Islam?" Aweis noticed Benson expressing displeasure at his question, but Ahmed was kind enough to give an answer. The apparent protest of the missionary discouraged Aweis from asking more questions. The Somali concept of "*marti edeb leh*"

³⁹ Benson is a long time American missionary to the Somalis. He is a brilliant scholar, a fluent speaker of Somali and an expert on Somali culture. He is a veteran missionary of 40 years and one of the most effective missionaries to ever serve among Somalis. "Benson" is a pseudonym.

(respectful guest) is drilled into Somali children so they never forget it. Quule Ali Egal, one of the Somali Christian friends who went with Aweis to visit Ahmed, also later chastised Aweis for the question he asked, by saying to him, “You sounded like you had doubts about your Christian faith.” Aweis did not have doubts about his faith, but he simply wanted to learn from one of the wisest and most educated Somali Christians ever. This golden opportunity was ruined by censorship.

Conclusion

Aweis is a product of his Islamic upbringing and Somali culture. The indelible effects of these two influences contribute to his worldview. Aweis’ penchant to ask thought-provoking or unpopular questions sometimes ruffles feathers; he is not dissuaded by such reactions to his questions. One of the ways Aweis learns or confirms facts is to ask what he considers genuine and constructive questions. The challenge he faced growing up in Islamic Somalia was that neither Islam nor Somali culture tolerates unbridled inquiries. The Somali proverb, “Be one with your people,” sums up this challenge.⁴⁰ The traditional Somali logic is that it is better to be with your people and be wrong than be separated from them and be right.

Aweis’ inclination to ask tough questions served him well as a seeker; no topic was off-limits under his magnifying glass. As a teenager, Aweis critically examined his Islamic faith and Somali culture. He distanced himself from certain aspects of Somali culture which he considered toxic and he became disillusioned with Islam. At the age of fifteen, Aweis embarked on a three-year spiritual journey to find the right path to God. The road was not smooth, as he faced criticism and threats because he was unhappy with Islam; the Somali adage, “To be with your people in hell is better than being alone in paradise,”⁴¹ sums up the Somali obsession with manufactured social harmony.

⁴⁰ In Somali, “*Dadkaaga dhinac ka raac.*”

⁴¹ In Somali, “*Fiqi tolkiis kama janno tago.*”

CHAPTER 7: SEEKING

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”
- Isaiah 55:6, NIV

Introduction

While Aweis was a pious and practicing Muslim during his childhood, his heart was seeking a true closeness to God. There was a void deep inside him and he wanted something deeper and more complete than Islam. Aweis found Islam lacking and neither the Qur’an nor the Hadith could comfort his seeking soul.⁴² The more Aweis studied Islam, the more dissatisfied he became with his Islamic faith. He prayed to God fervently and fasted for weeks, looking for divine wisdom. Becoming a better and more pious Muslim only added to his spiritual emptiness. However, Aweis continued seeking godly guidance through prayer, fasting and Qur’anic recitation.

Aweis did not receive any explicit guidance, but he felt optimistic and spiritually invigorated, feelings he could not explain. He believed it was only a matter of time before he could experience a spiritual breakthrough. He became a full-fledged seeker at age fifteen, after coming across a Christian radio ministry.⁴³ Aweis, a news junkie, often listened to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) English service to improve his English. While looking for a stronger signal on his short-wave radio to listen to the BBC news, he came across a Christian program in Somali. Aweis listened to the radio program and was impressed with the Christian message. He wrote a letter to the radio ministry and received an encouraging letter and some Bible study materials.

Studying the Bible

Aweis started studying the Bible he received from the radio ministers. Despite being a seeker, he remained a faithful Muslim to the best of his ability. He continued fasting, praying and led a reverent life. Aweis’ father was very disappointed with his interest in the Christian faith. However, Aweis continued reading the Bible and was pleasantly surprised by how coherent and original the Bible was, despite Muslim misinformation that the Bible was abrogated by God after human hands had allegedly tampered with it.

Aweis had no interest in becoming a Christian in the first year of studying the Bible. However, the possibility of following Christ became more appealing to him after that. He was mostly convinced that becoming a disciple of Christ was a worthy endeavor. Nonetheless, he still had several questions for the radio ministers in Nairobi. Aweis’ questions centered on doctrine, diet

⁴² The Qur’an, which is roughly the size of the New Testament, is the Muslim holy book. The Hadith (plural, ahadith) is, according to the clear majority of Muslims, the recorded words and actions, including silent approval and gestures, of Prophet Muhammad, as transmitted through complex narration chains. The Qur’an and the Hadith are the first and the second most powerful Islamic texts, respectively.

⁴³ *Codka Nolosha Cusub* (Voice of the New Life) is an SIM radio ministry that was transmitted at the time from the Seychelles. The radio ministry office was in Nairobi. It later relocated to Addis Ababa.

and modesty, especially in attire. Islam is a religion of “dos” and “don’ts” which regulates mundane things like which foot you put forward first when entering a restroom or when exiting it. Islam also controls which side of the head you start with when combing your hair. Aweis was therefore surprised by how open and accommodating the Christian faith was. He learned that the bottom line of Christianity is a relationship between God and his people. In this faith, the spirit of the law trumps the letter of the law. Aweis read Jesus saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” Mark 2:27, NIV.

Aweis spent eleven months in 1984 comparing and contrasting the Holy Bible and the Qur’an. He also studied the history of the Holy Bible, with emphasis on the canonization of the New Testament. Similarly, he also studied the history of the Qur’an and its standardization under the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, who ruled from 644 to 656; the Qur’an as it exists today is therefore known as the Uthmanic codex.⁴⁴ Any other Qur’anic collections that contained variant readings were then destroyed.⁴⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari, the most revered collection of Hadith in Sunni Islam, was compiled 200 years after Prophet Muhammad’s death and in an area 2,500 miles away from Medina, Saudi Arabia, where Prophet Muhammad died. Aweis accepted that the reliability of the Bible was unassailable in any objective study.

Questions and concerns

Aweis was ready to follow Jesus by the end of 1985, but his coming to faith was delayed by the way the radio ministers handled his unfamiliar and unorthodox questions. Here are some of the inquiries Aweis made:

1. What is the Christian confession of faith I should recite to follow Jesus?
2. Which direction should I face when praying?
3. Is a ritual ablution necessary before each prayer?

Aweis finally received sufficient answers to his questions by the first few months of 1986. This is when he realized that his questions had no Christian basis, but were simply a reflection of his Muslim upbringing. Christianity seemed to Aweis too easy to embrace but too challenging to practice authentically. The whole idea of loving your neighbor like yourself is humanly impossible without the help of the Lord: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:31, NIV. Aweis knew that, unlike Islam, Christianity did not have a clear definition of who your neighbor is. The assumption that everyone is your neighbor (Luke 10:25-37) only complicates the matter. Aweis wondered if this commandment meant that he could not eat a meal before verifying that all his neighbors had something to eat.

Aweis was ready to leave Islam for Christ, but he needed to do it thoughtfully. Somalis are so Islamized that it is impossible to know exactly where Islam and Somali culture diverge or

⁴⁴ “The Qur’an - Introduction.” Oxford Islamic Studies.
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780192831934/islam-9780192831934-miscMatter-6> (accessed 21 May 2022).

⁴⁵ “The Compilation of the Qur’an and Why Uthman Ordered That Some Copies Be Burned.” Islam QA.
<https://islamqa.org/hanaf/seekersguidance-hanaf/32699/the-compilation-of-the-quran-and-why-uthman-ordered-that-some-copies-be-burned/> (accessed 21 May 2022).

converge. Aweis had no plan to abandon his Somali culture, except for a few parts of the culture which were not compatible with the gospel of Christ. Aweis still cherishes the Somali Islamic culture of hygienic practices, especially those which pertain to restroom habits. The Islam-influenced Somali culture generally treats neighbors well and recognizes the rights and privileges of relatives, including very distant ones. Aweis recognized that he could have the best of both worlds if he could remain a culturally authentic Somali and still follow Christ faithfully.

The three-year period Aweis spent as a seeker is not considered too long in Somali ministry. Most Muslim seekers spend three to five years as active seekers before they follow the Lord. Barbara Keener Reed, a veteran missionary who served in Somalia, states that “Conversion for a Muslim was certainly not a fast-moving process but was something well thought-through, measured and deliberate...”⁴⁶ Reed mentions a Somali man who was a seeker for eight years before he followed Jesus.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Aweis was a full-fledged seeker at age fifteen in a culture where people are normally happy to stay in the religion they were born into in Islamic Somalia. Aweis’ spiritual hunger was intense, but he also wanted to first intellectually comprehend any faith he might embrace should he leave Islam. So far, only a tiny percentage of Somalis have left Islam and not all of them follow Jesus Christ. Aweis is therefore very blessed to be in that small group of people to become a disciple of Christ. Aweis found the Bible both intellectually stimulating and spiritually invigorating.

Aweis finally followed Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and embarked on a spiritual journey that shocked all his Muslim friends and family. He very quickly realized that the gospel of Jesus Christ was too good to hoard, so he started to actively share his faith in Mogadishu, Somalia. Aweis started a formal ministry in 1993 when he and a fellow Somali Christian established a house church where they both co-pastored. This house church opened so many ministry doors to him and deepened his faith in Jesus Christ. Membership in the house church steadily grew and it reached fourteen members, a megachurch in a staunchly Muslim country like Somalia.

⁴⁶ Barbara Keener Reed, *Standing on Holy Ground and Some Not So Holy: A Memoir*. (Lancaster, PA, Barbara Keener Reed, 221), 112-113.

⁴⁷ Barbara Keener Reed, *Standing on Holy Ground*, 113.

CHAPTER 8: BELIEVING

“Faith in God is filling.”⁴⁸

-Somali proverb

Introduction

After three years of looking for the truth, Aweis was finally convinced he had found it and his joy knew no bounds. While he felt the Lord God calling him to follow Him long before he embraced Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, Aweis was determined to examine the claims of the gospel to see if these had any merits, a strategy he learnt from the Bereans.⁴⁹ The more Aweis read and meditated on the Bible, the more he was convinced he was onto something good. He prayed for weeks to seek the Lord’s guidance.

Throughout history, religious belief has been seen as a communal affair. The idea of anyone choosing their own faith or no faith at all was seen as an alien concept. In fact, in much of the Global South today, faith and community are still intrinsically linked together. Therefore, when Aweis decided to become a disciple of Christ in 1986, he was going against the grain and his local community attempted to intimidate him into submission. All the threats and ultimatums failed to stop him from following Jesus Christ.

Repentance and reaction

1986 was not an ordinary year for Aweis. He repented of his sins and confessed his ignorance and arrogance to the Lord; he felt convicted of his sins and his need for divine redemption was apparent to him. Aweis knew by this time that he could not earn his own salvation since he had studied the Bible the previous three years as a seeker. Aweis took a shower, wore clean clothes and recited the following impromptu confession of faith, facing the holy city of Jerusalem, “From this moment on, I accept Jesus’ invitation to follow him, a decision that makes me a disciple of Christ. I will continue following Jesus regardless of the persecution I will face. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Aweis felt freed from the empty Islamic rituals and his uncertainty about his destiny once he died. There is no assurance of salvation in Islam, but his faith in Jesus Christ assured him of eternal salvation.

Aweis’ mother was the first person he confided in about his new faith; his father was deceased by then. His mother could not believe that her faithful Muslim son would convert to Christianity and abandon Islam. She described her son’s decision to follow Jesus as shameful. She also doubted her son’s sanity and dismissed his Christian faith as a form of teenage rebellion. She asked her son, “Since you are now claiming to be a Christian, does that mean you will never obey me as your mom? Will you start eating pork and drinking alcohol?” In her eyes, “Christians” are godless people who do not honor their parents and engage in immoral activities.

⁴⁸ In Somali, *“Iimaan Allaa uur buuxiya.”*

⁴⁹ “Now the Bereans were more noble-minded than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true.” Acts of the Apostles 17:11, Berean Study Bible (BSB).

Aweis assured his mother that he would continue honoring her as his mother and that he would not consume pork or alcohol. Despite these assurances, she continued to worry about her son's moral compass. Muslims have a distorted view of non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews.

While Aweis' mother neither interacted with any Christian nor knew anything about the Bible, she was "certain" of a few things: Christians never cared about their families and relatives and were immoral people who consumed filth for food. Aweis promised his mother that he would always love his parents, family and relatives and that he would also be upright to the best of his ability. He assured her that he would never eat pork – he should have qualified this pledge.

While in Addis Ababa in 1996, Rev. Oliver, the Canadian missionary who had baptized Aweis in Mogadishu years earlier, invited him and another Somali Christian to dinner at the Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel. Aweis ordered a chicken pizza, but Oliver pressured him to try Italian sausage pizza. He felt distressed. Oliver must have underestimated how much spiritual authority he had over Aweis. He ate about a quarter of the pizza and started feeling very unwell. He developed bad diarrhea and was very sick for a few days. That was the only time Aweis ate pork knowingly and he regrets his poor judgment.

Aweis found a part-time job at a cafeteria during his first year of seminary training in the United States in 2001. He initially worked as a dishwasher, which he found profoundly disturbing as a proud Somali man. In the Somali division of labor, men do not wash dishes. He took the job because he needed the money. Aweis could eat a free lunch at the cafeteria and he once enjoyed roasted meat. He first thought it was goat, but then realized it could have been veal. The following day he wanted to eat that roasted meat again, but it was not on the menu. He asked his boss whether it was goat or veal and the answer left him devastated. He had eaten pork again!

Aweis felt the Lord's calling on his life to become a minister of the gospel shortly after following Jesus. He knew he had to study Christian theology to be better equipped for this divine calling. This call ended Aweis' original desire to study dentistry. He received his ministry calling through visions and dreams that persisted for seven years, until he fully accepted the calling in 1993. His call was eventually confirmed by the leadership of the Medina House Church which he co-pastored with the legendary Somali church leader, Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan.

Meeting Liibaan



Annie Hellström
Photo credit: Nils Ögren

Aweis felt very lonely as a Christian while in Mogadishu. The radio ministry functioned as both his pastor and congregation. He certainly thought he was the only Somali Christian in the Somali capital. All this changed in late 1992 when he visited the mission compound of Swedish Church Relief (SCR) in Mogadishu. Annie Hellström, the director of the mission, was a highly respected woman of God who spoke good Somali. Aweis thought that if there were any Somali Christians in Mogadishu, Annie would know them. One early morning, he visited Annie at her office and she received him warmly. He said to her, “Annie, you do not know me, but I am a Somali Christian. I have been following the Lord for seven years. I need a fellowship. Do you know any Somali Christians?” Annie smiled and told him to wait.

Annie was gone longer than he expected, but eventually came back with a young man and introduced him to Aweis. “This is Liibaan. He is also a Christian.” Then Annie left them and returned to her office. Liibaan and Aweis smiled at each other. Aweis knew about Liibaan, but he never knew he was a disciple of Christ. Liibaan told Aweis he did not know he was a Christian, either. Aweis learned later that Annie prayed in her office before she introduced Liibaan to him. She asked the Lord to reveal to her if Aweis was a genuine Christian or an imposter trying to harm any Christian he might meet. Annie was convinced Aweis was an authentic disciple of Christ after her prayers and that is when she introduced Liibaan to him.

Aweis and Liibaan met often for fellowship and Bible study. They also started a house church in the capital. The house church had fourteen members by the end of 1993.

An answer to prayer



The Roman Catholic Cathedral in Mogadishu, built in 1928, was the biggest in Africa up until the 1920s and 1930s. This church building was destroyed during the early years of the Somali civil war that broke out in 1991.

Ibraahim Hassan, Liibaan’s father, used to work for an Italian family as a security guard in the 1950s. The pious Roman Catholic family regularly witnessed to Ibraahim and prayed for him. He used to tell the Christian family that he was happy to remain Muslim and had no interest in becoming a Christian. However, the family was not deterred; they continued praying for him. After returning to Italy in 1959, the family stayed in touch with Ibraahim to remind him that they were still praying for him; he dismissed their divine gesture as naïve. According to Ibraahim, Muslims did not become Christians.

The prayers of the Christian family were not wasted. Liibaan, Ibraahim's firstborn son, became a follower of Christ in 1985 and died as a martyr in 1994. Liibaan, an evangelical Christian who admired the charismatic movement, was one of the highest profile Somali Christian ministers at the time.

The magnificent Liibaan

Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan was one of a kind. He was compassionate and courageous to a fault. The following two stories illuminate his benevolence and audacity.



Pastor Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan

While working as a nurse aide in Benadir Hospital, a few badly wounded men who had been involved in a car accident were brought to the hospital. The raging civil war had shut down the nation's only blood bank. The only way to get a blood transfusion for patients was to find family members or friends to donate the blood. The wounded men quickly found fellow clan members in the hospital to give them blood. One was unlucky. He had no clan members in the hospital and he needed blood quickly. Liibaan heard the story about the unfortunate patient and volunteered to donate his blood if he was the right match. Once it was determined he was the right match, Liibaan donated enough blood to save the man's life. The patient recovered quickly and profusely thanked Liibaan.

The Muslim employees at the hospital were very impressed with Liibaan's selfless act and how he transcended the confines of the Somali clan system.

While Liibaan was working for Swedish Church Relief (SCR), he one day walked by some of the Muslim security guards removing stacks of envelopes from a pickup truck. One of the security guards yelled at Liibaan and held up stacks of envelopes, "What would you do with it if you were given this much in United States dollars?" Liibaan shot back without missing a beat, "I would build a church with it." The guards were shocked, but only two of them cursed Liibaan. The remaining guards remarked, "Unlike Saleban, Liibaan is a genuine Christian."⁵⁰ Saleban was a struggling, but fearless and prominent Christian in the Somali capital. The guards were from a hawkish Somali clan and they certainly had Muslim blood on their hands. Some were very proud of the number of Muslims from a rival clan they had killed not long ago.

The radio ministry

The radio ministry that helped Aweis with Bible study materials for the three years he was a seeker continued blessing him as a new disciple of Christ. The Somali government blacklisted the address of the radio ministry so correspondence between him and that ministry was sometimes confiscated. Despite these setbacks, he continued to grow in his new faith.

⁵⁰ Saleban Mohamed Saleban struggled to be Christlike and both Muslims and Christians were aware of his spiritual battles. Saleban finished the race well and died as a martyr. He was one of the most well-known Somali Christians in Mogadishu.

Aweis composed the following Somali poem in 2005 to commemorate the SIM radio ministry that the Lord used to find him:⁵¹

<i>Codka Nolosha Cusubow</i> ⁵²	<i>O! Voice of the New Life</i>
<i>Codka Nolosha Cusubow haddaan, Caadil ka cabsoodo</i>	<i>O! The Voice of New Life, if I fear the Lord</i>
<i>Ciiseba adigaa i baray, ciilna iga saaray</i>	<i>You are the one who taught me about Jesus and freed me from misery</i>
<i>Caasimadda dalkeenna anoo, cidla igu hayso</i>	<i>I was in the Somali capital and I was lonely</i>
<i>Carabi aanan garanayn anoo, ciridka taagtaagi</i>	<i>I was murmuring in Arabic, a language I did not know</i>
<i>Carrabkaagu cillad malahane, Eebbe war ku caabud</i>	<i>“Your language is fine, worship God in it”</i>
<i>Caqligaa adaan kaa heloo, kugu ciseeyaaye</i>	<i>I learned from you that wisdom and I respect you for that</i>
<i>Ciddaan Ciise garanayni waa, ehel cadaabeede</i>	<i>Those who do not know Jesus are in danger of hellfire</i>
<i>Injiilkaa caddeeyee ka eeg, Caadil Hadalkiisa</i>	<i>The gospel tells us that, take a look at the Word of God</i>
<i>Cafis waxaa uun laga helaa, Ciisaha an sheegay</i>	<i>Forgiveness comes only through the Jesus I mentioned</i>
<i>Soomaalidaan codkaa garan ayaa, ciilna igu haysa</i>	<i>The Somalis who do not understand this make me sad</i>
<i>Intaan Ciise soo laabanoo, caalamkan imaanin</i>	<i>Before Jesus comes back and returns to this world</i>
<i>Cafiskiisa waa in laga maqlaa, Awdal cirifkeeda</i>	<i>His forgiveness should be heard in the corners of Awdal region</i>

⁵¹ SIM was previously known as Sudan Interior Mission, Serving in Mission and Society for International Ministries. However, it is now known simply as SIM.

⁵² Aweis A. Ali, (ed.), *Maansada Masiixa* (Anthology of Somali Christian Poetry), Volume II (Nairobi, Kenya: Maandeeq Publishing, 2020), 79. The English translation has been slightly polished by the author.

<p><i>Waqooyiga Galbeed cod dheer, caawa ugu sheega</i></p> <p><i>Casharkaaga waa in laga maqlaa, Togdheeraan ciseeyo</i></p> <p><i>Sool iyo Sanaag yaan cidina, cawadan moogeyne</i></p> <p><i>Barigaa Caluuladu ku taal, Ciiseba u baahan</i></p> <p><i>Mudug yaan Casiis uga baryaa, inuusan ceebaynin</i></p> <p><i>Nugaal yaan cilmigaad waddo, cimrigood diideyne</i></p> <p><i>Axdiga Cusub wey rabaan, ciddaha joogaaye</i></p> <p><i>Galguduudda aan caashaqee, Caadil igu beeray</i></p> <p><i>Culimiyo caamaba u gee, caynkan an higaadin</i></p> <p><i>Hiiraan cidlada hawga tegin, caaqilada jooga</i></p> <p><i>In Casiis wadda an loo marayn, tan Ciise mooyaane</i></p> <p><i>Waa in caadka looga qaado oon, cidina ceeboobin</i></p> <p><i>Baay iyo Bakool cidaha dega, caafimaad hele e</i></p> <p><i>Cuurar dhawr ah yeey leeyihiin, Ciise wada raacay</i></p> <p><i>Shabeelooyinka yaan cawada, Ciise u baryaaye</i></p>	<p><i>Tell the people of the Northwest region in a loud voice</i></p> <p><i>Your voice should be heard in the Togdheer region I admire</i></p> <p><i>Sool and Sanaag regions are known to everyone</i></p> <p><i>The Bari region where Alula district is located also needs Jesus</i></p> <p><i>I pray to Jesus for the people of Mudug region that they will not be shamed</i></p> <p><i>Nugaal region will never reject the knowledge you herald</i></p> <p><i>People who live there want the New Testament</i></p> <p><i>The Galguduud region I love, where the Lord knitted me</i></p> <p><i>Convey this poem, both the clergy and the laity</i></p> <p><i>Do not leave the Hiiraan region sages in the dark</i></p> <p><i>That Jesus is the only way to God There is no other way to Him</i></p> <p><i>That should be made clear to them so that no one might be disgraced</i></p> <p><i>People of the Baay and Bakool regions are blessed indeed</i></p> <p><i>Many of their folks are followers of Jesus Christ</i></p> <p><i>I pray to Jesus tonight for the people of the two Shabeele regions</i></p>
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<i>In uu Caadilkeen siiyo kuwo, Ciise u adeega</i>	<i>That God may give them progeny who serve Jesus</i>
<i>Oo ciidda tira dhaafa oo, cidna ka cabsoonin</i>	<i>Fearless folks who are more numerous than the sand</i>
<i>Codkar yaa Gedo lagu yaqaan, cimrigood ha raagee</i>	<i>Gedo region is known for eloquence, may God give them long life</i>
<i>Casharada Masiixoy bartaan, yaa camari layde</i>	<i>Learning the lessons of the Messiah will prosper them</i>
<i>Jubbooyinka cidahaa degee, Caadil ka cabsooda</i>	<i>The people of the two Jubba regions who fear God</i>
<i>Cibaada runa waa in ay bartaan, Ciisena adeecaan</i>	<i>They should learn true worship and obey Jesus</i>
<i>Gabayo cusub waa in ay Rabbiga, toos ugu curshaane</i>	<i>They should compose new poems dedicated to the Lord</i>
<i>Oo caalamkoo dhami maqlaa, Ciise jacaylkooda</i>	<i>The whole world should hear how much they love Jesus</i>
<i>Codka Nolosha Cusubow adoon, waxba ka cabsoonin</i>	<i>O! Voice of the New Life, while being fearless</i>
<i>Dheeree codkaagoo la maqal, cawiyo laylkeede</i>	<i>Raise your voice so it can be heard day and night</i>
<i>Caaddilaa wakil kuu ahoo, caynka kuu haya e</i>	<i>God is your protector and your guide</i>
<i>Isagaa codkaagaa wattoo, waan la celinaynee</i>	<i>Your voice is His voice, it cannot be suppressed</i>
<i>Shaydaanka coofka lahibaa waa, uu ka cararaaye</i>	<i>The debased Satan flees from your voice</i>
<i>Casharkaaga yaa laga helaa, caafimaad dhaba he</i>	<i>Your lessons generate true healing</i>

Conclusion

Aweis is still grateful to the radio ministry that brought to him the salvific message of Jesus Christ. His adoration for missionaries is fueled by the kindness the SIM missionaries and local Somali ministers showed to him as a seeker and a new believer. Despite not meeting another believer for years, Aweis thrived in his faith and kept his eyes on Jesus Christ. Meeting other Somali Christians later and co-pastoring a house church enriched his faith. Aweis' call to ministry was first confirmed in this house church in 1993 and life has never been the same. Aweis wanted to study dentistry before his divine call but later realized the value of studying theology to become a better minister of the gospel.

Despite being a law-abiding citizen and leading a holy life, Aweis faced intense persecution from the Muslim community. The threats to his life were numerous and the ostracization even more painful, but he was determined to continue following the Lord. Aweis' suffering became more unbearable when most members of his house church were martyred. He finally escaped to Ethiopia with the plan of returning to Somalia when the dust settled down and he was better equipped as a minister of the gospel. Aweis studied theology in Ethiopia, became one of the key leaders of a local Somali Christian fellowship (house church) and embarked on an illustrious ministry to the Somalis in the Horn of Africa.

CHAPTER 9: PERSECUTION

*“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”
-2 Timothy 3:12, NIV.*

Introduction

Persecution and the Christian faith are so interconnected that to be a true disciple of Christ and not to be persecuted is an oxymoron. The idea that a Christian can live a holy life and avoid any kind of persecution is one of the most dangerous fallacies a Christian can entertain.⁵³ While Aweis expected some persecution because of his Christian faith, the intensity of the animosity he faced and the murderous attempts on his life and those in his house church surprised him. However, he slowly understood that following Jesus in Islamic Somalia was not for the faint-hearted. After North Korea, Somalia remains the most dangerous country for local Christians.⁵⁴



*Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys
Photo credit: Horn Watch blog*

The persecution was, of course, heightened by the lawlessness that Somalia descended into after the collapse of the central government in 1991. Newly minted radical Islamists, funded with a generous supply of Middle Eastern petrodollars, targeted the Somali Christians with impunity. By the end of 1992, anti-Christian sentiment swept through the capital. *Al-Itihad al-Islamiya* (Islamic Union), a local Islamist group led by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, used every medium possible to start threatening some of the prominent members of the house church.⁵⁵ Aweis suggested to Liibaan that they should stop meeting as a house church for a month or two until they evaluated the situation.

Ominous warnings

Aweis and Dalmar, his Muslim friend, shared a small villa in the Medina district of Mogadishu. Dalmar arrived home one day agitated; he sat down with Aweis and advised him to publicly re-embrace Islam or flee for his life. Dalmar, an astute businessman, said in a serious voice, “You know how trained these militants are. Our big gate and high walls cannot stop them. The

⁵³ “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 2 Timothy 3:12, NIV.

⁵⁴ Ruth Myors, *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia*. (Moreland City, Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, 171.

⁵⁵ Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys (b. 1935) was a former Somali army officer, a senior leader of *al-Itihaad al-Islamiya* (1994-2002) and one of the most radical leaders of the Union of Islamic Courts which took over the Somali capital in June 2006. The United States government added him to its list of terrorists in 2001. Sheikh Hassan was the leader of Hizbul Islam (2009 - 2010); he later joined al-Shabaab (2010 - 2013). Sheikh Hassan surrendered to the Somali government in 2013 and remains in detention.

militants could breach our home anytime from tonight and execute you.” The concerned friend added, “If the militants come, they may not spare me and my wife. Please don’t risk our lives.”

A day after Dalmar’s warning, a Muslim friend of Aweis visited him at his home to warn him of what he thought was an impending threat to Aweis’ life. Aweis did not know what to make of this visitor’s intentions. The man was a high-ranking official of an Islamist-owned financial institution. Was this an honest friend who cared about Aweis’ safety or was he scouting for the Muslim militants?

The safe house

Aweis and Liibaan decided to move to a safer area of the city for a while. Liibaan suggested that they could hide at the home of his in-laws, which was far away from their home area. Aweis accepted the offer and they stayed there for about two months. While in hiding, Liibaan felt safe enough to continue reporting to work, but Aweis stayed put in the house. During the hiding period, Dr. Nik Ripken visited Aweis as often as he could.⁵⁶ He even sent Allen F., one of his missionary co-workers, to visit Aweis when Dr. Ripken was out of Somalia. Both missionaries encouraged Aweis and Liibaan and brought them letters and Bible study materials from the SIM radio ministry office in Nairobi. They risked their lives to keep these two local Christians encouraged. Aweis and Liibaan returned to their homes after they felt the threat against their lives diminished. However, by February 1994, their house church was again in grave danger.

Liibaan is martyred

Liibaan was reporting to work one fateful morning on the 21st of March, 1994 when he was waylaid by two Muslim assassins who shot him very close to his office. Liibaan was hit several times in the chest and the head; he died on the spot. Liibaan was twenty-six years old and left behind a wife and two daughters.

Shortly after Liibaan was martyred, Aweis visited Dr. Nik Ripken at his office in Mogadishu. Dr. Ripken encouraged Aweis and prayed with him, he then laid his hand on Aweis’ shoulder, looked him in the eye and said, “Be safe.” Aweis lifted his untucked shirt to reveal his loaded semi-automatic Belgian handgun with its twenty-round magazine. He was not willing to go down without a fight. Aweis later wondered if Dr. Ripken was a pacifist or believed in self-defense. He found his answer years later when he learned he was from the U.S. State of Kentucky. Aweis then remarked, “Kentucky is not California; there are no pacifists there.”

⁵⁶ Dr Nik Ripken is a prominent expert on the persecuted church in the Muslim world. He is a veteran missionary of more than 40 years. Dr. Ripken is the author of the influential book, *The Insanity of God*. “Nik Ripken” is a pseudonym.

More believers are martyred



*Prof. Haji Mohamed Hussein
Photo credit: Nolasha Cusub*

Other prominent members of the house church who were martyred from 1994 -1996 include Prof. Haji Mohamed Hussein, Mohamed Sheikdon Jama and Ahmed Ayntow Gobe. These three men could not regularly attend the house church because of distance and safety concerns, but they remained cherished members. Aweis, Liibaan and Saleban sometimes visited them to fellowship with them. Saleban Mohamed Saleban also died a martyr. Other martyred members include: Isma'el Yusuf Mukhtar, Mohamed Aba Nur, Ali Kusow Mataan, Mohamed Abdullahi Yusuf, Nurani Madey Madka, Khalif Dayah Guled and Bashir Mo'alim Mohamud. Most of these martyrs had been walking with the Lord for less than a year. There was also a young Muslim seeker, Mohamed Qorey Saalah, who was martyred in 1995 because the Islamists mistook him for a Christian. The only survivor (other than Aweis) from the house church was the late Abukar Hared Taakow who died in Mogadishu of natural causes in 2005. Dr. Nik Ripken disciples Abukar in Mogadishu and the two men were close.

Between a rock and a hard place

In 1994, the Somali Christians in Mogadishu found themselves between a rock and a hard place: murderous Muslim militants and missionaries in denial. While Muslims were hunting down local Christians like dogs, two influential American missionaries did not initially believe that the Christians were killed for their faith, but rather for earthly gains.⁵⁷ According to Aweis, the two prominent American missionaries originally articulated that the Christians were killed by people who wanted to steal their jobs. As ill-informed as this opinion appears, it was believed for years by educated and intelligent American missionaries. What Aweis considered an unspeakable betrayal is that these two missionaries convinced other missionaries that the killings had nothing to do with the martyrs' Christian faith. In late 1996, Aweis listened to one of these missionaries express his views like this:

1. The Somali Christians were killed by Muslims who wanted their jobs.
2. Christian organizations in Somalia should never hire any Somali Christians to avoid angering Muslims.
3. If Christian organizations decided to hire Somali Christians, the percentage of Christian employees they hire should not exceed the percentage of Somali Christians in the population.

⁵⁷ Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, a prominent Somali Muslim scholar, acknowledges in his PhD thesis that some Somali Christians were targeted for their faith. He states, "Furthermore, some Christian believers in Somalia were targeted by armed clan militia or armed Islamic extremists and were persecuted and murdered." Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)*. (PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011), 116.

4. If Christian organizations wanted to help Somali Christians, funding an income-generating project for them would be more prudent than employing them.

The two most visible Christian organizations in Mogadishu which had Somali Christian employees in 1994 and the number of Christians they employed were as follows:

1. Swedish Church Relief (2)
2. International Aid Sweden (1)⁵⁸



Ahmed Ayntow Gobe

Photo credit: c/o Galen Reed

The five Somali Christians martyred in Mogadishu in 1994 were: Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, Ahmed Ayntow Gobe, Saleban Mohamed Saleban, Isma'el Yusuf Mukhtar and Mohamed Aba Nur. Only Liibaan and Selaban worked for a Christian organization, though neither of them held a senior position. If Liibaan and Saleban were killed so their jobs with Swedish Church Relief could be stolen, why were the remaining three Christians killed? Ahmed worked for a local clinic and Isma'el and Mohamed were unemployed.

The American troops in Mogadishu developed a disturbing pattern in the first quarter of 1993; they would distribute maize to poor Somalis in the capital and shell targeted neighborhoods at night. The late prominent Somali poet and a critic of the multinational armed forces in Somalia, Abshir Ba'adleh (1946 –

2010), addressed a sarcastic poem to the United States troops in Mogadishu. One stanza from the satirical poem says:

*Galley guduudda waan gartee, gantaalkuna goosaar miyaa?
I understand the maize is for eating; are the mortar shells the sauce?*

Aweis, attempting to borrow a leaf out of Abshir Ba'adleh's sarcastic poetry, composed this brief poem in January 1995 and recited it to Abukar Hared Taakow:

*Liibaan iyo Saleebaan haddii, shaqo uun loo toogtay
Axmed, Ismaaciil iyo Maxamed, maxay u laayeenna?
Ma in aysan hay'ad u shaqayn ayaa, iyaga loo maagay?*

*Nimankii caddaa een u qabay, in ay cod noo yihiin
Ayaa ku ciyaaray caqligeeni oo, caalla inna mooda
Innagaa xisaabini mar uun, haddii an noolaanno*

*If Liibaan and Selaban were killed for their jobs,
Why were Ahmed, Isma'el and Mohamed murdered?
Is it because they were not employed by a Christian organization?*

⁵⁸ Now this organization is known as International Aid Services.

*The white men I thought were our voices
Have insulted our intelligence like we are fools.
We will one day hold them accountable, if we live that long.*

Abukar, assuming that he and Aweis could be killed anytime, tape-recorded Aweis reciting that brief poem and then jokingly said, “I will send this tape to the Somali Christian Library.” There was no Somali Christian Library at the time.

Acknowledging martyrs

Dr. Nik Ripken met Aweis in Addis Ababa in the late 1990s to interview him for his influential book, *The Insanity of God*. After thorough research, Dr. Ripken acknowledged the deceased Somali Christians he mentions in his book as martyrs who were killed for their faith. Similarly, another influential American missionary later recognized that the Christians he knew who were killed in Mogadishu were killed for their faith. In fact, this missionary wrote two beautiful tributes to two of the martyrs, Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan and Prof. Haji Mohamed Hussein, and he calls them martyrs in his tributes. Aweis finds these acknowledgments vindicating.

The zealous chaplain

While Aweis’ 1990s Bible distribution ministry in Mogadishu was foolhardy, there is no evidence that it contributed to the martyrdom of any Christian, according to one Somali church leader in Mogadishu.⁵⁹ According to a house church pastor in Mogadishu, Aweis’ Bible distribution “ruffled some feathers but never killed any bird.”⁶⁰ One individual who handed out many Bibles without the oversight of Somali believers, according to multiple sources in Mogadishu, was an American chaplain. He handed out countless Somali Bibles to Somali Muslim job seekers from late 1993 to early 1994. The chaplain was based at the United States Embassy in Mogadishu which, at the time, also served as a major base for the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Many Somali Muslim job seekers returned home with a copy of the Bible. It may be risky to flood a conservative Muslim city with Bibles without the approval and oversight of the local body of believers.

Bible distribution

Aweis received dozens of Somali Bibles in late 1993 from a Christian organization he was working for. Out of excitement and immaturity, Aweis started an indiscriminate Bible distribution ministry in Mogadishu. While Aweis’ intention was good, his strategy was reckless. Ministry among Muslims requires great spiritual maturity, proper training and accountability. What Aweis demonstrated was simply a zeal without knowledge. It is important to know that Aweis was not properly disciplined at the time, he did not have a local church and never received any theological or missiological training. However, according to Ruth Cope, “God often uses brand new believers as the most effective evangelists, despite their lack of training. He loves to use the weak things to shame the strong, the foolish things to shame the wise” (1 Corinthians

⁵⁹ Mukhtaar Faarax, Personal Communication, 12 November 2021.

⁶⁰ Xuseen Maalin, Personal Communication, 9 September 2021.

1:27).⁶¹ Ruth Cope also said about Aweis' 1993 Bible distribution ministry, "Even though there were some bumps in the road, I think Aweis' Bible distribution was a Spirit-inspired idea and I admire his zeal without fear of persecution."⁶²

The first target of Aweis' thoughtless ministry was his elder brother. Aweis visited his brother's home to give him an unsolicited Bible. The brother was not home and Aweis left a brand-new copy of the Bible on his brother's TV stand. His Muslim brother came home later to find the alien gift in his home and immediately turned and rushed out of the home as if it was on fire. He felt his home was defiled by the unwanted gift. Aweis' brother later found him and yelled, "Come with me and remove that thing from my home right now!"

Aweis removed the Bible from his brother's home and passed it on to a Muslim friend who had previously told him he wanted a copy of the Bible. Many Somali Muslims are conditioned to believe that the Bible is a dangerous book. They think that bringing it to your home can cause misfortune, like ill health or even a house fire. Many Somali Muslims would not even touch the Bible; they think it could spiritually defile them or that Satan could use it to convert them to Christianity.

The terrified friend

The second target of Aweis' Bible distribution ministry was Mo'alim Y., his long-time Muslim friend. This friend was the owner and the administrator of a language school in Mogadishu. Aweis brought about twelve Bibles with him and secured his friend's permission to distribute the Bibles to the senior class which was set to graduate in a few months. Every willing student received a copy of the Bible. All seemed well until a week later, when angry parents and Muslim clergy visited the school. They screamed at Mo'alim Y. and some even threatened to kill him for allowing Bible distribution at the school.

Some radical Muslim clergy heard about it and three of these militants approached Mo'alim Y. to ascertain if Aweis was indeed behind the distribution. They also asked him if Aweis was involved in any evangelism in the city. Mo'alim Y. could have saved Aweis by acting dumb, but he was too scared to protect his longtime friend. When asked if Aweis was behind the Bible distribution, he answered in the affirmative. When asked if Aweis was involved in any ministry in the city to convert Muslims, Mo'alim Y.'s answer was so dramatic that two of the radical Muslims burst out laughing. Mo'alim Y. flailed his arms and screamed at the top of his lungs in his unmistakable Xamar and Xamar Daye dialect, "Leave me alone. That man almost converted me to the Christian faith."⁶³ This was exactly the testimony the Muslim radicals were looking for in order to justify targeting Aweis.

⁶¹ Ruth Cope, "Biography Manuscript." Message to Aweis Ali. 28 April 2022. Email. Ruth Cope (pseudonym) is a senior missionary among Somalis in East Africa and an expert on Muslim-Christian relations.

⁶²Ruth Cope, "Biography Manuscript."

⁶³ In Somali. "*Iga tag, anoowba i gaaleey tegee!*"

The petrified friend

After Liibaan was martyred in 1994, Aweis asked Abdulkadir M., a Muslim friend, if he could stay with him only at night for a few weeks. He accepted the request. One evening, when Aweis and Abdulkadir were walking to his home, Aweis noticed his friend was walking several feet away from him. His friend was so far away from him that Aweis had to raise his voice in the conversation. He finally asked, “Abdulkadir, what are you doing? Why are you walking so far away from me? His friend’s response floored him. “Get away from me. You are a dead man walking. Do you want a bullet intended for you to hit me?”⁶⁴ Aweis once more realized the gravity of his situation.

Aweis recognized that he could no longer stay in Somalia, so he contacted the SIM radio ministry in Nairobi and Rev. Oliver, who was then living in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The missionary in charge of the radio ministry did not offer any help,⁶⁵ but Oliver encouraged Aweis to move to Addis Ababa, where he said he could help him get missiological training to become a better minister of the gospel. Aweis felt close to Oliver because this missionary baptized him and gave him basic face-to-face discipleship training in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993.⁶⁶

The treacherous friend

Aweis was working for the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) when his best friend and co-pastor, Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, was martyred in 1994. While at work, Aweis was visibly worried for his life. Local Muslim staff at his office knew about Liibaan and some even celebrated his assassination. No local staff at the office showed Aweis any sympathy. In fact, they conspired against him and talked about him behind his back. When the preacher at a local mosque asked the faithful Muslims to kill Aweis, some at the office showed excitement. One particular staff member, whom Aweis regarded as a friend, Mahad R., especially threatened and tormented him. Mahad enticed more local Muslim staff members with UNOSOM to persecute Aweis. It is possible Mahad was pressuring Aweis to return to Islam, or he may really have wanted him dead since he belonged to a rival clan. Mahad, a fine family man, never apologized to Aweis, but the two men have a functioning relationship now.

The press conspiracy

Some caring Muslim relatives devised plans to save Aweis’ life from the marauding Islamists who were trying to execute him. They asked him to deny his faith (even if he did not mean it) to save his life. They even arranged for two well-known reporters from the two most prominent daily newspapers in the country at the time, *Xog Ogaal* and *Qaran* to interview Aweis about his situation, but what they published the following day left him baffled. In the published

⁶⁴ Abdulkadir said in Somali, “*Iga tag waryaa. Mayd socdaa tehee. Xabbad adiga lagu wado inay igu dhacdo maad rabtaa?*”

⁶⁵ Missionaries often receive a plethora of requests from local believers and it is impossible to meet all these needs. It is sometimes hard for missionaries to discern which requests are urgent or even genuine. The missionary in charge of the radio ministry has a long history of helping local believers in need.

⁶⁶ “Oliver” is a pseudonym for the Canadian missionary who baptized Aweis in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993.

“interview,” Aweis was a Muslim who had never embraced Christ. He was caught off guard by how much some of his Muslim relatives loved him and wanted to protect him. The elaborate scheme they devised to keep him safe was impressive, yet immoral.

In the lion’s den



Aweis visiting a carpet factory in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where his Muslim friend worked.

After the first few members of Aweis’ house church were martyred, some caring Muslim family members told him that the only place he could be safe was Saudi Arabia! When Aweis asked why they thought so, one cousin said, “Experienced thieves live by police stations because that is where they are least expected to be!” He added that no one would expect him to be in Saudi Arabia, a country under Sharia Law with powerful religious police.

The relatives secured Aweis all the documents he needed for travel and he fled to the most unlikely place to save his life – Saudi Arabia. Within the first week in that Muslim country, some Somali Muslims recognized Aweis and asked him what he was doing there. Word spread quickly that Aweis was hiding in Saudi Arabia. He realized too late that he had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. He quickly returned to Mogadishu before his two-week Saudi visa expired.

The Islamic court case

Some sympathizers of the Islamists who wanted Aweis dead accused him before the Islamic court in Medina district. This district was a stronghold of Aweis’ clan. The accusers were from a rival clan from another district. The militia leader of the district defended Aweis and called him “a good man.” However, Muhudin, the governing warlord’s communications director, suggested Aweis should be arrested for apostasy. This man was Aweis’ relative and they had grown up together. Aweis could not believe that a relative with whom he had eaten off the same plate could betray him like that. Aweis’ accusers were disappointed that he was not even summoned to court. The Muslim militia leader who defended Aweis later became a member of parliament, a cabinet minister and the mayor of Mogadishu.

Conclusion

While persecution for one’s faith is an integral part of the gospel, genocide is not. What the Somali church faced in Somalia from 1994 to 2004 amounts to religiously-motivated annihilation. It is only by the grace of God that the church in Somalia is growing despite the horrific persecution it endured day in and day out. The persecution Muslims thought would

eradicate the church is in fact contributing to its growth. Tertullian must have been right when he claimed that the blood of the martyr is the seed of the church.⁶⁷

The Lord started preparing Aweis as a minor for he knew that he would one day follow him as a teenager. Aweis grew up in a strict Muslim home in which the virtue of integrity was often emphasized. He was therefore raised as an upright person who was trusted by many. His widespread reputation as an honest young man later propelled his ministry in Islamic Somalia to remarkable success. Aweis lived a clean life and hated injustice with passion. Even after following Jesus Christ, he did not throw the baby out with the bath water; he kept what was good in his former Islamic faith and Somali culture.

⁶⁷ Tertullian, Latin: Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus; (c. AD 155 - c. AD 220) was a prominent Roman-era North African Christian author and apologist. He popularized the view that persecution contributes to the numerical growth of the church.

CHAPTER 10: TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES

“A person who did not travel is blind.”⁶⁸

- Somali proverb

Introduction

The Somali people are a mixed bag; you will find among them some of the most honest, most generous and most reliable people anywhere in the world. You will also find among them people who will make you question your faith in humanity. Aweis was formed in this inconsistent context. While Somali culture and Islam molded Aweis, brawling thugs also came into his life and left their mark on it. Aweis cherishes the positive contributions Islam had on his life; it is safe to opine that he left Islam, but Islam never left Aweis. Islam in Somalia is more than a religion; it is an ever-encompassing way of life. Aweis acknowledges that his Muslim heritage enriches his Christian faith.

Upon becoming a follower of Christ in 1986, Aweis chose to never throw out the baby with the bathwater. He chose to keep that which was good in Islam. However, this was easier said than done because it was hard to know where Islam ended and Somali culture started, or vice versa. Islam is not an isolated religion; its composition draws upon Judaism and Christianity. This is so true that Aweis jokes that most Muslims know Judaism and Christianity better than many Christians and Jews. Somali Muslims with no formal education in far-flung villages in the Somali peninsula memorize biblical narratives beautifully and poetically recounted in the Qur’an.

Islamic etiquette

Aweis studied *adabul Islam* (Islamic etiquette) as a boy at his father’s *madrassa*. The emphasis of this discipline is finesse, morals, good manners, decency and humaneness. He thrived in this study and put it to practice very quickly. Aweis graduated from this introductory one-year course of study around the age of thirteen. Topics covered in *adabul Islam* include not cutting down shade or fruit trees and not answering the call of nature near them, eliminating from roads and pathways any obstacle which could hurt people and animals, avoiding *laqwi* (meaningless and time-consuming discourse), abstaining from all filth, best hygienic practices, saying “*bismillah*” (in the name of God) before eating or drinking, saying “*alhamdulillah*” (thanks to God) after eating or drinking, guarding one’s chastity in word, deed and thought and helping those in need, especially one’s neighbors, family and relatives. *Adabul Islam* also includes helping the people your deceased parents used to help and not entering any home (including your parents’) without knocking on the door and waiting for permission to proceed.

⁶⁸ In Somali, “*Nin aan dhul marin dhaaya maleh.*”

The old shopkeeper

Shortly before Aweis graduated from the *adabul Islam* training, he went to a popular shop to buy some candy. The shopkeeper was not there that day, but his aged mother was filling in for him. Aweis handed five shillings to the lady, received his candy and plenty of change. The lady assumed she received twenty shillings, but Aweis quickly handed back the extra money and told her he only gave her five shillings, not twenty. The old woman's jaw dropped and she was tongue-tied; she could not believe the integrity of a boy whose financial situation she knew so well. The lady blessed Aweis and waved him goodbye.

The dishonest shopkeeper

Even before the *adabul Islam* training, Aweis was an upright boy; his parents taught him right from wrong. He learned quickly though that not all Somalis were honest, including some who prayed five times a day and appeared pious to the public. When Aweis was about eight years old, he went to one of the neighborhood shops to buy a nice balloon. Balloons came in various sizes, but they cost the same. The catch was that they were numbered and came with a scratch card. The buyers would choose the place to scratch and the number that was revealed would be matched to the balloon number. Aweis' scratch revealed a number that matched one of the biggest balloons on display. The shopkeeper decided to rip him off and handed him a small balloon. Aweis protested and demanded he should be given the right one. The shopkeeper yelled at Aweis and threatened him with violence if he did not accept the insignificant balloon. He took the undesirable balloon out of self-preservation. He did not allow his faith in humanity to be compromised because of one evil woman who would steal from a child.

Trusting a thug

Islam does not tolerate laziness and an unhealthy dependence on others for sustenance. Aweis' Muslim parents, therefore, instilled in him early on that he should always earn his wherewithal in an honest manner. He knew his parents would never allow him to bring to the family home any ill-gotten thing, small or big. When Aweis was about thirteen, he was returning home from dumpster diving at the Mogadishu International Airport. This main dumpster was an easy place to find some airline food and many poor children enjoyed this rare treat.

Aweis met an infamous Muslim thug who was struggling to haul rims of metal sheets he salvaged from a construction dumpster. The thug cut a deal with Aweis, "If you help me carry the metal sheets to Boocle market, I will pay you 25% of the sale proceeds." Aweis accepted the generous offer and carried about half of the load on his head.

The three-mile walk to the market was arduous, but Aweis resisted giving up because he needed the money. Aweis was skinny and possibly underweight, but he kept going by sheer determination. The metal sheets were quickly sold at the goatmeat section of the market and the thug walked away without paying Aweis; when he reminded him that he must pay him, the thug threatened him. Aweis was overcome with disbelief; he did not see it coming. When he realized he was being robbed, he glanced at a butcher knife on a nearby table and thought of grabbing it

and stabbing the thief. However, the man was already gone, never to be seen again. Aweis walked home exhausted and empty-handed.

Kusow & Maryan

In the early 1980s an incident that happened in Aweis' neighborhood left him a lasting scar in his conscience. Still in his early teens, Aweis hated injustice with passion and could never understand why some grown-up Muslims lived like they were godless. Despite the much-touted Somali egalitarianism and homogeneity, there are two Somali clans which others treat as inferior; one clan is derogatively called, "*nasab dhiman*" (outcast) and receive treatment that resembles how the Dalit (untouchables) are treated in India. The "*nasab dhiman*" look like any other Somali and they are practicing Muslims. The second despised group is Jareer-Bantu, a confederation of Negroid clans whose looks are different from the dominant Cushitic clans. Most of the Somali Jareer-Bantu groups descended from run-away or freed slaves who were originally brought to Somalia from countries that include Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania.

Kusow, a Jareer-Bantu man and Maryan, from a dominant "noble" clan, fell in love and eloped, knowing Maryan's kin would not approve of their marriage. Maryan's family later located the newly-married couple. They beat the couple up and demanded that Kusow divorce Maryan. He refused. Maryan's family forged a marriage license and claimed that she was already married and was committing bigamy. The family also bribed corrupt police officers and court officials. They were both sent to prison, Maryan for bigamy and Kusow for different trumped-up charges. Aweis was dismayed when he witnessed Maryan's dad praying at the neighborhood mosque. In Islam, an acceptable prayer is the one that stops you from living in sin. Aweis wondered how this Muslim dad could put his own daughter and son-in-law in prison and stand in front of God to pray. Aweis was convinced that the whole prayer thing was a futile exercise. He secretly wished God would send down a thunderbolt and strike that charlatan dead.

Five years after this incident, Aweis announced to his friend, Abdulkadir M. and a few cousins that he would select his future wife from the "*nasab dhiman*" (outcast) clan to snub the depraved Somali clan system. Abdulkadir pleaded with Aweis and said, "If you do that stupid thing, even your brother's children will not eat with your children." Three of the cousins proclaimed, "If you ever did that, we would tie you up and beat you till we break every bone in your body." Aweis was deeply saddened by their perceived clan superiority.

Closer to home

One of Aweis' half-sisters once eloped with a man and secretly got married. The sister's mother got wind of the matter and gave the husband an ultimatum to divorce her teenage daughter. She alleged that the man had dubious clan lineage, but he refused the divorce demand. The mother organized an armed clan militia and secured the divorce at gunpoint. Aweis later remarked, "The strange thing is that Islam does not recognize divorce at gunpoint."

Not all who pray are pious

Aweis' 1996 trek to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, took him through the Somali Ethiopian town of Gode. A young Sheikh joined them all the way to Addis Ababa. During the journey, the Sheikh faithfully performed all five daily obligatory Muslim prayers and a few Sunnah (non-obligatory) ones. The man, whose nickname was Agabar, seemed like one of the holiest and most trustworthy Muslim clergy in the Somali peninsula. Agabar was a quiet and unassuming man. Fellow travelers trusted him because of his visible piety. And yet, he stole money from fellow travelers, including Aweis. This apparent betrayal reminds Aweis of the Somali proverb, "A snake will kill you because it is well-camouflaged and a *wadaad* (a Muslim cleric) will kill you because he looks like anyone else."⁶⁹

Despite all the funny and sometimes demeaning jokes Somalis tell about *wadaad*, they still show deference to the Muslim religious leaders as earthly representatives of God's prophets and messengers. Because of his pious Muslim upbringing, Aweis still has a soft spot for the *ulema* (Muslim clergy). While Agabar was a terrible *wadaad*, Muslims do not have a monopoly on wicked religious leaders; in the last several years alone, Aweis has come across a few Protestant pastors and one Orthodox priest who are not worth their salt.

Why do you need water?

Aweis' Muslim parents raised him with strict hygienic practices, especially when it pertained to toilet habits. After answering the call of nature, Somalis use water to wash themselves. Toilet paper (or a similar object) alone is not enough. Warren Modricker (07 January 1907- 26 February 1998), a veteran SIM missionary to the Somalis, articulates that "Somalis are known to be very clean. We have known our Somali helpers to stand under the shower many times during the day and for long periods!"⁷⁰ He also describes the toilet habits of Muslims as follows:

Muslims in general seem to adhere to the practice of washing their hands after making calls of nature. In fact, this is one of the things that Muslims feel themselves better than non-Muslims, since they are careful to wash their hands after making a call of nature. Among many Muslims and easterners, a tin can with water is used to wash oneself after a movement.⁷¹

Aweis briefly attended Abyssinian Missionary Program, a missionary training school in southern Ethiopia, in 1996. Oliver, a young Canadian missionary, established the school to train Ethiopian missionaries and Somali evangelists to take the gospel to the Somali people. Since there was no water in any of the toilets, Aweis would take a bottle of water with him each time he used the toilet. The Ethiopian trainees, who were all from a Christian background, were puzzled by this toilet habit. When Aweis explained to them that washing with water and soap after using a toilet

⁶⁹ In Somali, "*Abeeso waxay kugu dishaa dhul u eki, wadaadna dad u eki.*"

⁷⁰ H. Warren Modricker, "Somali Culture and Customs: Some Helpful Points on the Somali Culture and Customs, Past and Present. (Unpublished manuscript).
<https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 16 December 2020).

⁷¹ H. Warren Modricker, "Somali Culture and Customs."
<https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 16 December 2020).

is a good hygienic practice, they laughed at him. Aweis approached the Canadian missionary and asked him if a bucket and a pitcher could be placed in the main toilet so anyone who wanted to wash themselves after answering the call of nature could do so. The missionary dismissively laughed and said, “I would have never thought about that.” Aweis’ suggestion fell on deaf ears.

Soiled witness

Aweis and a few Ethiopian ministers were traveling with a North American missionary in 1996. While driving through the Ethiopian town of Wondo Genet, southeast of Shashemene, the missionary drove by dozens of sheep and accidentally hit one of them. The Ethiopian ministers asked the missionary to keep going because “the sheep was fine.” The missionary kept driving, while the poor old shepherdess was chasing after the car and cursing him for not stopping. Aweis was appalled by the conduct of the missionary and the Ethiopian Christians. Stopping the vehicle and checking on the sheep would have been the right thing to do. Even if the sheep died, the compensation cost would have been under one hundred United States dollars. Negotiating with the shepherdess would have been easy, even if the sheep was injured. Fleeing from the scene of the accident was the least Christ-like thing to do.

The same North American missionary arrived another day to attend the Somali Christian Fellowship which met at the Addis Ababa mission compound of Youth With A Mission (YWAM). The missionary, who regularly drove his own vehicle, came in a different one that day. When one of the Somali Christian elders asked him what happened to his vehicle, the missionary said he was involved in an accident with a bus and he fled the scene. He took his car to a mechanic to be fixed. Aweis wondered again why a minister of the gospel would risk his reputation and witness by engaging in illegal and callous activities like fleeing from the scene of an accident.

The hazardous pathway

In 2005, Aweis was walking with an Ethiopian friend who was helping him find a vehicle to buy in Addis Ababa. They connected with a broker to see a vehicle that was for sale. The three men walked on a narrow pathway that led to the house where the vehicle was. On their way out of the house, Aweis noticed a broken bottle in the middle of the narrow corridor. He quickly picked it up and threw it in a nearby dumpster. The Ethiopian broker was in disbelief; he raised his voice at Aweis’ Ethiopian friend, “Did you see that? You and I saw that broken bottle, but we ignored it. Other Ethiopians saw it, too and did nothing about it. How come this Somali guy did what is right, unlike us and everyone else who ignored that danger in the road?” Aweis’ friend tried to respond to the visibly agitated broker but was short of words. The two Ethiopian men were Orthodox Christians and Aweis is Protestant. Neither of these two Christian traditions had anything to do with what Aweis did; Aweis would say that his Muslim upbringing made the difference.

Modesty and diet

While Aweis is not legalistic about it, his Muslim upbringing informs what he eats, drinks and wears. He abstains from alcohol and pork products, for example. Aweis is also an advocate for modest attire for both men and women. While the term “modest” is a relative term, people of any faith understand that wearing culturally appropriate clothing is a noble thing. A Canadian missionary was once traveling in a remote East African village when he noticed a completely naked woman. He said to his local friend, “Look, that woman is naked.” The local man looked and responded, “She is not naked. Don’t you see the waist bead she is wearing?” Modesty is therefore a cultural thing. Aweis also believes that a healthy boundary between sexes is necessary for their physical and spiritual health.

Monotheism

Somalis are staunch monotheists. Even *Waaqism*, the pre-Islamic traditional Somali religion, is monotheistic in nature.⁷² Somali Muslim seekers wrestle with the Trinity long before they become followers of Christ. These seekers follow Christ only after realizing that this doctrine does not infringe on God’s monotheism. Both Deuteronomy 6:4 and Mark 12:29 attest to the monotheism of the God of the Bible. Even after Somali Muslims follow Christ, a subtle fear lingers in them for some time about the compatibility of the Trinity with monotheism. This concern eventually goes away and the Muslim background Somali Christian thrives in their faith.

Rev. Garaad, a Somali Christian from a Muslim background, was chatting with some South Sudanese Christians from an animistic tradition. While all of them were studying theology and belonged to the same denomination, the way their background informed their Christian faith was obvious. Garaad asked if they struggled with the Trinity as seekers and their answer was a unanimous “No.” Garaad, a skilled jokester, then said to them, “What about if the missionaries who brought you Christianity taught that the Trinity meant ‘Five in One?’” The South Sudanese thought for a while and then said, “That is fine, as long as there is a biblical basis for it.” Garaad was disappointed with the response, but not surprised. It is much easier for Africans from an animistic background to embrace Christianity than for those from a Muslim background. It appears that Muslims are inoculated against leaving Islam.

Conclusion

As a boy, Aweis struggled with what he considered serious deficiencies in Somali culture. The dominant Somali way of life evolved in the inhospitable terrains in central and northern Somalia; the culture was also deeply shaped by other similar desert or semi-desert regions where camel rustling is still seen as a noble profession. As a result of this background, Somalis are often seen as volatile, loud and demanding, a survival mechanism that shocks many cool-headed expatriates. Aweis refused to be a “typical” Somali male and decided to be humble and predictable, even as a little boy; these characteristics repelled many of his Muslim family members and neighbors.

⁷² Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*, (Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021), 1-7.

While Aweis is from a dominant Somali clan, he always refused to unfairly use the Somali clan system for personal gains; he rather prefers a level playing field where there is no nepotism. Aweis also developed an enviable work ethic that was seen by many as admirable. This enabled him to be gainfully employed by some of the most coveted employers, including the United Nations and the European Union. Even at a time when good employment was hard to come by, he started his own fishing business, employing dozens of local fishermen. This is a testament to Aweis' versatility and resourcefulness.

CHAPTER 11: SHARK FINS, SHEIKHS AND A CLANNISH CLOWN

*“Earning an honest living is honorable.”⁷³
- Somali proverb*

Introduction

Finding a decent job in Somalia became harder after the country descended into lawlessness in 1991. Only people with powerful connections were gainfully employed. Not willing to play the clan card, Aweis visited a prominent clan chief whose family was known for piety and patriotism and returned with no employment prospects. He also contacted friends and strangers alike for an opportunity to earn a clean living. Despite the violence and the corruption in Somalia at the time, Aweis still had faith in humanity.

Faith can indeed move mountains and powerful people who met Aweis as a job seeker were impressed with his qualifications, humility and determination. An American supervisor with Brown and Root, a United States company, once told Aweis he was only hiring sandbaggers for the United States military fortifications in Mogadishu. Aweis told him he would take it. The supervisor was stunned, “I did not expect you would take that.” While the work was rough and most workers were illiterate village men, the pay was not bad. Aweis, a multi-talented man, never considered any work beneath him, including manually filling sandbags. Within a month, he secured a prestigious job with the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), without playing the clan card or engaging in nepotism.

The great general

Aweis’ lucky break came when he visited General Hussein Kulmiye Afrah, the second vice president of Somalia (1972-1990) and a powerful actor in Somali politics. Hussein received Aweis warmly, examined his CV and asked a few work experience-related questions. Aweis’ former employers included the Somali government and the European Union.

The General’s reception of Aweis was significant, since he did not know him from Adam. Aweis never mentioned his clan affiliation and the General never asked him about it. The man was a patriot and above reproach.

The General, who was also a former member of the Supreme Revolutionary Council,⁷⁴ must have been impressed with Aweis’ confidence and lack of clannish inclination. The General called one of his assistants and said to him, “Take him to Ahmed Washington and tell him to find

⁷³ In Somali, “*Shaqaa sharaf leh.*”

⁷⁴ The Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), Somali: *Gollaha Sare ee Kacaanka* (GSK), Italian: *Consiglio Rivoluzionario Supremo* (CRS), was the most senior military governmental body, which ruled Somalia from 1969 to 1976.

him a job.” Ahmed, a Somali German citizen, examined Aweis’ CV and asked him a few questions. He told Aweis that the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was hiring dozens of new employees and that he would make sure he got an opportunity to be interviewed for one of the vacancies. Ahmed was a prominent figure in Somalia’s relief and development efforts in southern Somalia.

The clannish clown

Aweis was interviewed within a few days by a UNICEF staff member from Nicaragua and was hired on the spot. Thirteen others, who passed a stringent screening process, were also interviewed. All but one passed and were also hired right away. The young man who was not hired because of his less-than-stellar English later became Somalia’s ambassador to South Sudan.

The Nicaraguan leader told the newly-hired local staff that he would like Aweis to become their team leader if he could garnish unanimous support from them. The staff voted and Aweis received one hundred percent of their votes. However, one staff member was on sick leave that day and started stirring trouble for Aweis the following day, as he opposed his election. The troublemaker’s objection to Aweis’ leadership was based on the perceived notion that he was from a rival clan in a divided city. Unlike other staff members, Aweis refused to divulge his clan identity and everyone assumed he belonged to a clan that was not welcome in North Mogadishu. His attempt to unseat Aweis failed.

While Aweis was from a powerful clan in Mogadishu, he detested the whole premise of basing someone’s worth on arbitrary clan membership. While it could have benefited him, Aweis never used the clan card to get any benefit, like employment. To his loved ones’ dismay, he liked a level playing field.

Never say that again!

In the eyes of most Somali Muslims, Christians are more united than they really are. Therefore, most Somalis think the Pope is the spiritual leader of all Christians. During a downtime at the office, Mohamed, a Somali British member of the UNICEF staff, wanted to put Aweis down. During a lighthearted discussion about religion, the Somali British man called the Pope a “dog.” Aweis expected better from this staff member and the cheap shot blindsided him. However, he stared him in the eye, pointing a finger at his face and said sternly, “Never say that again!” That was the last time any Christian leader, Pope, Patriarch, or pastor was insulted in Aweis’ presence.

Samaritan’s Purse

After Aweis’ UNICEF project came to an end, he visited the Samaritan’s Purse office and met Jim, the country director, who asked Grace, his wife and a senior leader, to interview Aweis and report back to him. A day later, Grace and the head of the personnel office, Abdullahi Mohamed Shegow, interviewed Aweis and hired him right away. Shegow, as he was known, was a longtime Somali Christian and a prominent media personality. Another Somali Christian with

Samaritan’s Purse was the famous Ahmed Ayntow Gobe who was martyred in Mogadishu for his faith in 1994. Samaritan’s Purse had left Somalia before this martyrdom because of worsening security.

UNOSOM employment



Aweis attending a UNOSOM function at the Mogadishu US Embassy in 1994.

After Samaritan’s Purse left Somalia, Aweis visited the two main bases of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) looking for a job. He met a European head in one base and an American in the other. Both men told him to return a week later for an interview. Both interviews happened the same day and he was offered the positions he applied for. Aweis declined employment by the Mogadishu International Airport and chose the one inside the United States embassy compound. The United States embassy

office was the safest in a violent city. The UNOSOM came to an end in 1995 when it pulled out of Somalia. Aweis was one of the last UNOSOM staff to be let go after he supervised the shipment of much of UNOSOM’s hardware to Rwanda and Brindisi, a port city in southern Italy’s Apulia region.

Shark fins and Sheikhs

When his UNOSOM employment ended, Aweis purchased a pickup truck and a fishing boat, embarking on an adventurous fishing expedition that took him to fishing hotspots in southern and central Somalia. Aweis composed a memorable poem for the Indian Ocean, a resource-rich fishing ground. In the poem, he justifies the reason he left the city for the coast. He also explains to the fishery-rich coastline that his anticipations included security and sustenance. Here is a brief quote from that well-known poem:

Bad Yahay i Maqal⁷⁵	O Sea, Listen to Me
<i>Badyahay i maqal waadigaa, buluggu waynaadey</i>	<i>O blue sea, listen to me very carefully</i>
<i>Beerkaaga waxa yaal ayaan, beden u heenseystay</i>	<i>I have prepared a boat to fish in you</i>
<i>Kumaan baahi bixin beled iyo, beri wixii yiile</i>	<i>I am not satisfied with what is on the land</i>
<i>Buuraha dhexdaadaan rabaa,</i>	<i>I want to rest in the</i>

⁷⁵ Aweis A. Ali, *Rag iyo Rabbi: Suugaan Nabadeed Soomaaliyeed (Men and God: Somali Poetry on Peace)* (Nairobi, Kenya: Maandeeq Publishing, 2020), 3-4. The English translation has been slightly polished by the author.

<i>inaan bariistaaye</i>	<i>mountains inside you</i>
<i>Beled waan ka imidoo adaan, baalka kaa degaye</i>	<i>I moved away from the city to live with you</i>
<i>Buntuq iyo bas baan uga baxsaday, beledki waynaaye</i>	<i>The main reason for my departure is the war</i>
<i>Buraashiyo waxaa aan sitaa, buugtaan baranaayay</i>	<i>With me are my study books and potable water</i>
<i>May baxnaaninaysaa anigu waan basaasnahaye?</i>	<i>Would you nourish me, for I am insolvent?</i>

Aweis and his crew of seven men specialized in shark hunting. The shark meat and fins were salt dried and exported to Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The salt-cured shark fins were more profitable than the entire shark meat. The demand for shark fins by Arab Sheikhs was insatiable. The Sheikhs exported the shark fins to China where shark fin soup is still a delicacy few can afford. This coveted soup, with its alleged medicinal value, was once prepared exclusively for Chinese emperors, nobility and other royals.

Aweis sold his profitable fishing business in 1996 when he became the target of jealous Muslim fishermen who resented his success. The unscrupulous fishermen used Aweis' Christian faith to stir trouble for him. He came to terms with the fact that no shark fin was worth his life.

Conclusion

Aweis is a textbook example of a confident go-getter; his aggressive and enterprising spirit secured him good jobs and professional relationships that are often unthinkable in the Horn of Africa. As a job seeker, Aweis solicited meetings with some of the most high-profile expatriate leaders in several non-governmental organizations, army generals, politicians and clan chiefs. He was respectfully received each time and sometimes received employment he was qualified for. Aweis' belief that confidence, character and qualifications can open many doors in a deeply nepotistic and clannish society is a strange concept to most Somalis.

Even in the midst of severe persecution and lawlessness in Somalia, Aweis' Christian faith guided him. He and his fellow Christians in the persecuted house church received visions and dreams that solidified their Christian faith in Islamic Somalia. Aweis felt his prayers were often answered in a way he could understand and felt God's protection all the time. The persecution and God's intervention in the situation reminded Aweis and fellow local Christians of the era of the Acts of the Apostles. Their Christian faith was so alive and so practical that they were content during intense persecution.

CHAPTER 12: DREAMS AND VISIONS

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.”

-Joel 2:28, NIV.

Introduction

Dreams and visions were rare in Aweis’ house church until early January 1994, three months before Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, the co-pastor, was martyred. Each time the house church came under more pressure, more visions and dreams were revealed to the members. This is not a surprise, given the promise of Acts 2:17, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.” NKJV.

Dreams and visions are common wherever the witness of Christ is limited, stifled, or is attempted to be vanquished. In addition to the Bible, God uses these avenues to encourage and direct the beleaguered community of faith. This is precisely what Aweis reports from his now-defunct house church in Mogadishu. While the church faced active martyrdom, members of this church continued receiving clear and vivid visions and dreams that directed and inspired the persecuted believers. Here are a select few of these dreams and visions.

Aweis’ dream

Aweis was elated after Annie Hellström introduced Liibaan to him; he was not alone anymore, as he had fellowship and was fully convinced that the Lord would use him and Liibaan to witness to many Somalis. However, Aweis started having periodic nightmares after a radical Islamist group started threatening some of the house church members, including him. Aweis would see in his dreams an extremely horrid and terrifying-looking beast attempting to devour him alive. Aweis would run to escape with his life but then his legs would be paralyzed and he would collapse to the ground helplessly. The beast would then hover over him salivating. Aweis would wake up very frightened.

Aweis prayed one night fervently, asking the Lord to spare him from the horrible nightmares. He went to sleep and the beast showed up again. Aweis was very terrified and attempted to run, but something interesting happened before he could flee – he heard a voice saying, “Hold this cross and command the evil beast in the name of Jesus.” Aweis grabbed the cross and stretched out his arm towards the intimidating beast, proclaiming with courage and confidence, “Stop, in the name of Jesus.” Aweis witnessed the beast in agony and shriveling until it was no more. He woke up in the morning refreshed and could vividly remember what had happened. That was the last time the beast visited Aweis.

Liibaan's dreams

One day Liibaan came to Aweis' home for a visit. He shared with him a dream he had. He described to Aweis what he saw. "I was preaching at the house church when a strange man came in and approached me. He pulled out a handgun and pointed it at me." The gunman said to Liibaan, "I have to either shoot you and spare everyone else in the house church or I will spare you and shoot everyone else." Liibaan said to the armed man, without missing a beat, "Shoot me and spare my people." Liibaan said, "I heard the click of the trigger and I collapsed to the floor." After he narrated this dream to Aweis, Liibaan solemnly smiled, gently touched him on the shoulder and said, "The church is the Lord's. It will be OK." Liibaan then added an ominous prediction, "You will be fine, but I know they will kill me. I am not afraid."

Was Liibaan prophesying or was he just uttering a common-sense prediction? Not only was Aweis from a dominant clan, but he also lived on his clan turf. This divine arrangement provided him a certain degree of protection. On the contrary, Liibaan's paternal grandfather was a non-Somali immigrant from southern Ethiopia and Liibaan's maternal lineage belonged to a docile farming people group in the Bay region of southern Somalia. Liibaan therefore had zero clan protection in a civil war-torn country. Liibaan wore his Ethiopian pedigree as a badge of honor. He knew that his Ethiopian grandfather was a Christian when he arrived in Somalia as a soldier with the Italian colonial authorities; he later changed his name, converted to Islam and married a Somali Muslim woman. Liibaan preferred to say he "reverted" (not converted) to Christianity on the day he became a follower of Christ in 1985.

Liibaan told Aweis another dream he had. "I saw a barrel suspended from the heavens. I watched it with amazement, before I noticed it had a small hole where honey was leaking from drop by drop." Liibaan continued to say, "I then looked down and saw a map of Somalia that was gradually being covered by the drops of honey from the barrel." Liibaan interpreted the honey as the Good News of Jesus Christ. According to this interpretation, Somalis will one day follow the Lord en masse.

Mohamed's dream

Mohamed Aba Nur, a new believer, also had a dream after the first five members of the house church were martyred. Mohamed noticed Aweis (who was visibly grieving) comforting some of the remaining believers of the house church. Mohamed opened his mouth and with uncharacteristic eloquence said, "I had a dream last night. A voice from a very bright light said to me, 'You know that the gates of hell cannot prevail against my church. The persecutors do not know this. They shed your blood to eradicate you, but they do not know your blood is seed. The persecutors will inflict a heavy toll on you, but they will not be able to eliminate you.'" The grieving and fearful believers stood up, clapped and fell on their faces to pray. The house church was dismissed that day full of hope.

Isma'els dream

Two months after Liibaan's martyrdom, Isma'el Yusuf Mukhtar, a new believer, testified in the house church, "I had a dream four nights ago. It seemed to me our entire house church was

martyred. Then I noticed at least one survivor.” Isma’el continued while the captive audience listened to him, “I heard a voice that said to me, ‘It may appear to you that it is over, but it is not. New believers will emerge from the blood of these martyrs.’” The believers held hands and prayed for a few hours. Isma’el was shot and killed exactly five days after he testified in the house church. He was a believer for only eight months.

Abukar’s dream

The house church knew early on that the co-pastors, Aweis and Liibaan, were the main targets of the Muslim persecution. With this knowledge in mind, they delegated Abukar to lead the church if the other pastors were martyred. Abukar was a man of great courage and impeccable faith. It also helped that, like Aweis, he was from a dominant clan which gave him certain protection. Aweis visited Abukar in mid 1996 to pray and consult with him. He suggested to Abukar that since they were the only survivors of the house church, they should move to Ethiopia or Kenya for their own safety. Abukar opposed the proposal by citing an earlier dream he had. Abukar said to Aweis, “They are trying to find us, but they will not locate us. Even if we stood right in front of them, they would not be able to see us.” Abukar added, “Even though we are safe, we must be careful.”

Abukar died of natural causes in 2005 and Aweis is still alive at the time of writing this book. While Aweis appreciated Abukar’s divine guidance, he chose to flee to Ethiopia within a week of this meeting. Aweis made several visits to Somalia from 1997 to 2001. Aweis and Abukar were able to plant a new house church in the general proximity of their old house church. This one house church facilitated the planting of dozens of house churches, fellowships and Bible study groups throughout southern Somalia. This revived ministry attracted the wrath of some Muslim fanatics in Somalia. One house church member was poisoned in Tayeglow, 198 miles from Mogadishu, but survived; several others were shot and killed. Some were arrested and others had to flee to Ethiopia for reprieve.

A Muslim mother’s dream



*Dr. Al Jones who treated
Aweis like his own son.*

Aweis’ Muslim mother had an interesting dream in August 1996. This was when Aweis fled to Ethiopia after twelve of his house church members were martyred for their faith. Aweis’ mother was worried about his safety and wellbeing in a faraway country where he had no family or friends to support him. She told him a few months after his arrival in Addis Ababa that she had a dream. A voice she believes to be from God said to her, “Do not worry about your son.” She responded, “Why would I not worry about him? He has no one to support him. His dad died when he was a teenager.” The voice responded, “I gave your son a new dad. He will be fine.” Aweis’ mother later told him, “I saw an older white man whose hair was all white. This man cares about you like his own son.” She added, “That was the last time I worried about you. I knew you would be okay.”

Conclusion

During the height of the persecution, dreams and visions received by some in the house church became a lifeline for the tiny community of faith. The once timid and frightened members spoke with boldness to narrate their dreams and visions. Every believer who received these dreams and visions or heard them shared felt emboldened in their walk with the Lord. Even when the believers were martyred one by one, the surviving ones continued testifying and courageously sharing their faith with Muslim friends and family members. Eventually, twelve of the fourteen members of the house church were martyred.

Aweis finally decided to leave Somalia for Ethiopia to be spiritually rejuvenated. The freedom Christians had in Ethiopia to worship without anyone killing them for their faith was surreal to him. Aweis studied theology, enjoyed church attendance and openly carried his Holy Bible in Ethiopia without any fear, freedom he never had in Somalia. While still in college to study theology, Aweis regularly traveled to Somalia for ministry purposes. He quickly noticed that the Somali Muslims in Mogadishu were more open to the gospel than they were before he left for Ethiopia. The martyrs' blood must have softened their hearts.

CHAPTER 13: *HIJRA* AND MINISTRY TRAINING

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV.

Introduction

Hijra is an Islamic theological term which means migration or departure from an inhospitable place to a more accommodating location. Islam teaches that there is a blessing in *hijra*. Muslims therefore consider *hijra* a religious duty when they face intense persecution because of their faith. *Hijra* can also be instigated by spiritual decay when Muslims fear that remaining where they are could threaten the vitality of their Islamic faith. Abshir Ba’adleh (1946 - 2010), a prominent Somali poet, declares in one of his poems,

“Waa laga durgaa meel kufrigu diin la too yahaye.”
It is better to leave a place where godlessness is regarded as equal to godliness.

Not only could he not practice his faith freely in Somalia, but Aweis’ very life hung in the balance. The precarious situation forced him to relocate to Ethiopia. The same God who blessed and prospered Joseph in Egypt helped Aweis thrive in Ethiopia. He developed a good relationship with Somali and Ethiopian Christians as well as the Western missionaries he met. Aweis grew spiritually and academically. He learnt a great deal from both local people and the expats he interacted with. Aweis is certain that his relocation to Ethiopia was from the Lord. Given how everything fell into place, only God could have orchestrated such a flawless plan.

Trek to Ethiopia

By the first few months of 1996, Aweis realized that his life and sanity depended on his departure from Somalia. He felt vulnerable after so many of his Christian friends were martyred and his brief marriage ended in the face of unspeakable persecution.

One morning, Aweis knelt at his mother’s feet and she placed her hands on his head and blessed him:

May God protect you from the evil one
May he answer your prayers promptly
May he give you the wishes of your heart
May he prosper you and your loved ones
May he always guide you to the right path
May he give you a long life and health
May he always fight your enemies for you
May he keep you safe wherever you are
May strangers treat you well, like family

Aweis got up, hugged his mother and walked away to find safety in Ethiopia. He knew that he could not take public transportation to leave Somalia because he could have been recognized and probably lynched because of his faith. However, he rented a Land Rover that smuggled him out of Mogadishu to Jowhar district, fifty miles from Mogadishu. Aweis felt very safe once he reached this agricultural town where no one knew him. He then hopped on a truck from Jowhar to Beledweyne and found another truck from Beledweyne to the Ethiopian town of Kelafo. Aweis got very sick in Kelafo because of malaria. He felt so weak that he thought he could die any time. He started recovering days later. Aweis traveled by land all the way to Addis Ababa. The trip took twelve days because of insecurity, bad roads and technical difficulties.

Rev. Oliver came to get Aweis during his second day in Addis Ababa and introduced him to Quule Ali Egal, a young Somali Christian man who fled from Djibouti to Ethiopia because of his Christian faith. Many people in Djibouti City knew Quule converted to Christianity and he was very open about his faith. One morning, Quule was reporting to work in Djibouti City when a uniformed police officer shot him in the forehead. The bullet ricocheted from his forehead, causing minimal damage. Despite immense blood loss, Quule recovered with the help of a German missionary nurse. The missionary helped Quule flee to Ethiopia for his own safety.

Theological training



Dr. Al and Kitty Jones

Quule invited Aweis to come and worship at the local church he attended. Dr. Al and Kitty Jones led the English service. To Aweis it felt amazing to be able to worship so freely without any fear for his life. Al and Kitty treated Aweis like he was their own son and supported him beyond his wildest dreams. Dr. Jones sponsored Aweis and a few other Christians from the local church to join the Evangelical Theological College (ETC) in Addis Ababa. He told them that he would find funding for their fees and textbooks. Aweis was ecstatic. He quickly contacted Dr. Lula, a prominent Somali Christian lady and shared with her the good news of the scholarship. He told her he needed a job to

pay for his rent, meals and transportation.

Dr. Lula contacted some of the senior SIM missionaries to the Somalis, who worked together and provided Aweis with Christian books to translate. He earned two United States dollars per page for the translation and the word processing. Daniel, one of the senior SIM missionaries, loaned Aweis a laptop to use for the work. The translation work paid Aweis better than other jobs could have paid him. He could also work at his convenience and he immensely enjoyed the work. Aweis is eternally grateful to Dr. Lula for advocating for him. He is also thankful to Benson, Daniel and Sam, the three missionaries who made the translation work available to him.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Benson, Daniel and Sam are pseudonyms.

A few weeks before he started at the theological college, Aweis learnt from Dr. Jones that he would also pay him and other students from the local church a monthly stipend of ninety United States dollars each so they did not have to worry about rent, meals and transportation. Aweis could not believe a kindness and a generosity like that. It simply blew him away. Aweis was one of the most “well-off” students at the theological college because of the scholarship, stipend and the translation work. He used some of his income to regularly bless various Somali Christians in Addis Ababa who were struggling financially.

The SIM Somali radio ministry office in Nairobi moved to Addis Ababa in the mid 1990s. Aweis was privileged to get involved in the ministry that the Lord had used to find him. He was also pleased to minister with Benson, a long-time leader of the radio ministry, who encouraged him during the most difficult time of his life in Mogadishu. Aweis’ involvement in the radio ministry was limited to translation work.

Theology and Somalis

Some missionaries with influential parachurch organizations in Addis Ababa did not like the idea of sending Somali Christians to theological colleges. Timeo, a Swiss brother and an entrepreneur, met Aweis and Quule at the home of Dr. Lula, a prominent Somali Christian medical doctor.⁷⁷ This was a month or so before Aweis and Quule started classes at the theological college. Timeo came with a German missionary who just sat in the meeting to listen without uttering a single word during the tense meeting. Timeo advised Aweis and Quule to study carpentry or masonry instead of Christian theology. He promised to help them with the training he suggested. Timeo explained to them that no employer in Somalia would hire them with a theological college degree. He continued to say, “You will not be able to make any money with a theological degree.” He was genuinely concerned about their financial stability. Timeo has a long history of helping Somali Christians with income-generating projects. When contacted to confirm this story, Timeo sent a message that read in part, “I have only very vague memories of this occasion, so I may be wrong, but according to how I know myself, this is probably how it happened.”⁷⁸

Aweis and Quule thanked Timeo for his time and advice but declined the carpentry and the masonry training. They knew God had called them to be ministers of the gospel and they were firmly convinced that a theological education would positively contribute to their vision and mission. One American missionary later told Aweis that theological education was not helpful to Christians from a Muslim background. That same missionary spoke highly of two Ethiopian students at the theological college, though they were from a Muslim background. Aweis could not understand this apparent inconsistency. The parachurch organization this missionary belonged to helped several Somali seekers and Christians in Kenya. Some of these attended Bible colleges and graduated and some dropped out. The bad experience the missionaries had with some of these Somalis in Kenya may have influenced their belief that theological college training was not a good idea for Muslim background Somali Christians. This appears to Aweis

⁷⁷ “Timeo” is a pseudonym for a Swiss missionary who is a fluent speaker of the Somali language and a man of many talents.

⁷⁸ Timeo, Direct Message. Message to Aweis A. Ali. 08 May 2022. Face Book Message

the most plausible explanation as to why he and Quule were asked to study carpentry or masonry instead of Christian theology.



Aweis' BTh graduation photo in 2000

Aweis and Quule graduated in 2000 with degrees in theology. They invited Timeo, one of the most well-known missionaries among Somalis, to a graduation party their church organized for them. He attended it and celebrated with them. While Aweis and Quule graduated twenty-two years ago, they are still strong in their Christian faith and remain active in ministry. The theological training was very valuable in their spiritual growth and was not an obstacle in furthering ministry engagement.

Aweis and Quule stayed active in Somali ministry while attending college. They also led the Somali ministry of their church. Aweis enjoyed his theological training so much that he traveled to the United States in 2001 where he attended a seminary and earned a Master of Divinity degree. He also graduated with a PhD in religion from a Christian university in Nairobi, Kenya. The concerns of the missionaries with the parachurch organizations did not dissuade him from his ministerial training. The motivation of the missionaries for encouraging Aweis and Quule to study carpentry or masonry was so that they could be the most effective witnesses of the gospel, knowing that a theology degree could be a barrier to re-entering Somalia. The Somali Islamic ministry is much more complicated than similar ministries in neighboring countries. Having said that, theological training for qualified Somali Christians is essential to the Somali community of faith.

A Mother's concerns

Aweis' mother always tolerated his Christian faith. However, joining a theological college to become a better minister of the gospel was too much for her; she certainly would have been happier if Aweis studied carpentry or masonry! Aweis' mother, a devout Muslim lady, started composing and reciting poetry as a teenager and she still communicates with her children through poetry. She sent Aweis two audio tapes full of her poetry and motherly exhortations encouraging him to drop out of the theological college and return home quickly. A few stanzas from two of her most piercing poems are:

Sinjigeenu gaal iyo ma galo, wax an sujuudayne

*We have no non-Muslims in our ancestral lineage,
non-Muslims who do not prostrate in worship [to God]*

*Qalqalooc hadday kuu dhigeen, qari Kitaabkooda
Ee qalabka soo qaado waan, wada qoslaynaaye*

*If the Christians are teaching you their crooked religion,
Rebuff their Book and return home so we can rejoice together*

Aweis, who describes his mother as the single most important person in his life, could not sleep the night he listened to his mom's poetry because of sorrow. However, he knew that he would not abandon his studies and return to Mogadishu. He went back to the college the following morning ready to learn more. Eight years later, Aweis asked Rev. Ali Adawe, one of his Somali Christian friends, to listen to the tapes and give him his feedback. Rev. Ali, who knows Aweis' mother, teared up upon hearing the contents of the tapes and said to Aweis, "You listened to this poetry one evening and returned to the theological college the following morning?" "Yes," Aweis responded. "You have a heart of stone. If I were you, I would have moved back to Mogadishu quickly while crying all the way." Rev. Ali's honest reaction sheds light on the power of that poetry.

Conclusion

Both in Islam and in Somali culture, the mother is the most important person in every Somali's life. Therefore, a mother's opinion is seen as extremely significant among Somalis. Aweis was understandably distraught when his mother found out he was studying Christian theology and instructed him to return home and abandon his studies. To ignore his mother's explicit demand was hard on Aweis, even though he knew his ministerial training was the will of God. Aweis' theological studies sharpened his understanding of the Christian faith and made him a more effective minister of the Gospel.

Christian ministry has its own challenges. Some of these challenges are external, while others are internal. The latter are far more damaging. Sometimes missionaries (even those from the same mission organization) do not get along. Career missionaries who spend a long time on the mission field tend to be strong-willed and task-oriented. It appears that only missionaries with forceful personalities can flourish in foreign lands. Some of these missionaries struggle to form strong bonds with people; this enables them to leave home for faraway countries. These gifts and strengths sometimes cause friction on the mission field.

CHAPTER 14: CHALLENGES OF MINISTRY

“Not all people will praise you. Make sure they don’t all blame you.”⁷⁹

-Somali proverb

Introduction

Many Christians know the blessings of ministry but gloss over the challenges. Christian ministry is not supposed to be smooth sailing. Challenges arise from within the church and from without. It is very painful when Christians cannot get along or hurt one another. Christians are not holier than Jesus and he was opposed, arrested, betrayed and executed. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement about a ministry issue (Acts 15:36-41). Aweis had no face-to-face interactions with any missionaries until 1993, seven years after the Lord found him. He had very limited face-to-face interactions with missionaries from 1993 to 1996 because of the challenges of the civil war in Mogadishu. Aweis’ long physical isolation from missionaries was a blessing in disguise. His faith matured and he learned to honor and respect missionaries as God’s valued and upright messengers.

There was peace and harmony among the small number of missionaries in Mogadishu where Aweis lived; these expatriate Christians had a common enemy that wanted them all dead. So, they got along fine despite some of their differences. Since local Christians in areas where the church is weak are often connected to different missionaries, when these expatriate workers collide, the conflict spreads to the local believers. It is better for the health of local ministries that missionaries avoid hostilities amongst themselves; their disagreements should be resolved without the knowledge or the involvement of local believers. As the Somali proverb says, “Camel herders’ hands are washed discreetly.”⁸⁰ Camel herders do not often get enough water, so when they find some to wash their hands, the dirt on their hands disgusts people – thus the idea of washing them inconspicuously! To use an English expression, missionaries should not wash their dirty linen in public. Nothing shakes the faith of new believers more than feuding missionaries.

Idolizing missionaries

Aweis revered missionaries before his arrival in Addis Ababa in mid 1996. He believed they were superhuman beings because of their calling and ministry. Aweis thought that they were so holy that they could do no wrong. His first rude awakening came when he saw some missionaries who could not get along, even when they belonged to the same mission organization. The realization that missionaries were just mere human beings like anyone else hit him very hard. Christians are not persecuted in Addis Ababa like in Mogadishu. Every Christian has the freedom to practice their faith without fear. Local churches are all over the city and worship freely. It was very easy to be a Christian in this famous city.

⁷⁹ In Somali, “*Benu’adam ku wada amaani mayee, yuu ku wada eedin.*”

⁸⁰ In Somali, “*Gacmo geelleey hoos ayaa loo dhaqaa.*”

Aweis' idolization of missionaries came from the Sufi tradition of Islam in which he was raised. The Muslim clergy in this tradition are highly revered. Sufi Muslims see their *ulema* (Muslim clergy) as representatives of God's messengers on earth. The *Sufi ulema* get along very well even when they belong to different orders and suborders. The humility and the piety of these Sufi *ulema* put most Protestant missionaries to shame. Aweis once asked Rev. Garaad, one of the wisest Somali Christian elders, to compare the Western missionaries to the Somali *ulema* and identify who was humbler and more pious. Aweis knew the answer but was still saddened to hear it from his friend. Garaad responded, "Hands down. Not even close. The Muslim *ulema* win very easily." The Somali *ulema* are often meek and generous. How the priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are revered reminds Aweis how the Sufi *ulema* are admired among Somali Muslims. Humility is also enshrined in the Qur'an, "And do not walk on the earth arrogantly. Surely you can neither crack the earth nor stretch to the height of the mountains." 17:37, The Clear Quran.

Upsetting a missionary

Aweis knew missionaries could get upset or feel disappointed. He knew they could be sad and even shed tears like any other human being. However, he associated extreme anger or short temper with carnality.⁸¹ Until 1997, Aweis did not know missionaries could yell and scream when they got very angry; he thought they were too holy for an emotional outburst like that. Again, this assumption comes from Aweis' Sufi Islamic upbringing. Aweis' view on missionaries was challenged when a Somali Christian couple from the Christian fellowship he attended asked him to help them to get married. The man was a long-time Christian and a really nice man. He had a history of struggling with substance abuse. His work ethic was also poor. However, he was also one of the elders of the fellowship. The woman was a new, growing Christian. She was brilliant and hardworking.

Aweis secured enough support from the other local leaders of the fellowship to help this couple get married. The idea of a Somali Christian family was irresistible to Aweis. Barbara Keener Reed, a veteran missionary who served in Somalia, states, "When we were resident in Somalia, women were much slower to inquire about matters of faith and to consider the invitation of Christ. Being fewer in number was an obstacle for establishing Christian homes."⁸² Aweis was determined to help establish a Christian home.

As one of the elders of the fellowship, Aweis notified the missionary who was helping the bride-to-be. This missionary had high hopes for this new Christian woman; she continued loving and teaching her even after the wedding. The missionary objected to the marriage plan; she thought it was too early and she was not impressed with the groom-to-be.

⁸¹ Barbara Keener Reed describes in her book, *Standing on Holy Ground* (page 110), the testimony of a Somali Christian. One of the reasons the former Muslim followed Jesus was that an American missionary he threatened with death did not get angry with him!

⁸² Barbara Keener Reed, *Standing on Holy Ground. and Some Not So Holy: A Memoir.* (Lancaster, PA: Barbara Keener Reed, 221), 112.

Aweis pressed ahead with the wedding planning. He delegated another elder from the fellowship to raise some money for the couple. All the members of the fellowship, including the missionaries, generously gave to the wedding fund. Enough money was raised for the wedding, the honeymoon and even a little bit more. The wedding took place at the Addis Ababa YWAM compound where the fellowship met. The missionary and her husband arrived for the wedding and Aweis went out to greet them and brief them on the progress of the program. That is when he realized how much trouble he was in. The missionary was very angry; she yelled at Aweis for ignoring her concerns and proceeding with the wedding preparation. She shouted at him like he had murdered someone she loved. Aweis was speechless. He could not believe what was happening. He expected her husband who was standing next to her to help calm things down. He did not get involved. This was the first time Aweis saw a missionary lose their temper; maybe it was a fit of holy anger. Aweis kept silent while the missionary was unloading on him. Aweis wanted to say to her, “What is wrong with you? Missionaries don’t get angry – at least not that angry!” He is glad he kept his mouth shut. The missionary was a fine Christian lady; her love for the bride-to-be was immense. Aweis later affirmed that the missionary’s wrath was a righteous anger, not a carnal one. The missionary couple recently disputed some important facts in this story.⁸³ Aweis is 100% confident that his version and recollection of the incident are accurate.

The Somali couple divorced after six years of marriage. The once-promising young Christian woman suffered spiritual decay; the marriage was counterproductive for her. Aweis believes the missionary was right and he was wrong. He regrets not listening to her. Aweis wonders what would have happened if he also objected to the wedding. There is a strong probability that the couple would have eloped; they were madly in love. A Somali proverb says, “Two do not listen to sound advice: a couple who wants to get married and a man who is going to war.”⁸⁴ The passion for procreating and the pressure to fight trump common sense.

Rev. Oliver



Minutes after Aweis’ baptism at the mission compound of International Aid Sweden in Mogadishu in 1993. From left to right: Aweis A. Ali, Rev. Darren Gingras and Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan

Oliver baptized Aweis and gave him his first face-to-face discipleship training in Mogadishu in 1993. Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, Aweis’ best friend, witnessed his baptism in the Mogadishu mission compound of International Aid Sweden (IAS). Oliver also invited Aweis to Addis Ababa in 1996 when most members of his house church were martyred for their faith. Therefore, Aweis considered him his spiritual father. Oliver was a very young man and a talented preacher. He was also incredibly good-looking and one of the tallest men Aweis had ever seen at the time. Oliver could have become a model or a basketball player if God did not call him as a minister of the gospel.

He always smiled and had a good sense of humor. He was also very strong-willed but still a very

⁸³ Name Withheld, “Confused???? Re: Another Story.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 14 May 2022. Email.

⁸⁴ In Somali, “*Labo talo ma yeelaan; nin dagaal u socda iyo nin guur damacsan.*”

likable man. Aweis' ministry relationship with Oliver eventually ended because of irreconcilable ministry strategies. This breakdown of the relationship grieved Aweis so much.

Missionaries and Somalis

Most successful missionaries are often strong-willed. Mission work is not for the faint-hearted. However, "strong-willed" should never be seen as synonymous with inflexible. Missionaries can be strong-minded yet adaptable. Somalis are also by nature independent-spirited, if not outright opinionated and obstinate. No wonder Somali Christians and missionaries have a long history of clashing over minor things that should never matter in the bigger scheme of things.

Because of their culture and history, Somalis are often more egalitarian than their neighbors. Unlike Somalis, it is easier for Ethiopians or Kenyans to show deep reverence for their leaders even when they disagree. On the contrary, Somalis are known to confront their leaders when they think the leaders are erring. This could be one of the reasons many missionaries appoint exclusively Ethiopian or Kenyan leadership for their Somali ministry. Somali Christians acknowledge that Ethiopian and Kenyan Christians are often more mature in their Christian faith. Most adult Somali Christians are first-generation Christians from a Muslim background, while most Ethiopian and Kenyan Christians have a Christian heritage.

While Somali Christians do not mind some Ethiopian or Kenyan leadership in Somali ministry, they want to see at least a few qualified Somali Christians included in missionary-appointed leadership. When Somali Christians do not see a single Somali Christian in the all-Ethiopian or Kenyan leadership for any Somali ministry, they sense injustice. Eventually, the relationship between missionaries and Somali Christians breaks down. Faarah Jaama Aadan "Laanjeer" (1910 - 1972), a Somali poet and a camel rustler, composed a poem in which he describes the fruits of injustice, whether real or perceived. One stanza of that poem says:

Rag caddaalad waayaa sidii cawshuu diriraaye
Men will fight ferociously when they sense injustice

Inter-Mission relations

Established mission organizations among Somalis are often protective of Somali ministry and rightfully so. These mission organizations invest blood, sweat and tears into the ministry and they do not want it to be wrecked by new inexperienced missionaries. Somali church history is littered with fly-by-night missionaries who caused more harm than good and then left. Veteran missionaries are burdened with cleaning up the mess.⁸⁵ It is therefore important for newer missionaries to consult with and coordinate their Somali ministry-related works with veteran missionaries. Similarly, the opinions of Somali Christians must be considered when missionaries devise strategies for Somali ministry. Aweis asserts that some missionaries have a history of excluding Somali Christians when making decisions that directly affect the Somali church.

⁸⁵ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 114-115.

Denominational ministries

Aweis' denomination was new to Somali ministry in 1996, though it had decades of ministry experience among Muslims elsewhere in the world. Some missionaries with a parachurch organization expressed concern to Aweis that his church could harm Somali ministry because of its denominational strategy. One of these missionaries expressed reservations to Aweis that Aweis' church knew nothing about Somali ministry. The missionary did not consider that Aweis and Quule Ali Egal were the leaders of the Somali ministry in their church. While Aweis' formal ministry experience was limited to five years at the time, he had been walking with the Lord at the time for about twelve years; He knew a thing or two about Somali ministry.

The Protestant tradition of Somali ministry was often non-denominational. SIM and the Mennonite Mission pioneered this practice starting from 1955. A denominational church among Somalis was thus seen as taboo. The SIM and the Mennonite Mission relationship briefly fractured on the 2nd of May, 1966, when some Somali house churches in southern Somalia decided to join the Mennonite Church.⁸⁶ The nascent Somali Mennonite Church (SMC) faced intense SIM opposition and died quickly; the SIM and the Mennonite Mission relationship mended once the denominational Somali church disintegrated.⁸⁷

Some friendly missionaries from various non-denominational parachurch organizations repeatedly told Aweis that Somalis were not ready for a denominationally based church. He found the assumption that Somali Christians cannot understand and appreciate a denominational connection misguided. Almost all adult Somali Christians are from a Muslim background and there is no such a thing as a generic Muslim among Somalis. Every Somali Muslim belongs to a *madhab*.⁸⁸ Many Somali Muslims are also members of a specific *dariqah*.⁸⁹ Aweis believes that while denominational membership encourages commitment, generic Christianity breeds complacency.

While these well-intentioned missionaries objected to the denominational nature of the ministry of his church, they also expressed to him two other concerns. Aweis' church sent several Somali Christians to evangelize their own people. The church also gave them enough financial support to live on as full-time ministers. Some of the missionaries thought the financial support was sometimes too much and that such monetary provision could create unhealthy dependence. The other concern was that the evangelists the church was sending out were not mature enough as Christians.

Aweis admits that his church was sometimes too generous to the evangelists who were risking their lives to make Christ known among Somali Muslims. His church took precautions to

⁸⁶ David W. Shenk, "A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970." (PhD Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 281.

⁸⁷ For more on this history, please read: Aweis A. Ali, "The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries Among Somalis." EMQ, Volume 57, Issue 1. January – March, 2021. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/the-case-for-denominationally-based-ministries/> (accessed 28 October 2021).

⁸⁸ *Madhab* is a school of thought within the Islamic jurisprudence. The 4 major *madhabs* are Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali and Maliki. *Madhab* is comparable to the Christian concept of denomination.

⁸⁹ Religious order or path. The most prominent Somali *dariqahs* are: Ahmadiyah, Qadiriyyah and Salihyyah.

discourage unhealthy dependence on mission finances. It is also true, according to Aweis, that some of the evangelists the church supported were not very mature. However, evangelists received on-the-job training so that their Christian maturity grew over time.

Pastor Abdikamil Mahmoud, a prominent Somali church leader, explicates the Somali believers' impact on frontier missions as follows:

Some use public forums to share the good news with their people; these include two faithful brothers who have been using radio ministry for more than a decade and, most recently, social media platforms to spread the gospel. Others have employed covert means to spread the Good News through friendship evangelism, discovery Bible studies and other contextualized methods. Still, others have chosen to invest in mobilizing believers to the mission field through teaching in theological institutions, pastoring local churches, and working with para-church organizations.⁹⁰

Aweis finds it unbiblical that one cannot be sent and supported to share one's faith until one is "mature" enough. Most of the evangelists Aweis' church sent and supported were successful in their ministry assignments. He therefore considers the objections of said missionaries invalid. As a result, Aweis sided with his church. However, his love and respect for the concerned missionaries were never compromised.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural ministries are rife with misunderstandings which are hard to avoid. However, missionaries can better prepare themselves to avoid some common *faux pas*. A culturally embarrassing or tactless act or remark is unavoidable in cross-cultural settings, but such mishaps should be kept to a minimum. Unlike in Europe and North America, family bonds are strong in Africa, where the elderly are also revered as wise and vital to the community. On the contrary, older people enjoy less honor in Europe and North Africa, where family bonds are also weaker than they were a generation ago.

Hospitality is also a big deal in Africa, where regularly entertaining guests at one's home is valued. Also, hospitality is more than feeding your guests; hospitality is more complex than serving food. Many missionaries prefer to take guests to restaurants – that is not hospitality, but generosity; hospitality finds its fulfillment at home. Every missionary cannot regularly entertain guests at home or have an open-door policy. However, every missionary can do their best and their best should be good enough.

⁹⁰ Abdikamil Mahmoud, "First Generation Believers' Impact on Frontier Missions." Somali Bible Society Journal. Volume I, Issue 1, Version II, (December 2020), 55. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SBSJ-DEC-V2-2020.pdf> (12 June 2021).

CHAPTER 15: CRITICISM

“All the people will never praise you. Make sure they don’t all blame you.”⁹¹

-Somali proverb

Introduction

Aweis understands that being a great ecclesiastical leader does not exempt him from criticism because he is aware of some of his areas of growth; he knows he is not a sinless saint; he also acknowledges that his ministry strategy is not divinely inspired. Aweis learns from criticisms, whether he considers them fair or not. His out-of-the-box ministry strategy started shell-shocking some missionaries and local believers in Somalia in the 1990s. They really thought that his untested ministry approach was harmful to the Somali ministry. Despite these initial misgivings, as well as his multiple errors and regrettable poor judgments over the years, Aweis’ ministry continued to prosper.

Aweis acknowledges that some of the criticisms he faces to this day from those in ministry are legitimate, while others, he claims, are from critics who are non-productive individuals, people who enjoy the status quo and fear new ideas. Aweis states that “to accomplish great things for the Kingdom of God, overthrowing the existing impotent state of affairs is imperative.” This attitude does not win Aweis many friends. I am of the opinion that he must exercise more humility and tone things down. I contacted dozens of Aweis’ most ardent critics, both Somali Christians and expatriate missionaries and I regret to write that most declined to critique Aweis and his ministry, even when I promised them anonymity. However, several of Aweis’ critics submitted the following criticisms to me.

Unnecessary risks

Rev. Ali Adawe, a Somali church leader, described Aweis as a man who sometimes risks his own life and the lives of those he ministers to, as well as his fellow ministers in Islamic ministry. Examples Ali submitted include this one:

Aweis led several Ethiopian Oromo Muslims to the Lord in 2006 in an isolated and mountainous village in eastern Ethiopia. In fact, the majority of the village’s only mosque members including the prayer leader became followers of Christ. These members turned the mosque building into a church building. I personally visited the mosque building and met the new Christian converts worshipping in it. The Muslim community in the village objected to the idea of the Christian converts turning the mosque into a church and a bitter conflict ensued. Muslims from a neighboring village moved to the village to forcefully take back the mosque building. The Muslims in the village threatened Aweis with death but he never told me about this death threat beforehand. I scolded Aweis for risking our life. Aweis took our then denomination’s Field Director for the Horn Africa to visit with the new Christian community in 2007. I made the mistake of going with them. The entire Muslim village was hostile to our visit and the new Christian converts were

⁹¹ In Somali, “*Benu’aadam ku wada amaani maayee, yuu ku wada eedin.*”

under intense persecution. Our visit encouraged the new believers but it was still unsafe for us. We stayed in the village until after dark which was a bad idea. These angry Muslim villagers could have killed us all.⁹²

Ali also cited multiple other examples of Aweis taking “foolish” risks by traveling by land to some of the most dangerous and gospel resistant Muslim communities in the Horn of Africa. Ali also mentioned a trip in which Aweis flew to Mogadishu in 2022 to minister to the local believers there. Aweis grew up in Mogadishu and lived there until 1996. During this visit, he stayed at a hotel that was a few miles from where twelve of his house church members were martyred for their faith in the 1990s. Several other Somali Christians had been killed in Mogadishu since then. This is a city in which the majority of Muslims who know Aweis want him dead because of his faith and ministry. He visited that war-torn city despite strong advice against his trip. Aweis knew the risk he faced there as one of the most high-profile Somali Christians. This is a dangerous city, which Aweis has refused to visit since 2001. A hotel next to the one he met with local believers was bombed by an Islamist group in 2020; over a dozen people died in the attack.⁹³

Ali states that he is not against taking risks for the propagation of the gospel, but he is against what he considers recklessness. Ali shared how two angry Muslims attacked him and two other evangelists in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 2005 and shot him in the stomach. He almost died, but finally recovered after several months of treatment. Ali takes security more seriously because of this attempted assassination.

Appointing immature leaders

A few missionaries with parachurch organizations and local believers attest that Aweis has a history of trusting immature and unqualified local Christians with important ministerial assignments. These Christians allege that even after some of the appointees failed, Aweis found other assignments for them for which they did not qualify! They added, “It is like he never learns from his mistakes.” These critics maintain that many of the local Christians Aweis surrounds himself with are neither credible believers nor qualified persons for any ministry assignment. They also state that Aweis focuses on quantity instead of quality. They conclude that “Aweis should focus on holiness instead of headcount.”⁹⁴

Denominational obsession

One significant recurring criticism against Aweis is his alleged obsession with denominationalism. Of course, Aweis writes and talks about his conviction that Bible-believing denominations are a force for good in Christian ministry. However, said critics state that Aweis’ unshakable belief in his denomination’s ministry strategy is problematic in Islamic ministry. The

⁹² Submitted by Rev. Ali Adawe to the author. 19 June 2022.

⁹³ “Somalia: Over a dozen killed in hours-long Mogadishu hotel siege.” Al Jazeera News. 17 August 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/17/somalia-over-a-dozen-killed-in-hours-long-mogadishu-hotel-siege> (accessed 21 September 2022).

⁹⁴ Personal conversation with two expatriate missionaries and three Somali Christians. Addis Ababa and Jigjiga, Ethiopia, 28 June 2022.

Islamic ministry in the Horn of Africa has traditionally been non-denominational. Aweis does not deny his deep loyalty to his denomination's mission strategy, but he considers planting denominationally based churches among Muslims as a noble endeavor.

Financial generosity as a threat to the ministry

Another recurrent criticism against Aweis is how he uses money for the propagation of the gospel. Three expatriate missionaries with different parachurch organizations allege that Aweis' financial support to those in ministry in the Horn of Africa, especially in Somali ministry, is problematic. Concerns raised by these missionaries include that generous ministry budgets can attract the wrong people and can create unhealthy dependence on mission finances. The role money should play in Christian missions is a hotly contested topic worldwide. However, it is certain that the money spent on local ministers is small compared to the amount spent on expatriate missionaries.

Stubborn determination

While it is good to be determined, it is really bad to be stubborn. Some critics used these two terms interchangeably. Determination and stubbornness are not the same, not even close in meaning. Stubborn people are against change, thus preferring the status quo, but determined people are known for their pragmatism. Some critics allege that, for decades, Aweis has been rejecting the traditional consensus and cooperation-based strategy of the Somali ministry. Aweis' commitment to denominational ministry flies in the face of what he describes as generic Christianity among Somalis in the Horn of Africa. One expatriate missionary avers that Aweis harbors nationalistic and pan-Africanistic tendencies, which he said cause discomfort to some Western missionaries. The missionary continued to say that Aweis' belief that local ministers are equal to the better-trained and more experienced expatriate missionaries causes problems. However, the missionary claims Aweis still refuses to moderate this stand.

Conclusion

Somali ministry is one of the most challenging and most rewarding ministries in the Muslim world. Because of the complexities of this ministry, different mission organizations had a gentleman's agreement since the 1950s to only facilitate generic Christianity and avoid denominational labels. It is noteworthy that no known Somali Christian was ever a party to this arrangement. This is one of the reasons some mission organizations initially considered Aweis' Somali ministry strategy as destabilizing. His view that denominationally connected churches are necessary among Somali people ruffled some feathers. His belief in indigenous leadership and the financial support he makes available to this ministry also face questions from some missionaries from parachurch organizations.

Hospitality is an essential tool in Somali ministry. Both Somali culture and Islam emphasize its importance. Cross-cultural ministers of the gospel need to remember that any time they spend socializing with local people is witnessing to them. Drinking tea and eating meals with the people missionaries serve is an essential component of their ministry without which they cannot have a successful ministry. While it is perfectly fine to entertain guests in restaurants, true

hospitality can only be realized at home. This is why an open-door policy, when possible, makes Christian witness more credible. Ministry is more than preaching and evangelizing. Eating together and socializing are the bedrock of any successful ministry in the Muslim world.

CHAPTER 16: HOSPITALITY IN THE CHURCH

“Guests do not enter an open door, but they enter an open face.”⁹⁵

-Somali proverb

Introduction

The Bible is a book of hospitality and Abraham is the father of hospitality (Genesis 12, 14, 18, and 19). These narratives teach the community of faith how to treat and how not to treat strangers and other guests. The story of the Prophet Elijah receiving hospitality from the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17-18) and the Shunammite woman hosting the Prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4) are inspiring stories in the Bible. Biblical hospitality is more than feeding or hosting familiar guests and strangers in your home. Leviticus 19:34 (NIV) teaches, “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” The central theme of biblical hospitality is to identify with strangers, guests and the poor to the level of loving them as yourself; this is a tall order for anyone without the help of God.

An Arab proverb says, “When a guest comes to a house, the host becomes the guest and the guest the host.” When the host serves a meal, it is the guest who makes sure the host eats and eats well. The Somali people have a similar culture. It seems that this culture is common in the Global South. The Bible also teaches the significance of hospitality in the faith community, “Be hospitable to one another without grumbling” 1 Peter 4:9, NKJV. Aweis believes that Christian hospitality is home-based. By this definition, you can take someone to some of the finest restaurants and foot the bill, but this is kindness, not hospitality.

If hospitality finds its fulfillment in the home, it is very important for missionaries to open up their homes to entertain the people to whom they are ministering; but they must do this in moderation. This hospitality can be overdone to the detriment of family health. It is counterproductive to make your home an extension of your regular ministry. Non-Christians and Christian converts have no clue what Christian family looks like. Aweis speculates, “The best way these people can learn the values and the virtues of Christian family is to observe a Christian family interacting in the comfort of their home.” Three missionary couples with an influential parachurch organization had the greatest impact on Aweis’ life during his theological college days in Addis Ababa.

The first family

Daniel and his wife had an open-door policy.⁹⁶ Somali Christians knew they could drop by any time for a chat, a cup of tea, or to just practice on the couple’s laptop to improve their typing skills. There were often snacks available in the living room. Aweis spent plenty of time in this Christian home and learned what a Christian family should look like because he watched this

⁹⁵ In Somali, “*Albaab furan lama galee, weji furan ayaa la galaa.*”

⁹⁶ “Daniel” is a pseudonym for an American veteran missionary of more than 35 years. He is a fluent speaker of the Somali language and an expert on Somali culture.

couple and their children interact in their natural environment. Aweis realized within a short time what Somali Muslim families lacked. In a typical Somali Muslim family, the husband is the boss, the wife is the servant and the children are the domestic workers. Everyone knows their place in the pecking order. While Aweis knows a few exceptions, he admits this is the norm in Somali Muslim family homes. Daniel disciplined Rev. Ali Adawe, a Somali Christian friend of Aweis, at his own home. Just like Aweis did, this new Christian very quickly realized how blessed a Christian family was. One day, this friend visited Aweis and said to him, “We do not know how to treat our children as Somalis. I am learning so much from this family.”

A young Somali Christian refugee from the Somali Ethiopian town of Kelafo once confided in Aweis, “When I feel very hungry, I just visit this family. I am too shy to ask for food, but the snacks that are always available in their living room and a cup of water is plenty enough to sustain me for the next twenty-four hours.” This young man added, “They often give me food and a cup of hot tea even though I do not ask for them.” Somali Christians knew you could even stay at this home if you were visiting Addis Ababa. This missionary couple offered hospitality to anyone who showed up at their door without grumbling (See 1 Peter 4:8-9). They also knew that the poor Somali Christians in their living room could not repay them, but they did not care; they knew they would “be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14, NKJV).

The second family

Sam and his wife also had an open-door policy and the Somali Christians could stop by their home anytime.⁹⁷ The couple was also extremely humble. They did not care what they wore, as long as it was clean and modest enough; they could even wear beggars’ shoes with no qualms.⁹⁸ In fact, many Somali Christian refugees dressed better than them. Sam is best remembered for his patience and perseverance. He was a successful missionary and well-liked among Somali Christians. He was also generous. Every visitor was greeted with a cup of water, tea, or some food. No Somali Christian refugee who ever visited this home left with an empty stomach.

The third family

Benson and his wife had an open-door policy for the first fifteen years of their ministry among Somalis. However, a closed-door policy later became necessary for the wellbeing of the family.⁹⁹ However, the couple remained generous and hospitable. Somali Christians knew they could not just show up. An appointment was necessary to visit Benson at his home, though getting such an appointment was very rare. Instead of opening his home and inconveniencing the family, Benson would meet any Somali who wanted to see him in public places like teashops and cafeterias. Benson’s wife was more flexible than her husband when it came to opening her home to a small number of Somali believers, but her face-to-face ministry was often limited to a few Somali women at a time. Somali Christians knew that this family preferred their home to be a quiet

⁹⁷ “Sam” is a pseudonym for a veteran missionary of more than 35 years. This man is one of the humblest Protestant missionaries who ever served among Somalis. He is a fluent speaker of the Somali language and an expert on Somali culture.

⁹⁸ Somali traditional shoes made from recycled car tires.

⁹⁹ “Benson” is a pseudonym for an American veteran missionary of 40 years. He is a fluent speaker of the Somali language and an expert on Somali culture.

sanctuary. This was a very different strategy to Sam and Daniel, but different does not mean wrong. They were clear about their boundaries and that is what mattered.

Benson is a man with an impeccable work ethic and an intense academic mind. As a bookish and budding scholar, Aweis treasured Benson's brilliance and the fact that he read widely. Benson also contributed to Aweis' spiritual growth as a new believer in Mogadishu, Somalia. Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan, the first martyr of the Medina house church, adored Benson so much that Aweis joked in 1993, "If Benson started a cult, Liibaan would be the first believer."

Aweis learnt so much from these three missionary couples. Their different gifts, strengths and weaknesses contributed to his academic success and spiritual growth. Not all missionaries can practice an open-door policy; some need their home to be a quiet sanctuary for different reasons. However, they can all be generous in word and deed. They can all foster an ecumenical spirit in the Christian community. As the Somali proverb says, one finger does not wash a face.¹⁰⁰ If Muslims must hear the gospel in a way they can understand, missionaries must help one another; after all, they contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God. Any missionary who tries to build their own little kingdom will fail.

Conclusion

One of the signs of well-adjusted missionaries is their ability to regularly host guests at their homes, both locals and expatriates. Such hospitality enhances the standing of the missionaries within their community. Such well-adjusted missionaries are often more effective than those who turn their home into an English castle.¹⁰¹ I must note here that there can sometimes be legitimate reasons why some missionaries cannot entertain guests at home. However, it is important that those who can do it for the glory of God.

Successful missionaries also understand the necessity of local ministry leaders. These missionaries equip and trust local ministers. Sadly, some missionaries labored among Somalis for decades but never produced or equipped a single local leader. The work of these missionaries collapses once they return home or other missionaries replace them to continue the work. This ministry model is not sustainable. The main reason the Somali church is so tiny, given the long mission history in Somalia, is the missionaries' failure to produce and equip local ministers of the gospel.

¹⁰⁰ *Far keliya fool ma dhaqdo.*

¹⁰¹ This alludes to the English proverb, "An Englishman's home is his castle."

CHAPTER 17: THE NECESSITY OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”

- Titus 1:5

Introduction



Ethelstan Cheese (with beard on right) at Swedish Mission wedding reception at Jonti, Italian Somaliland, 30 March, 1929. Photo credit: Philip Cousins

The churches and mission organizations that contributed most to Somali ministry since the 19th century belong to an exclusive club Aweis calls the Magnificent Four: The Roman Catholic Church, the Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church,¹⁰² the Mennonite Mission and SIM. SIM arrived in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1954 under the leadership of the renowned missionary couple, Warren and Dorothy Modricker.¹⁰³ Ethelstan Cheese (1877-1959),¹⁰⁴ an independent Anglican mystic and missionary who served thirty-three years among Somalis, invited the Modrickers to settle and serve in Somalia.¹⁰⁵ Cheese, who is known as the poor man of God and the holiest man in Somalia, facilitated SIM's move to Somalia.¹⁰⁶ SIM operated quality schools and clinics in

¹⁰² The Swedish name of this mission organization is Evangelisk Fosterlands-Stiftelsen (EF-S); the closest English translation is “Evangelical Homeland Foundation,” better known today as “Swedish Evangelical Mission.” See also: David W. Shenk, “A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970.” (PhD Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 3.

¹⁰³ To learn more about the Modrickers, please see: Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modricker*, (Guardian Books, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Rev. Cheese was born 19 November 1877 in Gosforth, Cumbria, England. He was ordained in 1902 and died 5 June 1959 on board a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. He was on his way back to England and was buried at sea.

¹⁰⁵ To learn more about this saint, please read: Philip Cousins. *Ethelstan Cheese: A Saint of no Fixed Abode*. (Churchman Publishing, 1986).

¹⁰⁶ David A. Kerr, “Cheese, John Ethelstan.” *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. <https://dacb.org/stories/somalia/cheese-johne/> (accessed 01 January 2021).

addition to its evangelistic ministry.¹⁰⁷ The Somali government expelled SIM in 1976 after mounting pressure from the Somali Muslim *ulema*.¹⁰⁸



Ethelstan Cheese at a prayer meeting on the beach at Mogadishu towards the end of his life.
Photo credit: Philip Cousins

Prominent Somali Christians who came to the Lord in Somalia under the SIM ministry include Prof. Ahmed Ali Haile (1953-2011), Prof. Da’ud Hassan Ali (1944-2008) and Dr. Aweis A. Ali (b. 1968). After the expulsion, SIM settled in Kenya to continue its ministry to the Somalis. SIM eventually returned to Somalia in 1983. With a few exceptions, the Magnificent Four struggled to develop qualified local leadership for the Somali church. If these four mission organizations, with their documented success in Somali ministry, could not produce enough trained local church leaders, what chance do newer mission organizations and ministries have to do better than the Magnificent Four? Newer mission organizations should not despair, because the solid ministry foundation laid by the Magnificent Four is available to build upon.

SIM Somalia

SIM is historically one of the most successful mission organizations among Somalis. Aweis first heard the gospel through the SIM radio ministry, *Codka Nolosha Cusub* (Voice of the New Life), in 1983 while in Mogadishu, Somalia. The radio ministry, which was based in Nairobi, Kenya, at the time sent him sufficient Bible study materials and guided him to a salvific faith in Jesus Christ in 1986. This ministry continued to nurture and encourage him in his walk with the Lord. In fact, Benson played a significant role in Aweis’ spiritual development in the late 1980s and early 1990s while he was still in Somalia.¹⁰⁹

The SIM missionaries who succeeded Warren and Dorothy Modricker in the early 1980s were no match for these veteran missionaries; they could not fill their shoes. A pertinent Somali proverb to explain this situation is “a dik-dik (a small antelope) replaced the lion.”¹¹⁰ Somalis use this proverb when a benevolent alpha male dies and his widow is inherited by a beta male.¹¹¹ However, SIM Somalia (based in Kenya at the time) expanded from 1991 to 1996 because of the influx of Somali refugees to Kenya as a result of the Somali civil war. Despite the historic number of Somalis who came to the Lord in Kenya during this time, mission organizations, including SIM, struggled to develop competent Somali ministry leaders.

¹⁰⁷Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*. (Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2015), 21.

¹⁰⁸ A body of Muslim religious scholars recognized as such by the Muslim community.

¹⁰⁹ “Benson” is a pseudonym for an American veteran missionary of 40 years.

¹¹⁰ In Somali, “*Meel aar ka kacay atoor fadhiisay.*”

¹¹¹ Widow inheritance is a socio-cultural practice whereby a male relative (often a brother) of the late husband is required to marry the widow of the deceased kin. The practice is also known as a levirate marriage and is sanctioned in the Bible (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Levirate marriage is a common practice among Somalis.

Abdikamil Mahmoud articulates:

... I would say we need to see regular periodic reviews of the methods of engagement utilized by these organizations. Perhaps lack of periodic reviews may have contributed to the same 'fruitless' methods being employed.¹¹²

Abdikamil also makes an imperative point when he states, "the scriptures teach that some plant, others water and yet others harvest. Fruitfulness for the planter should be gauged based on planting and not harvesting."¹¹³ However, while planters and harvesters are plentiful in Somali ministry, developing qualified local church leaders remains as elusive as ever.

The Somali church's disappointment

The Somali church has yet to produce another Christian of Ahmed Ali Haile's caliber. This disciple of Christ was remarkable. He was from a prominent Somali family, a peacemaker and a generous man. His Mennonite heritage made him an even better person. He was still a Somali at heart, sometimes volatile, independent and very confident. He was also a very humble man, gentle and peace-loving. Somalis describe someone like him by saying, "If you stick your finger in his mouth, he will not bite it."¹¹⁴

Ahmed finished high school in the United States and attended college there. He also earned two graduate degrees in the United States and did some doctoral studies. Ahmed's wife was an American-born church historian and a virtuous lady. Ahmed and his wife were an excellent bridge between nationals and expatriate missionaries. Until his premature death in 2011, Ahmed maintained a cordial relationship with SIM.

In the 1980s the position of director for SIM Somalia opened up and Ahmed Ali Haile applied. He was caught off guard when he learnt his heritage as a Somali disqualified him to become the director of SIM Somalia. How could this happen towards the end of the 20th century? Every Somali Christian who was aware of what was going on at the time was profoundly appalled. Ahmed explains this disturbing incident in his book, *Teatime in Mogadishu*:

Marc believed that I should be the director of the SIM program and leader of the team. However, the SIM international leadership did not think it wise to appoint a Somali to administer the Somalia program. When the two different approaches to leadership could not be reconciled, SIM withdrew from Somalia and determined to continue to give special attention to Somali ministries in Kenya.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Abdikamil Mahmoud "Abdi Walalo", "Re: 2 Questions." Message to Aweis A. Ali. 22 December 2021. Email.

¹¹³ Abdikamil Mahmoud "Abdi Walalo", "Re: 2 Questions."

¹¹⁴ In Somali, "*Haddii aad farta afka ka gelisana, kaa qaniini mayo.*"

¹¹⁵ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 73.

True to his Mennonite principles, it is obvious Ahmed showed restraint in the above citation. How did SIM miss what Marc Erickson, a missionary medical doctor, was plainly able to see – that being a Somali, if anything, should be a blessing, not a problem in leading SIM Somalia?

In 2002, Aweis met one of the SIM missionaries who relocated from Somalia to Kenya because SIM International could not support a local minister leading SIM Somalia. Aweis asked this former SIM missionary about this infamous incident. The missionary affirmed that being a Somali should not have disqualified Ahmed from leading SIM Somalia. He added that SIM had changed since the 1980s and today it would embrace a qualified local Christian as an SIM director in their county of birth. This assertion is true and SIM International changed its controversial policy of not allowing qualified local leaders to serve as SIM country directors. In fact, SIM Ethiopia is currently led by a competent and charismatic Ethiopian lady with illustrious ministry background. However, it is sad that she would have been disqualified in the 1980s to lead SIM Ethiopia because of her Ethiopian heritage.

SIM Somalia in Kenya and Ethiopia

Ahmed later moved to Kenya after the collapse of the Somali government in 1991 and continued his Somali ministry, partnering with SIM. The Somali Christians quickly recognized Ahmed as their leader. Some SIM missionaries did not recognize Ahmed as a key leader in the Somali Fellowship (church) and the discipleship training school.

In the mid 1990s, Ahmed was teaching at an SIM and Mennonite Mission-supported Somali discipleship school in Nairobi. Two of the students engaged in a terrible fistfight. Somalis can fight in the morning and eat lunch together hours later as best buddies. They are not resentful by nature. What happened after the skirmish between the two students was awful, but expected. The SIM missionaries shut down the discipleship school and the Somali church. Both the school and the church met at SIM premises. Neither Ahmed nor any other Somali leader in the church was consulted about the unfortunate closures.

A Somali church leader, who was a student at the discipleship school at the time and a member of the local church, reflected on what happened:

The SIM closed the Somali Discipleship Training School in Nairobi. The justification was that it was closed because two students fought during the training. This cannot be a good enough reason. The fight was used as an excuse to close the school in order to suppress Ahmed Haile's leadership role in the Somali Fellowship and the Somali Discipleship Training School.¹¹⁶

Ahmed's reaction to the closure was not less forceful than that of Rev. Mahad Birik:¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Mahad H. Birik, "Re: SIM-MM Ministries." Message to Aweis A. Ali. 08 April 2021. Email.

¹¹⁷ Rev. Mahad H. Birik is a Reformed Church of East Africa minister of the word and sacraments and Coordinating Chair of the Somali Believers Ministry Network in the region. Mahad holds a Diploma in Theology from the Reformed Institute of Theological Training, a Bachelor of Theology from the International Leadership University (NIST) and a Master of Arts in Christian - Muslim relations from St. Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya.

Consequently the two expatriate leaders decided to close both the school and the church. I was deeply angered. As far as I know, the Somalis in the church had not been consulted. The missionaries were not the Somali church; the church is the church. It is called to be a community of reconciliation.¹¹⁸

Ahmed also states in his book that some SIM missionaries attempted to separate him from the Somali church. Ahmed wrote:

My counsel could not be heard. Some missionaries advised my assignment in Nairobi was a professor at Daystar, not involvement in the church. I should leave the Somali church matters to missionaries appointed to work with the church, it seemed, and not meddle in their affairs. I should worship elsewhere and not with the Somali church. This suggestion astonished me.¹¹⁹

Ahmed rejected the SIM missionaries' proposition and confronted them firmly but with respect. He said to them, "I will not accept that you have the authority to exclude me from the Somali church."¹²⁰ According to Somali believers who are privy to the situation, some Somali Christians sided with the SIM missionaries against Ahmed. The veteran missionary, Warren Modricker (1907 - 1998), a long-time SIM Somalia director, elucidates this classic Somali survival mechanism well:

One of the things that a new-comer quickly learns is that the Somalis are master psychologists in reading your character. In fact, it seems that the first thing the Somali does when meeting a person is to give him a psychoanalysis; he reads the person's character. And in this connection the Somali is a master at INGRATIATING himself upon the other person. He readily understands what will please his employer to hear and he agrees with whatever he knows will give him a better standing with his boss. To use a poor illustration for example, if the employer is dissatisfied with a certain worker, national or Westerner, and wishes to discredit that person, the Somali quickly senses this feeling and goes along with his employer in agreeing that person is undesirable, whether the criticism be honest or not. If an employer wants the Somali to agree with him that the other person and his work is unsatisfactory, the Somalis will agree in order to build his own position stronger with his employer. But we might say that this is not restricted to the Somali people; it is also found among Westerners too though not in such a great extent. The missionary must not let himself fall into this trap of deceptiveness.¹²¹

Somalis becoming "master psychologists" was necessitated by their background as nomadic pastoralists in a hostile and resource-depleted environment. Giving people a quick

¹¹⁸ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 110.

¹¹⁹ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu*, 110.

¹²⁰ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu*, 111.

¹²¹ H. Warren Modricker, "Somali Culture and Customs: Some Helpful Points on the Somali Culture and Customs, Past and Present." (Unpublished manuscript.) <https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

psychoanalysis enables them to know who is a friend or foe. This is a typical example of protecting oneself from being hurt by other people.

SIM and the Mennonite Mission (MM) have a long history of cooperation in Somali ministry. However, SIM always wielded the power in this partnership. Whenever the MM showed some independence, the relationship quickly deteriorated.¹²² Their ministry strategy was also different. The MM apparently favored a denominationally based ministry and thus took local leadership development more seriously.

The fallacy of fellowships

Some missionaries expressed repeated concerns about the Somali ministry experience of Aweis' denomination. Aweis loved his denomination and local church. He was thriving in his faith. He also enjoyed the freedom that he could openly worship with fellow Christians without any fear of a radical Muslim terror attack. What happened to his house church in Mogadishu in the mid 1990s was still fresh in his mind. Aweis never witnessed these missionaries advising Somali believers to join a local church. The missionaries were apparently happy, as long as these Somali believers attended fellowships held at missionary homes. Aweis' thinking was different. He considered all the Somali fellowships as dead-end causes that could never take the place of a local church. He is fine with fellowships if every believer attending any fellowship is also a member of a local church or house church with shared doctrinal and theological persuasion. A detailed paper Aweis wrote on this subject was published in 2021 by EMQ.¹²³

Reasons to delegate

One of the strengths of Aweis' denomination is the role of indigenous leadership in local ministries. Aweis' church, which embraced the Somali ministry in 1997, quickly installed him and Quule Ali Egal as the leaders of the Somali ministry. This church produced more Somali church leaders over the next few years. The church also gave college-level theological education to some of the Somali leaders. Several of these ministers were ordained by 2000 as elders. Some missionaries with an influential parachurch organization expressed concerns about some of these ordinations because they thought the ordinands were not qualified enough for such an office. All these ordinands remain faithful and are in ministry today. Of the seven Somali ministers the church ordained, only one briefly stumbled for a couple of years and the Lord healed him of his failings. This is a pretty good record for a relatively young ministry.

Over the years, these concerned missionaries have depended on expatriate missionary leadership for their Somali ministry. However, the long-term benefit for Somali ministry is to be Somali-led. Abdikamil Mahmoud asserts, "One of the goals of church planting is indigenous leadership. Healthy churches follow the 3S model – Self-sustaining, Self-propagating and Self-governing. A

¹²² Aweis A. Ali, "The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries among Somalis." EMQ, Volume 57, Issue 1. (January - March 2021), 35. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/the-case-for-denominationally-based-ministries/> (accessed 28 October 2021).

¹²³ Aweis A. Ali, "The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries among Somalis, 34-36.

Somali-led church is a reflection of growth and maturity.”¹²⁴ Abdikamil gets it right and I pray expatriate missionaries to the Somalis get it right, too.

While it is good for Somali ministry to be Somali-led, it is also helpful to the missionaries for their own sanity. Missionaries in Aweis’ denomination fully delegated selected Somali ministers to lead the Somali ministry. Missionaries did not dictate anything to these local leaders but supported them from behind the scenes; this strategy has worked very well. The Somali church leaders minister to their own people, solve their own problems and save the missionaries unnecessary headaches pertaining to the day-to-day challenges of this creative access ministry.

On the contrary, the Somali ministry of some key parachurch organizations was led by expatriate missionaries instead of locals. The Somali Christians who were associated with these ministries had to go to the missionaries for anything that was of concern to them, big or small. Only the missionaries were the decision-makers and problem-solvers. This created a Somali ministry that was dependent on the missionaries. There were times that the missionaries and the Somali Christians clashed over various ministry-related issues.

Local leadership development

With limited exceptions, expatriate parachurch organizations do not have a successful track record of developing local church leaders. Aweis articulates four reasons for this:

1. **Comfort zone:** some missionaries fight against anything that might invade their comfort zone. They like what they have been doing for so many years and resist any suggested changes. The missionaries’ incredible opposition to change undermines local leadership development.
2. **Learned helplessness:** some missionaries genuinely believe in their inability to develop local leadership. Such missionaries cite perceived external dynamics. These missionaries would find a problem for every solution; their ability to manufacture endless excuses is limitless. Local leadership development becomes a pipe dream when every new or different strategy is zealously resisted.
3. **The path of least resistance:** some missionaries opt for easy solutions to fill in significant ministry positions. Other expatriate missionaries occupy important ministry positions since no qualified local leaders exist. This is an easy way to achieve a goal but it is not sustainable. The hard way of developing local leaders is preferable to this. There will be multiple failures when developing local leaders but nothing good comes easily.
4. **Blame the victim strategy:** when some missionaries want to prove that local leadership is notoriously unreliable, they will appoint untrained, untested and unqualified local

¹²⁴ Abdikamil Mahmoud “Abdi Walalo”, “Re: 2 Questions.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 22 December 2021. Email.

“leaders” for some ministry positions. When the inevitable happens and these “leaders” fail, then the missionaries will blame the local leaders and absolve themselves from any responsibility in the failures.

Churches do much better than parachurch organizations regarding local leadership development. The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) and a denomination from the holiness tradition best exemplify this. SOLC was expelled from Somalia in 1935 by the Italian colonial authorities.¹²⁵ By the beginning of the 20th century, SOLC sent at least one local leader to Sweden to study for the ministry. Dozens of other local leaders were trained in Somalia by 1915.¹²⁶ Similarly, the denomination from the holiness tradition which is still active in the Somali ministry has been developing competent local church leaders since 1997.

SIM and Somali ministry

SIM was accustomed to a position of power and privilege in the Somali ministry. In fact, SIM and Somalia mission work are almost synonymous. However, new mission organizations and other ministries have embraced the Somali ministry since 1990s. Some Somali-led ministries have also joined the Somali mission work. Some SIM missionaries to the Somalis were caught off guard by this new reality. Instead of showing charity, a few SIM missionaries resented the new kids on the block. The SIM disdain for the newer ministries was partly instigated by their deep-rooted desire to protect the Somali ministry from fly-by-night ministries which could cause more harm than good. However, these SIM missionaries threw the baby out with the bathwater; they did not separate those ministries which were genuinely attempting to evangelize the Somalis from those who might have been seeking their fifteen minutes of fame. The SIM missionaries viewed them all as suspects.

¹²⁵ Sweden condemned Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia (3 October 1935 – 5 May 1936). Italy took revenge on the Swedish missionaries in the Juba Valley by expelling them from the country.

¹²⁶ The Swedish name of this famous mission organization is Evangelisk Fosterlands-Stiftelsen (EF-S); the closest English translation is “Evangelical Homeland Foundation,” better known today as “Swedish Evangelical Mission.” See also: David W. Shenk, “A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970.” (Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 3.



A dilapidated SOLC local church. The closest "big" town of the church was Kismayo while the closest significant mission station was in Jamame town.

While the Somalia Mennonite Mission succumbed to the SIM pressure to fall in line around 1955, a major denomination from the holiness tradition chose to maintain its independence in 1997. This partly explains the relentless SIM disinformation campaign against this denomination. Somali Christians joke that SIM considers the Somali ministry as its wife and anyone attempting to minister to Somalis is viewed by SIM as someone trying to violate its beloved wife. No wonder SIM jealously guards the Somali ministry against what it might consider wayward intruders. The denomination from the holiness tradition has over the years developed more Somali church leaders than any other ministry or mission organization since 1935. Only the Swedish Overseas Lutheran

Church (SOLC) developed more local church leaders in its 39 years (1896 -1935) of ministry in the Jubaland regions of Somalia.¹²⁷ The denomination from the holiness tradition has been in Somali ministry since 1997.

Reflection

Aweis has a soft spot for SIM. He owes SIM his spiritual birth. Only the Lord knows where he would have been today had he not been reached by SIM. Aweis' biggest heroes in Protestant missionary work in the Somali peninsula are the legendary SIM pioneer missionaries, Warren and Dorothy Modricker. Aweis also attended an SIM-affiliated theological college, the Evangelical Theological College. The missionaries who had the most impact on his life, other than those from his denomination, are SIMers.

Aweis used to ask some SIM missionaries in the Somali ministry why SIM's Somali radio ministry never had a Somali director. This ministry was established in 1972. At the time of writing this book, this ministry is fifty years old. Different missionaries have been leading this powerful radio ministry for decades. This ministry is close to Aweis' heart; it is the medium the Lord used to find him. He cares deeply about this ministry which is now web and social media-based.

Conclusion

Why do some mission organizations do better than others in producing and training local ministers of the gospel? Why are some of the oldest and most well-known ministries failing to realize that the best ministry investment they could make is to leave behind trained and qualified local church leaders? Different Somali Christians I spoke to expressed different opinions. However, a common theme was that many missionaries do not see the urgency of investing in

¹²⁷ SOLC is better known today as Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM). SEM's Swedish name is *Evangelisk Fosterlands-Stiftelsen* (EF-S).

local leaders; they think they or the missionaries who will succeed them have plenty of time. However, this assumption is imprudent. Mission organizations that have been in Somali ministry for decades should be worried when they fail to produce and equip local leaders to carry on the ministry.

There are, of course, individual missionaries of ministries with an enviable record of identifying and equipping local ministry leaders. Dr. Howie F. Shute is one of those missionaries; he is one of the most successful missionaries ever to minister to the Somali people. Unless more missionaries and ministries join in this effort, these trailblazing individuals and ministries cannot make a huge difference in this generation. Missionaries willing to produce and equip local leaders are known for their ability to delegate. Any missionary determined enough to trust and delegate to the local believers they minister to is on the right track to leave behind competent and qualified local ministry leaders. This is what some local believers call the Howie Shute paradigm – the ability to evangelize, train and trust local believers.

CHAPTER 18: THE HOWIE SHUTE PARADIGM

“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”

- Acts 14:23, NIV.

Introduction



Dr. Howie F. Shute

Dr. Howie Shute is the father of the Islamic ministry in his denomination; Aweis describes the Howie Shute Paradigm (HSP) as trusting, equipping and releasing local believers to make Christ-like disciples. The HSP includes allowing qualified local believers to lead their churches, ministries and even international mission organizations serving Somalis. While the HSP sounds logical, some missionaries in Somali ministry struggle with it; they are unwilling to entrust Somali believers with leadership responsibilities. Aweis suggests that any mission organization among Somalis which does not produce a single local church leader in seven to fourteen years should reexamine its ministry strategy. In this ministry philosophy,

producing at least one local ministry leader in about a decade of mission work should be the norm, not the exception.

Expatriate ministers should see themselves as scaffolding that facilitates the establishment, strengthening and reinvigorating of the Somali church. Sooner or later, the scaffolding comes down, but the structure it was supporting stays standing. It pains Aweis deeply when he witnesses mission organizations that spend decades in Somali ministry but never produce a single competent and qualified local minister. It hurts him even more when he sees these unsuccessful missionaries training new missionaries on how to do Somali ministry, thus perpetuating their failures. Somali ministry is challenging, but it is not as demanding as some missionaries portray. It is easier to blame an external factor when things go awry instead of taking full responsibility.

Dr. Shute and his background

Dr. Howie F. Shute (b. 1946) came to the Horn of Africa with a background of eight years in pastoral ministry and twelve years' experience as a manufacturing executive. Dr. Shute, a Vietnam veteran, is the most fearless and most trusting missionary Aweis has served with.¹²⁸ Dr. Shute said, “In hindsight, I can see clearly that the Lord prepared me with this background for leading my denomination in mission to a very challenging world area.”¹²⁹ The most formative

¹²⁸ To learn more about Dr. Shute's courage and conviction, see: Howie F. Shute, “A Personal Testimony and a Challenge to the Global Church.” *Somali Bible Society Journal*. Volume I, Issue 1, Version II, (December 2020), 32-41. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SBSJ-DEC-V2-2020.pdf> (accessed 24 April 2021).

¹²⁹ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 24 April 2021. Email.

years in the development of Dr. Shute's philosophy of ministry and mission leadership may have been those years he served as the Manufacturing Manager for a large corporation that produced highly sophisticated filtration systems. In this role, he was responsible for all facets of the manufacturing process, including product planning, purchasing of materials, warehousing, production control, factory management and shipping. Everything except engineering and sales fell under his responsibility. Obviously, these functions could not be carried out successfully without highly qualified teams of workers fulfilling the various functions throughout the manufacturing process.



Dr. Howie and Bev Shute

Dr. Shute was responsible for the bottom line. In business, the bottom line is profit. In order to meet profit goals, he had to rely on teams of people that were properly trained and highly motivated to fulfill their responsibilities. It would be ludicrous to think that he could have performed all the manufacturing functions by himself or even micromanaged the work of these teams. Releasing others and giving them authority to make decisions within the realm of their responsibility are important aspects of a successful leader. This is not only true for business leaders but also for successful leaders in ministry and mission.

Dr. Howie Shute is courage personified; a man known for his wisdom and work ethic. A Somali proverb says, "God does not humble the courageous."¹³⁰ The Lord God rewarded Dr. Shute's bravery and prospered his ministry in the most unlikely places in the Horn of Africa. Dr. Shute put the Somali proverb, "One finger alone does not wash a face,"¹³¹ into action by building competent ministry teams and entrusting them with responsibilities and resources. Dr. Shute, a pastor at heart, loved people more than rules and regulations. He is best known for his light-hearted saying, "I like the soft cover church manual because it is more flexible than the hardcover one."

Dr. Shute's philosophy

As the Lord led Dr. Shute from business to ministry, he moved into a new role of local church leadership. He recognized that as a pastor of a church, he still had a bottom line for which he was responsible. The bottom line was no longer one of gaining financial profit, but rather of leading people into the Kingdom. Souls became the bottom line. He realized that his responsibility was now to lead properly trained teams in making Christ-like disciples. Again, it would be preposterous to think he could do this by himself or by micromanaging teams in carrying out the calling of a local church. His experience in business prepared him to release others and give them authority to become effective ministers of the gospel.

¹³⁰ In Somali, "Geesi Alle ma xilo."

¹³¹ In Somali, "Far keliya fool ma dhaqdo."



Dr. Howie Shute and Steve Sharp visiting Mogadishu in 2000.

This philosophy of leadership carried over into Dr. Shute's assignment as Field Director and Field Strategy Coordinator for his denomination in the Horn of Africa. He came to the Horn to develop, train and lead teams to make Christ-like disciples in the six countries that comprise the Horn. Twenty years of leadership in business and ministry created in him a *modus operandi* of delegating authority to teams trained and motivated to accomplish bottom-line objectives. This *modus operandi* was fully buttressed by biblical imperatives. The Apostle Paul indicates that Jesus "...Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" Ephesians 4:11-12. This

passage makes clear that the ministers of the gospel are not the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers but the equippers of ministry teams. Each of these ministry specialists trains others in their area of giftedness. The biblical mandate is for trained ministry teams to be released with authority to minister. And this authority comes from Christ himself. In the Matthew 28 Great Commission passage, it is clear that Jesus is giving us his authority to go and make disciples. And this authority is not for ministry specialists but for every disciple of Jesus. Then, of course, Jesus' own example indicates that this is his *modus operandi*. He developed and trained a team of twelve disciples whom he sent into the world to carry out his mission.

In bringing his philosophy of mission leadership to the Horn of Africa, Dr. Shute found himself to be mostly in agreement with other mission leaders. However, this was not the case as they began their mission to the Somalis. He was surprised to find that some missionaries from other mission organizations were strongly opposed to his mission paradigm in Somali ministry. He "discovered that missionaries from all of the other mission organizations were unwilling to release leadership authority to Somali believers."¹³² Dr. Shute was truly going against the grain when he trusted Somali believers to be teachers, pastors, superintendents, ministry council leaders and missionaries to other cultural contexts. Most of the missionaries who opposed his *modus operandi* in the Somali peninsula were more experienced missiologists than him, especially as it pertained to the mission to Somalis.¹³³ However, his business and ministry experience in other contexts up to this point and his understanding of Scripture would not allow him to forsake his own philosophy of ministry.

¹³² Howie F. Shute, "Re: Your Insight Needed."

¹³³ The Somali peninsula encompasses the country of Somalia and the Somali regions of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Restore or replace

Dr. Shute said, “I cannot speak for these other mission organizations, but I believe that their concerns may have been based upon their lack of trust in Somali believers. I think that failures by some Somalis who may have returned to Islam or just fallen into sinful behavior colored the outlook of these Somalia missionaries.”¹³⁴ Failures by Christian leaders are to be expected. Even Jesus had one who betrayed him, another who denied him when the heat was on and the rest of his team who failed in various ways. Restoring leaders who fail is part of the leadership development challenges. Even losing a leader who fails to repent and find restoration is inescapable. Again, I refer to Jesus losing Judas Iscariot. Dr. Shute was given counsel once by Dr. Louie Bustle, Global Mission Director for Dr. Shute’s denomination. He remembers Dr. Bustle saying to him after the failure of one of his Ethiopian church leaders, “Howie, if a leader fails, don’t pull back, just appoint another leader. If that leader fails, appoint another one. Don’t stop trusting because of failures.”¹³⁵

Dr. Bustle’s timely advice carried Dr. Shute through a number of failures by leaders from various countries. And it was advice that fit his experiences and biblical beliefs. Some leaders failed. Most did not. Those that did were either restored or replaced. Taking a more conservative stance and holding back on releasing and authorizing leaders would put an end to all hopes of a movement. Dr. Shute’s risk venture in the Somali ministry paid great dividends. In their first year of mission to the Somalis, they planted one underground house church. One year later, they had three, the next year nine, a year later eighteen, then twenty-five. This ministry produced dozens of house churches, fellowships and Bible study groups in the Somali peninsula.¹³⁶ This movement of God that is still sweeping the Somali peninsula validates the *modus operandi* that Dr. Shute’s denomination has taken.

Local leadership development

During Dr. Shute’s ministry in the Horn of Africa, he facilitated the ordination of seven Somali believers who are still in ministry in various capacities. Before ordination, these Somali ministers had to meet the denomination’s strict requirements, which include ministerial training, ministry experience and Christlikeness. These ordained Somali ministers are serving today in world areas that include Ethiopia, the Somali peninsula, Sweden and the United States. Another record Dr. Shute set is producing the first Somali minister who holds a PhD in a ministry-related discipline. This Somali Christian only had a high school education when he joined Dr. Shute’s denomination in 1996. He has since earned a Bachelor of Theology in Christian Education, a Master of Divinity in Missiology and a PhD in Religion. No Somali Christian has ever reached this level of ecclesiastical training since formal mission work started among Somalis in 1881. If any Christian ministry is to bear fruits in the Somali peninsula, it must emulate the Howie Shute Paradigm. Abdikamil Mahmoud asserts:

¹³⁴ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 24 April 2021. Email.

¹³⁵ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.”

¹³⁶ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.”

It is important to note that, like in any other field, becoming a leader is a process. This process involves observing others lead, leading alongside other leaders, and leading while others are observing. The leadership of the Somali church needs to go through this process. Skipping the second step of leading alongside missionaries is detrimental.¹³⁷

Another validation

There is yet another validation that has arisen from the philosophy of ministry that Dr. Shute has employed in the Somali peninsula. The premise of the missionaries who have failed to trust Somalis to take leadership roles in ministry is that *Somalis cannot be trusted*. This premise is far from the truth. What Dr. Shute has discovered about Somali Christians flies in the face of such a belief. The reality is quite the opposite. He has found that the majority of Somalis who truly give their lives to Jesus are some of the most dedicated, self-sacrificing disciples in the worldwide Church. In fact, he has often bragged on the Somali church as being the strongest Church in Christendom today. Dr. Shute has written stories of some of the most amazing followers of Christ in Somali ministry in his book titled, *Underground*.¹³⁸ He has retold these stories in papers he has written for the Somali Bible Society Journal.¹³⁹ Let me be clear. Dr. Shute believes the Somali believers are intelligent, creative and extremely committed to the cause of Christ. They challenge him deeply with their sold-out, self-sacrificing, willing-to-die-for-Jesus attitude.

Killing the golden calf

Dr. Shute had no idea that the mission strategies that he would employ when entering into mission in the Somali peninsula amounted to a smashing of the golden calf venerated by some missionaries in Somali ministry. This “golden calf” was to keep Somali believers from leadership roles in Somali ministry.¹⁴⁰ At first, he did not recognize how other mission organizations considered his strategies a destabilizing factor in the overall mission to the Somalis. Dr. Shute said, “I regret that these missionaries viewed what we were doing as wrong and disrupting. However, I will never regret employing such strategies.”¹⁴¹ With all of his heart and mind, Dr. Shute believes in trusting people (despite occasional failures) and he believes in entrusting them with authority and resources to take the gospel of Christ to the world. The simple act of empowering Somali believers may be one of his greatest accomplishments.

¹³⁷ Abdikamil Mahmoud “Abdi Walalo”, “Re: 2 Questions.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 22 December 2021. Email.

¹³⁸ Howie F. Shute, *Underground: Stories of the Persecuted Church in Africa* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2014).

¹³⁹ Howie F. Shute, “The Somali Faith Hall of Fame”, *Somali Bible Society Journal*. Volume II, Issue 1, (June 2021), 74 – 83. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SBS-Journal-Vol.-II-Issue-1.-June-2021.pdf> (accessed 19 July 2021).

¹⁴⁰ Ahmed Ali Haile, a prominent Somali Mennonite, describes in his book how in the 1980s SIM denied him the SIM Somalia director role because SIM leadership thought a Somali could not be trusted to lead the Somalia mission organization and its projects. Neither his character nor his academic qualifications were found lacking. The only thing which was cited to disqualify him was his Somali heritage. Let this sink in! Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 73.

¹⁴¹ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 24 April 2021. Email.



Dr. Howie Shute at the Jigjiga, Ethiopia, charcoal market

Dr. Shute knows that there are good and godly missionaries who strongly disagree with his strategy of empowering Somali believers for leadership roles. Entrusting Somalis with resources, education, church development and leadership goes against their enduring paradigm. It is my hope that the paradigm for Somali ministry could move more and more toward one of trusting, releasing, training, empowering and fully authorizing Somalis for ministry to Somalis, as well as Somalis taking the gospel across cultures to other nations. This is what I mean by the “Howie Shute Paradigm.” To current and future missionaries to the Somalis, let me encourage you, let God’s people go. Try to trust

and see what God might do. Dr. Shute knows that many believers in the Somali church are now referring to his strategy as the “*Howie Shute Paradigm*.”¹⁴² However, he says, “I would say to missionaries called to Somali ministry, see my strategy not so much as the ‘*Howie Shute Paradigm*,’ but as it should be known, as the ‘*Jesus Paradigm*.’ For certainly, he is the very best and perfect example of empowering people for ministry.”¹⁴³

Stay the course

Dr. Shute says to the Somali believers:

Stay faithful. Don’t let us down! You are some of God’s best! I believe in you. God may very well be raising up the Somali church for such a time as this. Our world is in complete disorder. Even in my native country of America, we are losing the way. And the Church in the United States (with some notable exceptions) is losing its way.¹⁴⁴

In fact, being dead to self and fully given over to God are not followed by every professing Christian in the world. The Somali church has the opportunity to show the world what it looks like to carry the cross of Christ. Aweis affirms that as the Lord is using the Somali church in the Horn of Africa, he can also use it in this day to turn the entire world back to Christ, our coming and reigning King.

Conclusion

Dr. Shute proved himself to be a gifted church leader within a few years of settling in the Horn of Africa. He was a fast learner and a man of great insight who did not commit any significant *faux pas* despite the Horn of Africa’s many diverse cultures and languages. How he pulled this off remains a mystery. Dr. Shute developed a genuine friendship with people in the Horn of Africa and demonstrated unpretentious respect for elders; his faith in the local people he was working with is legendary. He always gave people the benefit of the doubt and this made him the most admired and most productive missionary from his denomination to ever serve in the Horn of Africa.

¹⁴² In Somali, “*Jidkii Howie*.”

¹⁴³ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.”

¹⁴⁴ Howie F. Shute, “Re: Your Insight Needed.” Message to Aweis A. Ali. 24 April 2021. Email.

Aweis is a vocal speaker for the Somali church; he does not shy away from calling a spade a spade. He writes widely and one of his articles in *The Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ) attracted an unexpected response from SIM. Aweis is therefore the first Somali Christian whose writings ever attracted an official response from any mission organization. Aweis' claim that SIM thwarted the newly-established Somali Mennonite Church (SMC) was disputed by SIM even though Aweis cited reliable Mennonite Mission and SIM sources in his claim.

CHAPTER 19: CRITIQUING THE SIM RESPONSE TO AWEIS

*“Truth reveres God alone.”*¹⁴⁵
- Somali proverb

Introduction

The Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ) published Aweis’ article titled “The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries among Somalis.” In this article, Aweis briefly mentions how SIM vanquished the nascent Somali Mennonite Church (SMC) established in Mogadishu in 1966. Aweis cites published SIM and Mennonite sources in his assertion. He says in the article, “SIM’s disapproval of the union between the Somali Christians and the Mennonite church took its toll on the new church, which eventually disintegrated within a few years.”¹⁴⁶

SIM Somalia’s treatment of the emerging SMC is well known in the Somali church. The Somali Christians who organized themselves as SMC did not expect much resistance from SIM, a parachurch organization that is supposed to help churches, not oppose them. However, local Christians were caught off guard when they realized SIM was opposed to the establishment of the SMC. Apparently, SIM considered denominational ministry problematic, an opinion that the leadership of the Somali Christians did not share.

A misleading response

SIM gave the impression of refuting Aweis’ argument in an EMQ article titled, “A Response to ‘The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries Among Somalis.’”¹⁴⁷ The three authors started their response with, “We have known the author for thirty-one and twenty-four years respectively and acknowledge Aweis’s long ministry experience and wide reading on Somali mission history.”¹⁴⁸ However, instead of countering Aweis’ real argument, the SIM response set up a strawman and then defeated it without much effort. The response states, “In fact, the authors along with others can bear witness that this church continued holding worship meetings and had a constituted leadership structure through the 1970s and 80s and even into the 1990s.”¹⁴⁹ The response then quotes a Mennonite source, “The Somali Mennonite Believers Fellowship is located mostly in Mogadishu...the capital city of Somalia. The fellowship had weekly worship services every Friday morning.”¹⁵⁰

Aweis never mentioned a Mennonite fellowship in his article. He talked about the Somali Mennonite Church (SMC). When did these two entities become synonymous? When SIM

¹⁴⁵ In Somali, “*Gari Allay taqaanaa.*”

¹⁴⁶ Aweis A. Ali, “The Case for Denominationally Based”, 35.

¹⁴⁷ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to ‘The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries Among Somalis.’” EMQ, Volume 57, Issue 2. (April – June 2021), 41-43.

¹⁴⁸ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 41.

¹⁵⁰ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 41.

extinguished the young SMC, the members scattered in total disarray. Some of the remaining local Mennonites concluded that the only practical option left to them was to reconstitute as a Somali Mennonite fellowship. At its peak in the 1970s, the fellowship had a membership of about fifty believers; the members dwindled to thirteen in the 1990s until the fellowship eventually died out. This on-and-off fellowship was never intended to replace the promising denominational church that the Somali Mennonites lost prematurely. The SIM response wasted valuable time by answering the wrong question. Unfortunately, the response was also deflective, defensive, dismissive and flat-out dishonest. However, while the response was disheartening, it was not surprising.

SIM and Mennonite sources

The authors deny “that SIM actively opposed the development of the Somali Mennonite church...”¹⁵¹ However, in his article, Aweis quotes David Shenk, who was privy to the situation. Shenk states in his PhD thesis that the decision by Somali Christians to form the Somali Mennonite Church (SMC) in 1966 distressed the SIM Somalia director at the time.¹⁵² Shenk adds:

After most of the Somali Christians in Mogadiscio accepted closer affiliation with the Mennonites on May 2, 1966, relationships began to deteriorate seriously between the two missions, and in September the SIM director required that all contacts between Mennonites and SIM missionaries terminate, even on the social level lest the Somalis become confused concerning the real issues involved in the problem.¹⁵³

The SIM Somalia director argued that the Mennonite Mission took away the SIM Somali converts. David Shenk continued to enunciate:

Lind reported that the [SIM] director informed him:¹⁵⁴ “We have spent more than twenty years bringing the Gospel to the Somalis; now that the church has finally emerged it has been swept away from us.”¹⁵⁵

Helen Miller, an SIM missionary, who was also in the know with the SIM-Mennonite tension describes SIM’s anger in her book, *The Hardest Place*:

¹⁵¹ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 41.

¹⁵² David W. Shenk, “A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970.” (PhD Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 281.

¹⁵³ David W. Shenk, “A Study of the Mennonite Presence”, 1972, 281.

¹⁵⁴ Wilbert Lind (1923-2007) was the Somalia Mennonite Mission director at the time. Unlike any other Somalia Mennonite Mission director, Lind stood up to SIM’s domination tactics. He was determined to see the establishment of a Somali Mennonite Church no matter what SIM Somalia thought. Lind later backed down out of respect for his mission’s leadership which decided to mend fences with SIM. The nascent Somali Mennonite Church became the collateral in the two missions’ restoration of relationship. If the Mennonite Mission stayed the course and never backed down, the Somali Mennonite Church today could have looked like the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), the largest Anabaptist conference in the world and a member of the Mennonite World Conference. Mennonite missionaries started the MKC in 1951. As of 2017, this denomination had a membership that exceeds over 500,000.

¹⁵⁵ David W. Shenk, “A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970.” (PhD Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 281.

The [Somali] believers thought they wanted to be independent, but they demanded that everyone join together to make up a Mennonite church, including the believers at Bulo Burde and Belet Weyne. Up to this point the Mennonite Mission and the Sudan Interior Mission had been happy to work together. This request directly contradicted the understanding Warren had with the Mennonites not to establish a denominationally based church.¹⁵⁶

John Miller, an SIM missionary, asked Wilbert Lind, the Somalia Mennonite Mission director, to disband the nascent Somali Mennonite Church (SMC). Helen Miller continued on to say:

John Miller, from the Sudan Interior Mission, went to talk to Mr. Lind about this, but Mr. Lind insisted that this was the decision of the Somali Christians. Many of these new believers left the Sudan Interior Mission and went to the Mennonites.¹⁵⁷

The irony is that this very John Miller was cited in the SIM response which states, “In his [John Miller] personal communication on the issue, he recounted numerous occasions in the 1960s and 1970s in Somalia when SIM and the Mennonites worked together to encourage the growth of the Somali believers.”¹⁵⁸ This statement is generally true but is a textbook example of cherry-picking. No one disputes that the Mennonite Mission (MM) and SIM have a long history of cooperation in Somali ministry (often at the expense of the MM). Still, the elephant in the room is how SIM’s antagonism destroyed the most promising denominational church in the history of Somali mission work.

How did the SIM response not mention all these reliable SIM and Mennonite sources? Even over a year after the establishment of the SMC, Warren Modricker, the SIM Somalia director, continued to lament this historic incident of establishing a denominationally based church in Somalia:

...Warren wrote to friends in the United States about the split among the Somali believers. His continuing hurt and disappointment over what he felt was betrayal by some of the [Somali] believers and the Mennonites shows in his statement, “This split brought deep grief and sorrow to many, and we know you will stand in prayer with us for complete healing.”¹⁵⁹

Aweis has a good opinion of Warren and Dorothy, his wife. He believes them to be the greatest Protestant missionary couple to ever serve among Somalis. Aweis writes in his seminal book, *Understanding the Somali Church*:

¹⁵⁶ Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modricker* (Canada: Essence Publishing, 2006), 196.

¹⁵⁷ Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place*, 196.

¹⁵⁸ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 42.

¹⁵⁹ Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modricker* (Canada: Essence Publishing, 2006), 196.

The greatest Protestant missionary couple is Warren and Dorothy Modricker. The Modrickers pioneered the Somali Protestant ministry in Somalia. They arrived in British Somaliland in 1933 and temporarily relocated to Yemen after the British Colonial Authority had denied them entry to Somaliland. The Modrickers lived in a number of countries so they could better minister to the Somalis. These countries include Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. Even after retiring to the United States, the Modrickers continued ministering to the Somalis in the US. Almost every Protestant Somali Christian in the Somali peninsula directly or indirectly traces their salvation to the ministry of the Modrickers.¹⁶⁰

Despite Warren Modricker's great contribution to the Somali ministry and SIM's fruitful work among Somalis, both the man and the parachurch organization he led for so many years made some mistakes. But then again, who doesn't make mistakes?

Paul Nissley Kraybill (1925-1993), Secretary of the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC) in Salunga,¹⁶¹ Pennsylvania, approached SIM International to resolve the MM-SIM rift. David Shenk writes:

His [Kraybill] New York contact with Raymond Davis, international director of SIM, was cordial. Davis felt that a temporary severing of relations was necessary until issues clarified, but anticipated more positive relationships in time.¹⁶²

With SIM International's apparent support of SIM Somalia's decision to cut ties with Somalia Mennonite Mission, the inter-mission resentment continued to fester. The fellowship and cooperation between the two mission organizations were restored when the nascent Somali Mennonite Church (SMC) succumbed to the intense SIM hostility and collapsed.

The SIM response asserts:

Ahmed A. Haile's memoir, *Teatime in Mogadishu*, which is cited several times by Aweis, is notably silent on this point of alleged "sabotage," and in fact he relates a very similar account of the Somali Mennonite Church meeting in Mogadishu in 1982 and following when he participated in it.¹⁶³

The only problem with this claim is that it is blatantly misleading. Nowhere do the cited pages (71, 74, 80) describe the Somali Christian gathering in question as "Mennonite." Ahmed A. Haile calls the gathering Somali Believers Fellowship (SBF) on pages 71 and 74 and church on page 80.¹⁶⁴ SBF is a generic name Somali believers still use to describe any regular or semi-regular worship meeting. Such fellowships are often non-denominational or inter-

¹⁶⁰ Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*, (Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021), 42. <https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/understanding-the-somali-church/> (accessed 10 October 2021).

¹⁶¹ EMBMC changed its name in 1993 to Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM).

¹⁶² ¹⁶² David W. Shenk, "A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970." (PhD Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 282.

¹⁶³ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, "A Response to", 41.

¹⁶⁴ Ahmed Ali Haile and David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 71, 74, 80.

denominational. Furthermore, SIM used this very term, SBF, to describe the gatherings of Somalis who embraced Christ under its ministry in Somalia. Abdurahman M. Abdullahi states in his PhD thesis, “Probably, SIM acquired experience in working with Muslim communities by avoiding establishing churches. Instead, it organized its Somali adherents into the Somali believers’ fellowship orders and secretive congressional teams.”¹⁶⁵ The SIM response authors provided zero evidence that the SBF described in Ahmed Haile’s book was Mennonite.

Aweis knows two of the SIM response authors and describes them as good men who contributed to his spiritual and academic growth; it, therefore, dismays him that they would write such a misrepresentative response to his article. Maybe the authors thought the Somali proverb, “You cannot fear God and fight men at the same time,” was true in this context.¹⁶⁶

SIM and denominationally based churches

The SIM response authors attempted to paint their mission organization as historically friendly to denominational churches and state, “[SIM] in fact has planted denominations with strong evangelical doctrinal distinctives in many lands throughout their history of more than 125 years.”¹⁶⁷ The response mentions as an example the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, then known as SIM Fellowships, which was founded in 1927.¹⁶⁸ However, what the response does not state is that the early SIM missionaries planted what they called SIM Fellowships and strongly opposed the members of these fellowships forming an independent national denomination.¹⁶⁹ Seblewengel Daniel, from the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church, writes:¹⁷⁰

[Ethiopian] Leaders of the church also came into conflict with the [SIM] mission regarding the status of the new churches. Getachew notes that the leaders wished for the church to have an indigenous name and autonomous leadership instead of being linked with SIM and run by the mission as the head. The mission was not happy with the question of independence, suspecting that the request had its origin in the sentiments of the revolution and that the church would disintegrate.¹⁷¹

Even after the Ethiopian church leaders succeeded in dropping the “SIM Fellowships” name and replacing it with the local name, Kale Heywet, in the 1950s, the SIM missionaries still insisted that the newly formed denomination should be run from the SIM Headquarters. The Ethiopian leaders refused this and demanded that the new denomination should have its own separate Head Office.

¹⁶⁵ Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)*. (PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011), 113.

¹⁶⁶ In Somali, “*Rag iska dhici iyo Rabbi ka cabso meel islama galaan.*”

¹⁶⁷ Ben I. Aram and Ya Sow Lij with Gary Corwin, “A Response to”, 41.

¹⁶⁸ The Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church is the biggest denomination in Ethiopia, with over ten million members. Kale Heywet means Word of Life.

¹⁶⁹ Seblewengel Daniel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia*. (Langham Monographs, 2019), 111-112.

¹⁷⁰ Seblewengel Daniel, PhD, is a former professor at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology. She is currently the SIM director of East Africa Sending Office.

¹⁷¹ Getachew Belete, *Agonies and Hallelujah*, (Addis Ababa: Kale Heywet Church Literature Department, 2000), 34-42. Cited in Seblewengel Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 111-112.

Seblewengel Daniel writes again:

The question of establishing independent head office for the churches, however, was delayed for nine years because of the disagreement of the [SIM] mission. Finally in March 14, 1974 the establishment of head office was approved by the general assembly which was held in Addis Ababa.¹⁷²

The conflict between the SIM missionaries and the Ethiopian leaders of the SIM Fellowships (later renamed Kale Heywet Church) was so bitter that this wound sometimes reopens to this day when SIM missionaries and Kale Heywet Church leaders strongly disagree on administrative or ecclesiastical matters; an SIM missionary who later became the director of SIM Ethiopia confirmed this to Aweis in 1997. The Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church is a thriving national denomination today because the SIM missionaries at the time failed to prevent its formation as a national denomination.

Words and their meaning



The pastor reported 21 new house churches in her area of ministry.

Original Version



The pastor reported 21 new home fellowships in her area of ministry.

SIM Version

As detailed above, SIM Ethiopia called the fruits of its labor in Ethiopia “SIM Fellowships” instead of churches. Aweis mentions in his EMQ article that SIM Somalia belonged to a group of non-denominational parachurch organizations in the Somali ministry which shows demonstrable aversion to the word “church” in the Somali context but prefers the word “fellowship” instead.¹⁷³

The 2020 edition of *30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World* solicited prayers for Somalia on Day 29, 22 May.¹⁷⁴ The original publication used “house churches”; however, the SIM printed version changed it to “house fellowships.” The question many Somali Christians ask is, “Why can’t we have churches like any other Christian

people group? Why is the word ‘fellowship’ forced on us all the time?” Maybe SIM Somalia will one day respond to this question.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

¹⁷² Getachew Belete, *Agonies*, 4-42. Cited in Seblewengel Daniel, *Perception and Identity*, 112.

¹⁷³ Aweis A. Ali, “The Case for Denominationally Based”, 34.

¹⁷⁴ *30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World*, 30 Days of Prayer International. 24 April - 23 May 2020, 33.

¹⁷⁵ There is technically no SIM Somalia since SIM is neither registered nor operates in Somalia proper.

However, “SIM Somalia” operates in Kenya and Ethiopia. It is therefore more accurate to call it SIM Somali ministry.

In his books and articles, Aweis consistently acknowledges the importance of the SIM ministry to his people in the Somali peninsula and beyond.¹⁷⁶ As the Somali proverb says, “The tongue and the teeth are closely related, yet the teeth sometimes bite the tongue.”¹⁷⁷ When this happens, neither the tongue nor the teeth can cut ties with the other. Similarly, SIM led Aweis to the Lord in 1986 and helped him grow in his faith in Islamic Somalia. He is eternally grateful for it. When Somalis describe an unbreakable bond, they cite the adage, “No knife can cut off and no water can wash away that relationship.”¹⁷⁸ Similarly, SIM and Aweis are eternally connected despite his occasional criticism of this mission organization’s long and successful ministry record among Somalis.

Despite unavoidable challenges, the Lord uses missionaries to the Somalis in a mighty way. To make mistakes or experience awkward *faux pas* does not negate the missionaries’ otherwise impressive ministry accomplishments in some of the most challenging mission fields in the world. The best way to avoid embarrassing situations is to closely work with local people and learn from them. Host cultures often tend to be more conservative than the missionaries and this can create uncomfortable situations. Experienced missionaries should mentor younger or newer missionaries until they become well-versed in their host culture.

¹⁷⁶ Aweis A. Ali coined the term “The Magnificent Four” to acknowledge the indispensable role four mission organizations played in Somali ministry. The Magnificent Four comprise: The Roman Catholic Church, The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church, the Mennonite Mission and SIM.

¹⁷⁷ In Somali, “*Carrab iyo ilkaa isugu dhaw iyana way is qaniinaan.*”

¹⁷⁸ In Somali, “*Wax aan birina goyn biyana mayrin.*”

CHAPTER 20: CLASH OF CULTURES

“What one person considers bad another deems a badge of honor.”¹⁷⁹

- Somali proverb

Introduction

Aweis learned in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that missionaries are more transparent and humbler than most Somalis, but this openness and humility come at a cost. Publicly admitting embarrassing details of one’s life is hard in the honor-based Somali culture. For example, parents are extremely important in Somali culture – even deadbeat ones. Parents’ responsibility is to nurture their children and when the children grow up and these parents age, the children are required to support them. If the parents fail to support their children, that will not justify the adult children failing to help their aging parents. In other words, children do not take revenge on their parents, end of story.

The Somali *ulema* (Muslim clergy) are very cautious when it comes to interaction with the opposite sex. They handle religious texts with the utmost deference and they are respectful and generous. They know how to respect old people. These clergy also bless others materially whenever they can. They know their words are spiritually powerful and they use them carefully, lest they hurt someone with them. These *ulema* see themselves as representatives of the departed prophets and messengers of God. They take this office very seriously. Following are a few examples of cultural clashes that caught Aweis off guard.

The “sinful” missionaries

In the mid 1990s, Aweis and a few other local Christians met at the Mogadishu mission compound of International Aid Sweden (IAS). Rev. Oliver led a Bible study for the Somali believers. A few missionaries also attended the Bible study. At the time, Oliver was dating his future wife and this couple conducted themselves well according to the Somali Islamic culture. However, Chris and his Canadian girlfriend behaved nothing like religious people. Somali Christians expect missionaries to be holy in word, deed and thought. Chris and his girlfriend would kiss each other in public; his girlfriend would sit on his lap in front of the Somali Christians. The local Christians concluded that these two short-term missionaries were not above reproach.

Chris and his girlfriend later broke up and Chris joined the Canadian Armed Forces. Somali Christians expect Christian missionaries to be at least as pious and as restrained as the Muslim *ulema* (Muslim clergy). Religious leaders making out in public is a horrendous depravity; the question often asked is, “If they are doing this in public, what else are they doing in private?” Why didn’t the IAS missionaries and other Christian expatriate workers restrain Chris and his girlfriend? Why did they allow them to carry on their passion right in front of the local Muslim background believers?

¹⁷⁹ In Somali, “*Wixii nin ka faano ayuu nin kale ku faanaa.*”

Tempting or teaching?

Islamic ministry is challenging and many missionaries struggle to understand how to minister to Muslims as well as Muslim background believers effectively. Aweis narrated to me one experience that disturbed the Addis Ababa fellowship he attended in the 1990s.

The Somali Christian Fellowship met at the YWAM compound. Various Western mission teams visited the fellowship to minister to the Somali believers. One mission team from Australia numbered about a dozen, mostly young women. These youthful women decided to perform a Christian drama for the fellowship to teach an important Christian lesson. Most of the fellowship members were young single men who fled from the Somali civil war.

A few young women stood in front of the fellowship, removed their shoes and recited some verses. They then dropped to the carpeted floor and rolled around to communicate a message no Somali Christian remembers. What all the Somali men agreed on is that the women should never have done that; had they consulted with the Somali elders at the fellowship, their reputation could have been protected. The women's shirts rolled up, exposing their midriffs. After the "Christian" drama was over, Faisal, one of the Somali Christian men, asked Aweis, "Were the women strip teasing?" These Western Christian women knew nothing about Islam or Islamic ministry. Obviously, rolling around in front of men in a revealing manner should have no place in any house of worship.

I do not talk to my father

A North American missionary who was very active in Somali ministry once told Aweis and other fellow Somali Christians that he had no relationship with his father; the relationship between the missionary and his father was so broken that they did not meet or talk for a long time. This casual confession bewildered the Somali Christians. The missionary told them how his father cheated on his mother and divorced her. While what the father did was awful, it did not justify the missionary's unwillingness to have a relationship with his father, according to the heavily Islamized Somali culture. The Somali Christians wondered if the missionary was *caasi waaliddeen* (one who dishonors his parents). To be *caasi waaliddeen* is one of the gravest sins one can commit in Somali culture. Murderers and adulterers are more honorable among Somalis than the despicable *caasi waaliddeen*. Somali Christians wondered for a long time how a "*caasi waaliddeen*" qualified to become a missionary with a reputable mission organization. A well-known Somali proverb says, "Your parents are right when they are right and they are right when they are wrong."¹⁸⁰ At least this missionary had a good relationship with his mother, which encouraged the Somali Christians very much. One's mother is the most important person in one's life in Somali culture.

I despise my father

Another North American missionary once told Aweis, "I despise my father because he is an awful man." He added, "I don't trust him around my wife and kids." This confession horrified

¹⁸⁰ In Somali, "*Waalidkaa gartiisuna waa gar, gardaradiisuna waa gar.*"

Aweis. There must be a way to honor and support a belligerent and irresponsible parent without risking the well-being of your wife and kids.

Rev. Ali Adawe, a Somali minister of the gospel, recounted to Aweis an experience he had while serving in Djibouti. An ethnic Somali father abandoned his baby boy and refused to support him. The father hid in faraway villages to evade responsibility. The negligent father reappeared more than two decades later because he heard that his son had grown up, got an education and was now working for the Djiboutian government. The father found the son and demanded monthly financial support because he was old and sickly. The son refused to help his father. The father went to the courts and secured an order that forced the son to support his deadbeat father financially. In fact, the employer started monthly garnishing the son's salary so the father could afford to live a decent life. Wronging a parent who wronged you is not an option in Islam; two wrongs do not make a right.

Blessings and curses

There is a strong belief in Somali culture that not honoring your parents will bring curses on you. Parents have the power to bless their good children and curse their negligent ones. Even if parents do not intentionally curse their disobedient children, the parents' hearts could curse them and this is outside the parents' control. Mistreating your parents has earthly consequences in Somali culture.

A North American missionary serving in West Africa once told Aweis about her ailing mother back home. Aweis asked the missionary the hypothetical question of what could happen to her in this life if she did not help her mother. The missionary said, "I help my mom because I am Christian but nothing can happen to me in this world if I refuse to help her." Aweis asked her if she believed in blessings and curses and the missionary responded, "No."

Aweis asserts that someone who does not believe in blessings and curses is a dangerous person. Such a person believes that no one has divine authority over them and that no words from their parents, older people and religious figures can benefit or hurt them. Aweis believes that a missionary who does not believe in blessings and curses should not be allowed to serve among people who do.

Like any other Somali, Aweis believes that God will send down a thunderbolt and strike him dead if he dishonors his mother. His father died many years ago. Even if God does not send down a lightning bolt on those who do not honor their parents, the belief is that they will live a miserable life in this world and will end up in hell in the hereafter.

Let me talk to my wife

Somali culture is very patriarchal; the men run the show, or so they think. As one of the elders of the Addis Ababa Somali Christian Fellowship, Aweis would often have meetings with some of the missionaries and talk about issues pertaining to the Somali ministry. A missionary would often say, "Let me talk to my wife about this." Any missionary who says such a thing when meeting with other men comes across as a hen-pecked beta male. There is a joke in Somali

culture that when a man says, “Give me time to think about this,” he means, “Let me consult with my wife,” but he is too ashamed to put it that way!

When Somali men talk, they talk about manly things. Any man who lowers the bar by interjecting his wife and young children into the conversation is seen as a subordinate male. What your wife thinks or says has no place in your dialogue with Somali men; this is the typical worldview of the Somalis.

Honoring the Bible

Like any other Muslim, from when he could remember, Aweis was taught to honor the Qur’an. For example, you never place anything else on the Qur’an, you do not put it directly on the floor and you do not handle it carelessly. Aweis started honoring the Bible from when he was a seeker. His respect for the Bible increased when he became a follower of Christ in 1986. Every Somali Christian treats the Bible with respect. For example, it is normal among many Somali Christians not to write or highlight any verses in the Bible. If they could not do this to the Qur’an as Muslims, why would they do it to the Bible as Christians?

Aweis recalls seeing Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan underlining some verses in the Bible around the end of 1993. Aweis protested and commanded Liibaan never to do anything like that again to the Bible. Liibaan defended himself by saying, “This is not a problem. I saw Benson do it.”¹⁸¹ It is safe to assume that any Somali Christian who writes in the Bible most likely learned it from a non-Somali Christian. Aweis arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1996 and it took him until 1998 to write in the Bible! Not even Aweis was safe from this “sacrilegious” practice.

Muslims always hold the Qur’an with their right hand and are taught to hold it above their waist. Aweis was surprised to see missionaries in Ethiopia who unceremoniously placed their Bibles on the floor or wrote in them. These missionaries would also place stuff on their Bibles, including other books. The missionary Bibles did not enjoy any privilege over any other book in their personal libraries. Aweis also witnessed some missionaries who would enter restrooms with their Bibles instead of leaving them outside until they were done with their private business. Aweis heard several Somali Christians saying in disgust, “They should treat the Bible better than that.”¹⁸²

No Muslim would say, “I bought a copy of the Qur’an,” because it is impossible to buy such a holy book; they would instead say, “I honored/freed a copy of the Qur’an.”¹⁸³ This is how Muslims revere their holy book. Christians from a Muslim background assume Christians respect their Bible as Muslims respect their Qur’an. Aweis also noticed Ethiopian Orthodox Christians show intense respect for their Bible. It is not uncommon to see Orthodox Christians reverently kissing their Bible or placing it in a lofty place in their living rooms. Aweis still cannot understand why Christians from the Western tradition (Catholics and Protestants) of the Church

¹⁸¹ Benson is a long time American missionary to the Somalis. “Benson” is a pseudonym.

¹⁸² In Somali, “*War may Kitaabka sidan u dhaamaan.*”

¹⁸³ They would say in southern Somalia, “*waan soo xurmaystay*” (I honored it) and “*waan soo furtay*” (I freed it) in the west and the north of the country.

do not treat the Bible better. There must be a way to venerate the Bible without committing bibliolatry.

Relationships

Relationships are extremely important to Somalis; it is not a hyperbole to call them a lifeline. No Somali can imagine a holistic survival without solid and healthy relationship with numerous people, including relatives, friends, neighbors, former or current coworkers, religious leaders, clan elders, etc. Somalis are interdependent by nature. Such relationships are enforced by exchanging gifts, visitations, sharing a meal or a cup of tea, or simply staying in touch. Now imagine some (not all) Western missionaries who serve with locals for years on the mission field. Once these missionaries return home, they cut off all relationships with the very people they served and served with for years. This is very strange in Somali culture.

This is not a Western versus Eastern thing. There are some Western missionaries who cut off other Western missionaries they served with for years. Since they are not serving together anymore, they are not interested in staying in touch with them. It seems that relationships in the West are sometimes seen purely as transactional, whereby in the Global South, relationships are transformational, relational, personal and mutual. Even after a ministry assignment ends, relationships do not in this part of the world. People stay in touch directly or even indirectly. Severing a relationship so easily is a peculiar concept. Among Somalis, your network is your net worth. Aweis states that even your friend's friend is your indirect friend. I couldn't agree with him more.

First to leave the church

Muslims intensely respect their places of worship. Pious Muslims come to the mosque hours before the communal prayer time and spend time reading their scriptures and praying *Sunnah* prayers.¹⁸⁴ Devout Muslims will not be the first to exit the mosque when the collective prayers are concluded; after all, the house of worship is the best place to be and there should not be any rush to leave. It is the Muslims with a shallow faith who flee from the house of worship so quickly after prayers. This practice is discouraged in Islam.

There is an instructive Muslim parable about the person who hastily withdraws from the mosque after prayers. A Muslim man had a wish he wanted to come true and he prayed to God many times so he could realize his desire. However, he never received his request. The man went to sleep one night and saw a devil in his dream; the devil said to him, "What will you give me if I give you your wish?" The man responded, "Ten gold coins." The man woke up from his sleep, his wish came true quickly and he was very happy.

The man did not know where to find the devil so he could pay him the ten gold coins. The man visited a Muslim holy man because he did not want to negate the pledge and asked him where he could find the devil so he could pay him. The holy man told him he could not help him locate the devil, but he could help him keep his payment pledge. The holy man told the man to go to any mosque and wait outside until the communal prayer was over. "Give the ten coins of gold to the

¹⁸⁴ Non-obligatory prayers.

first man who exits the mosque,” he told him. The holy man added, “That is not the devil, but it is the closest to one.” The man did as the holy man told him.

Imagine Aweis’ surprise when he started attending church (including the Somali Christian Fellowship) in Ethiopia. Missionaries came on time, but they hardly came early as he expected since they were clergy. Missionaries were sometimes the first to leave the house of worship, which Aweis found to be odd. He wondered why some missionaries were the first to leave the house of God so quickly.

Respect for elders

Older people enjoy immense respect and authority in the Global South, like Somalia and Ethiopia. No honorable person would disrespect an old person. A young North American missionary in Ethiopia, who was involved in Somali ministry, clashed with an older Ethiopian Christian minister; the minister was from a Hiwot Berhan local church in Wondo Genet town. The Ethiopian minister respectfully exhorted the missionary in 1996. The missionary could not believe that the poor village minister could exercise spiritual authority over him. He left the Ethiopian minister visibly shaking with anger. He unloaded on Aweis, “I can’t believe this. He wants me to respect him because he is old. He is not my leader.” He then added, “We would call him a dirty old man in my country.” That is exactly the moment Aweis lost faith in that missionary. Their five-year ministry relationship never recovered.

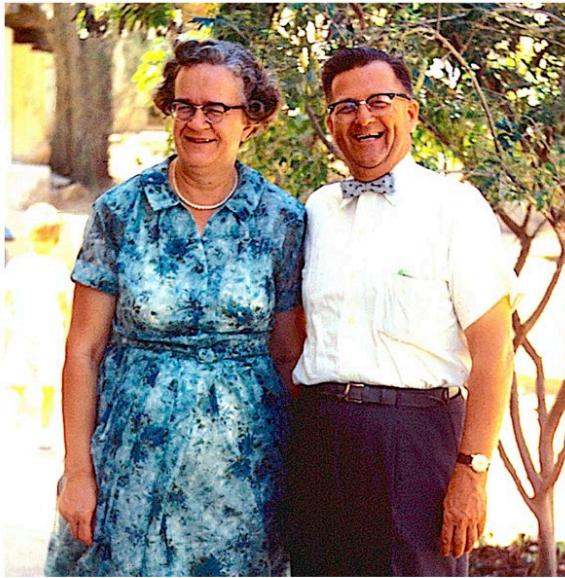
There is a Muslim parable about the honor old people enjoy by virtue of their advanced age. Hell and hunger quarreled about who was more heartless. Hunger accused hell of being meaner as people burn in it. Hell shot back in protest, “I shy away from children and old people, but you don’t spare either.” Hunger scurried away in shame. Only a fool will mistreat an old person.

Thank you – Somali version

A few missionaries asked Aweis why Somalis do not say “Thank you.” Somalis do say thank you, but they say it in a different way – by praising you before others in your absence; this is their “thank you.” When you help a Somali, many people will know your kindness and generosity; this knowledge will improve your standing in the community. A Somali parable describes a man who helped a fellow village man. The man was so grateful for it, but he never said “Thank you” because that is not often part of Somali culture. However, the man said, “because of what you did for me, should I give you five camels, or should I speak of your kindness under five different trees where men gather?” The benefactor responded, “I would rather have you mention my name under five trees.”¹⁸⁵ Camels are the most prized possessions among Somalis. The cost of an average camel at the time of writing this book is 1,000 United States dollars.

¹⁸⁵ In Somali, *Shan geed miyaan kaa sheegaa mise shan halaad ayaan ku siyaa?*

Generous but loud



*Warren and Dorothy Modricker
Photo credit: c/o Galen Reed*

Somalis are loud and demanding; they are confident and proud; humility is also frowned upon among men since it is seen as a feminine quality. Some of these characteristics appeal to many missionaries. Ruth Myers, while serving as an SIM missionary among Somalis, was transferred to southern Ethiopia in 1973. Ruth wrote in her memoir, “The Dilla people were humble and respectful, but I missed the brash, loud, often demanding Somalis. The spice was gone.”¹⁸⁶ When describing the generosity of the Somalis, Ruth wrote, “the poorest Somali householder would always have something to offer a visitor, often at a sacrifice to the family. We learned so much generosity from the Somalis.”¹⁸⁷ Warren Modricker (1907 - 1998), a long-time missionary among Somalis and the director of SIM Somalia, wrote of the generosity

of the Somalis, “When the Somalis have the wherewithal, they are generous in sharing it, even more generous than a great many affluent people of the Western world.”¹⁸⁸ Modricker continued to say about Somalis, “They are a likeable people and very brave.”¹⁸⁹ No wonder many missionaries love working with Somalis, no matter what.

Generally speaking, missionaries appreciate Somali generosity; some inadvertently ruin it by making giving a one-way street. In the mind of these well-meaning missionaries, Somalis, particularly Christians, are too poor to give anything material to the missionaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many Somali Christians feel that missionaries force them into the poverty box. Many missionaries are terrified when a Somali offers to pay for their lunch or attempts to give them a small amount of cash as a gift. Aweis affirms that he witnessed a few Western missionaries forcefully rejecting to accept small monetary gifts from Somali Christians. Aweis narrated to me that a white South African missionary and his Kenyan Christian friend visited with him in eastern Ethiopia in June 2022. After the brief fellowship, Aweis handed each brother about ten United States dollars in local currency. The South African brother forcefully rejected the small gift saying, “I am rich. I don’t want your money.” This brother was not rich by any definition of the term. Like the Kenyan brother, he finally accepted the small gift because of Aweis’ persistence.

¹⁸⁶ Ruth Myers, *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia* (Moreland City, Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2016), Author’s Note, Kindle Edition, Chapter 30.

¹⁸⁷ Myers 2016, Kindle Edition, Chapter 11.

¹⁸⁸ H. Warren Modricker, “Somali Culture and Customs: Some Helpful Points on the Somali Culture and Customs, Past and Present.” (Unpublished manuscript).
<https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 16 December 2020).

¹⁸⁹ H. Warren Modricker, “Somali Culture and Customs.”
<https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 16 December 2020).

Using resources right

Missionaries often have more material resources than the Somalis they work with. This creates difficulties for some missionaries. They assume their wealth could become a stumbling block to the gospel. One mistake such missionaries make is to pretend they are poor like the people they work with. This is a terrible strategy. Following are three examples:

A North American missionary with a parachurch organization once decided to invite a widely-respected Somali Christian who is an ordained elder and a ministry leader. The missionary said to Aweis, “I want to invite Garaad for lunch. Please tell him this and join us, too.”¹⁹⁰ Garaad was impressed that the missionary invited him for a meal. Both Aweis and Garaad arrived at the missionary home at the appointed time. The “lunch” was served quickly and both Aweis and Garaad were surprised. The missionary served a little bit of boiled corn and some rice. It appeared that the missionary was feeding two chickens and not two men. Aweis and Garaad ate what they could eat out of respect for the missionary. They left quickly and stopped on the way home to eat a proper lunch at a nice restaurant. Garaad was flabbergasted. “Why did he do that to us? We are not beggars; he is the one who invited us for lunch.” Aweis was speechless. The missionary was a great person, but he made a mistake.

Garaad suggested to Aweis, “I think I should invite him for lunch at my home. He needs to learn how to host men. I can kill him a goat and feed him like a king.” Then Garaad added, “I think I should leave him alone. I don’t want to see him again; he treated us very poorly.” The missionary did not want to look well-off in the presence of two “poor” Somali refugees. The message the missionary wanted to send was, “Look guys, I am just like you. This is how my family and I eat all the time.” However, what he actually communicated was great disrespect. The missionary forgot one crucial thing: it is not about how many resources you have but how well you use them.

Another example is a North American missionary who moved to Jigjiga, eastern Ethiopia, in the late 1990s to work with Somalis. The missionary wanted to “identify” with the poor people he wanted to serve. He rented a simple house in one of the poorest areas on the outskirts of the city. His home did not have running water. He hired a donkey cart to collect water for his family. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were huts; there were also a few dilapidated one-room brick houses. Local people could not believe that a man with a wife and small children would live like that when he could have lived better. The missionary drove a good Land Cruiser. If he sold that vehicle, he could have purchased every house, goat and donkey in his entire neighborhood. The missionary was not poor and trying to play one was not a good idea because it tainted his reputation in the community and made him appear either deceptive or foolish.

It is not wrong for missionaries to have more wealth than the local people they serve. This is perfectly fine. If the missionaries want to be nice, all they have to do is to share some of their resources with those in need. Maybe they can buy a few goats for a poor widow or buy school uniforms and shoes for a poor orphan. Maybe they can entertain guests and feed them like people, not like chickens.

¹⁹⁰ “Garaad” is a pseudonym for a widely-respected Somali Christian minister.

Giving to missionaries

Aweis states that missionaries do not expect the Somali Christians they serve to support them financially. Giving is always a one-way affair; missionaries are the givers and Somalis the takers. Somali Muslims financially support their *ulema*; when these same Muslims become followers of Christ, they should be expected to financially support their missionaries. Aweis alleges that this never happens, which he considers dangerous to the health of the Somali church.

Warren Modricker (1907 - 1998), a longtime director of SIM Somalia, who ministered to Somalis for over fifty years narrates in his unpublished manuscript about how generous some Somali friends were to him and Dorothy, his wife, in the United Arab Emirates:

In 1978 to 1980 Dorothy and I had a new experience. We met hundreds of Somalis who had gone to the United Arab Emirates. Most of them had found good paying jobs and were making salaries that were staggering to the mind! ... Somalis came to us, offered us rides in taxis, took us to the market, bought food and vegetables for us, brought all kind of gifts to us (without expecting anything in return). They even paid the round-trip air fare for one of us ... to see our daughter in Pakistan, a cost of nearly \$500.00!¹⁹¹ How we praise God that he permitted us to see this beautiful, generous expression exhibited by our dear Somali people! It would have been tragic if we had not returned to the Somalis during these last final years of our missionary service to the Somalis.¹⁹²

Warren does not mention the faith of the Somali friends who were generous to him, but it is safe to assume that they were Muslim – at least the vast majority of them.

Aweis recounted an incident which happened in 2019. He traveled to Djibouti City for ministry purposes and met two expatriate missionaries. First, he met an Italian Roman Catholic clergy. Aweis handed him one hundred United States dollars as a gift. The Italian minister accepted it right away. The first time Aweis met this missionary was in Mogadishu around 1988.

Aweis later met with a Protestant American missionary and after eating breakfast together at a local restaurant, Aweis handed him one hundred United States dollars as a gift. The minister pushed Aweis' hand away and refused to take the money, saying, "I am fine. I don't need any money." Aweis spoke sharply to the missionary, "You give money to Somalis. Why don't you accept money from us? Why are you making giving a one-way street?" The missionary relented and accepted the gift. He then told Aweis that he would donate the money to a Somali he knew who needed some financial help. Aweis first met this missionary in Djibouti City around 1998.

Aweis, who owned several wristwatches, was once having lunch in Nairobi, Kenya, with a missionary friend. Aweis noticed that the American missionary was not wearing a wristwatch

¹⁹¹ When adjusted for inflation, USD 500 in 1978 is equal to USD 2,245 in 2022. This takes into consideration the annual inflation over this period, which was 3.47%.

¹⁹² H. Warren Modricker, "Somali Culture and Customs: Some Helpful Points on the Somali Culture and Customs, Past and Present." (Unpublished manuscript).
<https://somalisforjesus.blogspot.com/2006/05/somali-culture-and-customs.html> (accessed 16 December 2020).

and gave him the one he was wearing. The American missionary accepted the gift without any objections. At the time, Aweis had known this missionary for about two years.

Aweis has a long history of giving to missionaries and even raising some money for them from fellow African Christians (Somalis included) in the Horn of Africa – he has never raised enough money to make a long-term difference in their ministries. However, if every Somali Christian gives a little bit of help to missionaries, that combined generosity will make the lives of the missionaries much easier. God will also bless the local Christians for being generous to their missionaries.

Aweis articulates that Somali Christians have no history of giving anything (other than headaches) to the missionaries who minister to them. He mostly blames this undesirable trait on the missionaries themselves. Western missionaries come with the assumption that Somali Christians are so poor that they have nothing to give them. Even when a few local Christians attempt to give something to the missionaries, they struggle to accept it because they think it might be an exploitation to take from the “poor” Somalis. Aweis asserts that Jesus should be our example of giving to the ministry of the Lord; he commended a truly poor widow for giving to the service of God:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.” Mark 12:41-44, NKJV.

Aweis recommends that missionaries ask Somali Christians to give to them; it may be cash, a few eggs, a chicken, or even a goat. Every Somali Christian can afford to give. Making giving a one-way street is detrimental to the health of the Somali church.

Sectarianism

Aweis was raised as a devote Muslim and taught to consider all Muslims as his brothers and sisters. No color, *madhab* (school of thought), or *dariqah* (school or order in Sufi Islam) separates Muslims. Muslims of different backgrounds pray together in the same mosque. It is true, however, that certain neoconservative Muslim clergy create a divisive wedge in the Muslim community because of their distinctive theological emphasis. This is a relatively new challenge to Islam and it poses no significant threat to Muslims – at least in the short term.

When Aweis moved from Somalia to Ethiopia in 1996, he was dismayed by how factional Ethiopian Christians and missionaries were. Aweis is an evangelical Christian of the holiness tradition, but he considers all Christians his brothers and sisters. He was saddened when he found out that Protestant Ethiopian Christians (missionaries included) did not often consider Orthodox or Catholic believers as real Christians. Similarly, Orthodox Christians do not usually see Protestant believers as real Christians. In other words, each group believes that to be born again, one must belong to their church.

Aweis refuses to this day to accept this unbiblical view of fracturing the Church. He believes that to be a true Christian means to be born again; no specific church or denomination has a monopoly on being born again. There are nominal Christians who are not born again in the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches. Christians should get down off their high horse and start loving one another.



Hailemariam Temesgen

Aweis often contributes money to the ministries of the Orthodox Church; most Ethiopian Christians from Aweis' denomination are astounded by this ecumenical practice. These concerns do not dissuade him. In fact, Aweis and a fellow Somali Christian once paid for the corrugated sheet roof of a small renovated Orthodox church outside Bahir Dar, northern Ethiopia. The renovation project was led by one Hailemariam Temesgen, a godly Orthodox priest and a friend of Aweis. All born again Christians should know that the Church is the body of Christ and the body of Christ is indivisible.

The men at the well

A Somali proverb says, “Only when the men at the well agree, can the camels drink water.”¹⁹³ Somali believers and seekers are the camels here, while the missionaries are the men at the well. When men at the well, who were supposed to water the camels, work against one another, the camels will suffer thirst. Missionaries with parachurch organizations in Somali ministry have a history of bickering about ministry matters. Interdenominational agencies lack unifying doctrines and theological persuasions. This is one of the main reasons for the disharmony. Denominational missionaries are often spared from said pitfalls because they are doctrinally and theologically unified. Such missionaries are capable of planting denominationally based local churches.

Regardless of their denominational affiliation or lack thereof, it is imperative that missionaries present a united front for the glory of God. If missionaries indulge in disharmony like co-wives, the Somali Christians and seekers will pay the price – they will go thirsty.

With very few exceptions, the Somali *ulema* (Muslim clergy) are often united and one would be hard-pressed to see them arguing in public; they resolve their issues privately. The Somali *ulema* are usually from the Sufi tradition of Islam like the clear majority of Somali Muslims. Somali believers and Muslim seekers expect missionaries to be at least as united as the *ulema*.

Conclusion

Different cultures are bound to clash when they interact closely enough. No culture is divinely inspired. The widespread assumption that the host culture should be the gold standard is misguided. The culture of the missionaries and the culture of the local people must find a healthy

¹⁹³ In Somali, “*Marka ceelleey heshiiso ayuu geelu biyo cabbaa.*”

way to interact and contribute to the ministry. Every culture has positive things to contribute for the advancement of the ministry. Missionaries must feel free to slowly introduce to the host culture any cultural thing they consider helpful, like work ethic and healthy self-sufficiency. Missionaries can also learn from the host culture.

Aweis found higher education rewarding and helpful to his ministry. Every course he takes and every degree he earns benefits his ministry. Aweis also feels enriched by the different cultures he interacts with as a minister of the gospel. He maintains a learning attitude and he is never disappointed in his openness to learning, even from people with no formal education. As a result of this policy, Aweis is one of the most effective ministers of the gospel in the Horn of Africa. Another trait that serves Aweis well is that he gives people the benefit of the doubt; he does not assume the worst in any situation. Aweis always disagreed with the Somali proverb, “Assume the worst because the best can never hurt you.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ In Somali, “*Shar u toog haay, khayr wax kaama dhibee,*”

CHAPTER 21: EDUCATION, OBSERVATION AND MARRIAGE

*“Your eyes are as old as you are, but your ears are older than you.”*¹⁹⁵
-Somali proverb

Introduction

Aweis knew early on that he needed two important things to successfully minister to the people the Lord God called him to serve: a suitable spouse and solid academic training. It is impossible to be an effective minister of the gospel if one lacks the right spouse. When God calls one spouse, he calls the other to be their partner or supporter in that divine call. With the wrong spouse, failure is guaranteed. A Christian marriage is by itself an act of service, which makes it a ministry. As a husband and wife serve each other, they also serve God and minister to the people around them.

Good academic training is imperative for any successful ministry. Excitement and zeal can only take you so far. Formal ministry training and experience can help one thrive in one’s ministry, whether it is close to home or far away. It is obvious that cross-cultural ministries require cross-cultural understanding. Aweis found his ministry training and cross-cultural experience invaluable assets to his ministry in Africa and beyond. His training helps him understand the word of God and communicate it effectively. Every Christian needs to know God’s word well before they can share it with others. Aweis’ denomination is known for its emphasis on higher education.

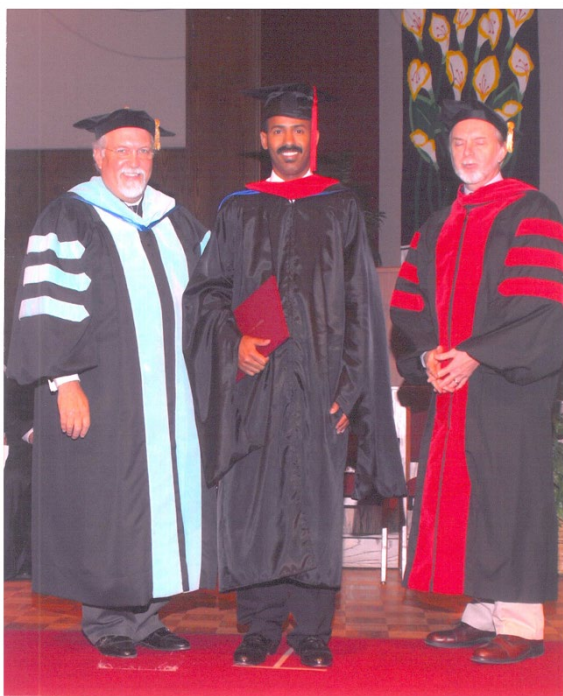
Seminary

Aweis flew to the United States in 2001 to study at Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS). He knew long before he enrolled at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa that he needed to study Christian theology to the highest level possible, up to the doctoral level. Aweis was convinced that the Somali church needed Somali theologians and Bible scholars to guide it, nurture it and safeguard it from heresy. However, he never dreamed of studying outside Africa. Dr. Howie Shute, his missionary leader, advised him to study at NTS. Aweis asked him how he would be able to pay for a United States education. The leader told him he would secure a scholarship for him but added that he had to work part-time to earn some money.

Ahmed, Aweis’ Muslim brother, paid for his United States air ticket and gave him some pocket money. Amina, Ahmed’s Muslim sister-in-law, helped Aweis with some education supplies. Mohamed, Ahmed’s Muslim brother-in-law, donated a laptop for his graduate studies. Aweis also secured an apartment and quickly found a job at the seminary cafeteria. While the seminary gave him a generous scholarship, Americans from Aweis’ denomination also gave him some

¹⁹⁵ In Somali, *“Ishaadu waa kula da’, dhegtaadusa way kaa da’ wayn tahay.”*

financial assistance. These benefactors include Walter Sharp, Margaret Bailey and Dr. Chuck Gailey.



Aweis' MDiv graduation photo in 2004. From Left to right: Dr. Ed Robinson, Aweis A. Ali and Dr. Harold Raser

While attending seminary, Aweis often flew to Minnesota to minister to the large Somali community in the Twin Cities. He partnered with Somali and American Christians who were already involved in this exciting ministry. Having been actively involved in ministry while attending the theological college in Addis Ababa gave Aweis academic and spiritual benefits. Similarly, being actively involved in the Somali ministry in the Twin Cities while attending seminary in Kansas City was extremely rewarding to him. Aweis' theological training was never divorced from practical ministry and this balance kept him grounded. Richard Sickels, the denomination's Minnesota leader, provided Aweis with some financial support for the Twin Cities ministry. Aweis graduated from seminary with a Master of Divinity degree in 2004; the graduating class also gave Aweis the Heart of a Servant award in recognition of his ministry in the Twin Cities during his seminary training.

Marriage



Aweis and LeCrecia, 2022. Photo credit: Qaali Ali

Aweis met his wife, LeCrecia, at the seminary, where she was also studying for her Master of Divinity degree. She was raised in southern Africa as a missionary kid. Her parents served in Africa for thirty-four years as ministers of the gospel. Aweis' plan was to return to Ethiopia right after graduating from seminary. While he knew the importance of a competent Christian spouse, he did not want to be involved with a woman who could not thrive in Africa as a fellow missionary. What attracted Aweis to LeCrecia was her intelligence and maturity. The fact that she was called as a child to minister in Africa was a huge attraction as well.

LeCrecia and Aweis married in 2003. Many of her close family members and relatives attended the wedding, including her parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and her only sibling. In fact, her parents flew from Swaziland (now Eswatini) for the wedding. No one from Aweis' Muslim

family attended the wedding. He has close family members in the United States and Canada, but they would not attend a Christian wedding held in a church.



Dr. Al and Kitty Jones

However, Aweis' ministry team and friends (both Somalis and Americans) from the Twin Cities drove in a church van and came to Kansas City; it was a huge encouragement for Aweis. If his Muslim family declined to attend, his Christian family was there for him. Dr. Al and Kitty Jones, pioneer missionaries to the Horn of Africa, stood in as his parents at the wedding. Mohamed S., one of the Somali Christian friends from the Twin Cities, glanced at LeCrecia's big family who attended the wedding and remarked, "Aweis, you cannot mess it up. All your wife's family came and even that old woman in the wheelchair was not left behind. They came here to honor you. Do not disappoint them." Aweis carries Mohamed's counsel with him all the time. May the good Lord help him never to disappoint his wife's family.

Aweis and LeCrecia landed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2005 to continue serving the Lord.

English or Spanish?

Aweis' experience in the United States was primarily shaped by white conservative evangelical Christians. They surrounded him in seminary, church and ministry in the Twin Cities. He found them loving, respectful, hardworking and incredibly generous. Aweis believes that if these people had surrounded his devout Muslim mother, her negative view of Christians would have changed. However, he was surprised by how little many Americans knew world geography and politics outside the United States. Communication was also challenging. Aweis' accented English and his tendency to speak too fast created some confusion. Despite Aweis' previous employment with the United Nations, European Union and Samaritan's Purse, some Americans found his English difficult to decipher.

Aweis was a former English teacher in Mogadishu, Somalia, and he did his college education in English. In fact, almost all his college professors were from the United States and the United Kingdom. Aweis was therefore confident that his English was fine, until he visited the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to apply for his driver's license. He was wondering if the DMV would exchange his Ethiopian driver's license for a United States one or if he needed to take a driving test. Aweis approached a young white lady at the DMV and asked if they would honor his driver's license from Ethiopia. The lady listened intently and then carefully replied, "I am sorry, I don't speak Spanish." Aweis was speechless because he does not speak Spanish either. This was not the last time an American mistook Aweis' English for Spanish.

It tastes like chicken

Aweis once asked an American woman how a certain game meat tasted and she said to him, “Just like chicken.” A few months later, while ministering in the Twin Cities, an American lady asked someone how that same game tasted and Aweis interjected, “Someone told me it tastes like chicken.” The lady laughed hard and explained that the saying, “It tastes like chicken,” was a joke. He learned something new that day.

From godly to godless

Aweis felt safe and protected around the white conservative evangelical Christians. He found them modest, peaceful, and clean in their language and behavior. He thought this was a typical American thing until he found a part-time job at an American superstore, where he worked in the deli department. Aweis felt he was thrown into another world. All his co-workers told him they were Christians, but very little in their lives indicated that they were followers of Jesus; they lived a life of sinfulness and their work ethic was deplorable. Most of these co-workers were from broken families and led equally broken lives. Aweis was the senior employee within four months; the employee turnover was very high. Aweis’ supervisor liked him very much and was sad when he told him he would quit his job to return to Africa as a minister of the gospel. The supervisor said to Aweis, “I will hire you on the spot next time you return to the United States.” While Aweis was not considering a career in the deli department of any superstore, he felt honored.

Wasteful culture

Another experience Aweis had in the United States was how much fresh food Americans waste. Food is a precious commodity in Africa. Many people die on this continent for lack of food. Aweis’ stint at the superstore magnified to him how much food is wasted, not only by people but also by corporations. Aweis was regularly asked to throw away warm and freshly-cooked whole chickens because it was time to close the deli department. He wondered how moral and sustainable it was to throw away so many fresh food items, including fruits and vegetables. However, he thoroughly enjoyed his time in the United States and faced no problems whatsoever. Life was good.

Racism and the United States

Aweis finds the United States to be the least racist country in the world. Aweis travels widely and has family, relatives and friends living in many countries across the world. He reads widely and is a news junkie; he knows a thing or two about race relations worldwide. Aweis spent about five continuous years in the United States as a full-time student. He visited more than forty states, often driving alone or with family. In his extensive time in the US, Aweis can recall only one incident in which he was treated poorly based on his race.

While residing in Ethiopia, Aweis flew to the United States twice in 2014 to take some doctoral level courses at Nazarene Theological Seminary. He spent about two weeks each time in the United States to take two intensive courses. He stayed at the King’s Conference Centre (KCC)

on the seminary premises during his doctoral studies. A white couple managed the KCC and Aweis had never met the husband. The second time he came to stay at the KCC could have cost him his life. Aweis got permission from the wife to borrow a cart to take dozens of his own packages and mail from the Academic Dean’s Office to the KCC. Aweis was pushing the loaded cart on the ground level of KCC when the husband came out of his room and witnessed Aweis hauling the loaded cart. The husband screamed in horror and yelled at Aweis. He assumed he was a burglar. Aweis smiled at the startled husband, who ran by him towards the reception where his wife was so that he could report to her about the “thief” in the facility. Aweis froze in place. He feared the man could shoot him in “self-defense.” Aweis was confident that the wife would calm down her terrified husband by telling him that the black man he thought was a robber was indeed a paying customer and a doctoral student. Aweis waited for what felt like an eternity. Finally, the husband, who seemed less worried, reappeared and walked towards his room. Aweis smiled at the man to calm things down and the man returned an awkward smile. There was peace. Aweis found it strange that the husband did not apologize; maybe he was too ashamed of his overreaction.

Aweis does not blame the husband for the unfortunate assumption. The student body at the seminary is overwhelmingly white. Aweis was the only black student in the doctoral class. The seminary sometimes experienced intrusions, vandalism and outright theft. Aweis affirmed “The culprits are neither white nor brown.” He added, “They look like me.” The husband did one thing right; he reported to his wife, the co-manager, instead of harming Aweis. The experience left Aweis humiliated and traumatized. He called his wife right away and told her what happened. He never spoke to anyone else about this humbling experience.

Doctoral studies



*Aweis' PhD graduation photo in 2021
Photo credit: LeCrecia Ali*

Aweis graduated from Africa Nazarene University, where he earned a PhD in religion. His thesis is titled, “Persecution of Christians and its Effect on Church Growth in Somalia.”¹⁹⁶ He is the first Somali Christian to ever earn a ministry-related doctoral degree. This terminal degree enabled Aweis to write about the Somali church and write for Somali Christians. He produces quality books and articles for the benefit of the Somali community of faith and for the larger group of Muslim background believers. He writes both in Somali and in English.

¹⁹⁶ Aweis A. Ali, *Persecution of Christians and Its Effect on Church Growth in Somalia*. (Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021).

Conclusion

Aweis' proclivity for higher education and fearless tendencies to take risks contribute to who he is as a man. Aweis always finds something new to learn each time he is thrust into a new culture. His pious Muslim background and his evangelical faith from the holiness tradition shape his character. Aweis' upbringing in a home that lacked even basic material necessities and his experience in the United States, the wealthiest nation on planet earth, give him a balance in life which only a minority of people can experience in any meaningful way.

Aweis' long Christian ministry experience, which started in 1993, makes him one of the most prominent and most effective Somali Christian ministers to date. Aweis' solid ecclesiastical training positively contributed to the success of his ministry, which took him to diverse countries in terms of cultural values and belief systems. Even when his primary ministry assignments put him outside Somali ministry, Aweis always found ways to bring the light of the gospel to his fellow Somalis; his love for the Somali people as a whole is legendary in a culture where tribalism is rife.

CHAPTER 22: MISSION WORK AND MINISTRY

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

- Matthew 28:10-20, NIV.

Introduction

Aweis’ ministry was initially limited to Ethiopia and the Somali peninsula from 1996 to 2001. However, it expanded to more countries after he returned from his seminary training in the United States in 2005. Aweis later became the Horn of Africa Mission Coordinator for his denomination, overseeing the work of the church in the six countries that comprise this strategic region. He moved to West Africa in 2010 to start a ministry in North Africa. He focused on West Africa when the Arab Spring made ministry in North Africa more perilous. While living in Senegal, Aweis regularly ventured into Morocco, Mauritania, the Gambia, Mali and Chad. Since 1996, he made ministry trips to fourteen African countries, six European countries, seven Asian countries and two North American countries.

In December 1996, Dr. Al Jones, Aweis’ missionary leader at the time, asked him where he felt God was leading him to serve as a minister of the gospel. Aweis told him about his passion to serve in East Africa, North Africa and the Middle East. He felt this burden to minister in these three world areas shortly after the Lord found him in 1986. Aweis’ understanding of his missionary call is about people and not necessarily about geography. He would be very happy to minister in Tuvalu, a constitutional monarchy located midway between Hawaii and Australia in the South Pacific Ocean, if there were East Africans, North Africans, or Middle Easterners. He considers any ministry assignment given to him by his church leaders as a divine appointment. In other words, God still speaks through his anointed ecclesiastical leaders.

He loves his fellow Somalis

Aweis lived in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal and the United States. He loves his fellow Somalis and their eternal salvation is of paramount importance to him, as illustrated in a Somali poem he composed in 1994. He could not understand the bloodletting tribal warfare that engulfed the once proud nation. Following is a brief excerpt of the long, evocative poem:

Colka Hakiya ¹⁹⁷	Ceasefire
<i>Soomaalidaan caalamka u jeclaa caddaan iyo madowba</i>	<i>The Somalis I love above all other people</i>
<i>Cafis hadday ku helayaan ku waan cadaab u geli laayba</i>	<i>I would have gone to hell if that could save you</i>
<i>Caysh iyo kuwaan dhaafsadeen caalamkoo idilba</i>	<i>You are more important to me than the world and its contents</i>
<i>Caynadoo da kuwaan ugu jeclaa Caaddil intuu uumay</i>	<i>I love you more than I love anything else in all God's creation</i>
<i>Canaad badan kuwii aan u galay si aan u caawiyo</i>	<i>I paid a heavy price in order to assist you</i>
<i>Ciil badan kuwii igu riday markay colloobeenna</i>	<i>The enmity between you angers me beyond measure</i>
<i>Caqligiini ma waxaa la tegay caada cunayaasha?</i>	<i>Have you all lost your minds? Selfish troublemakers mislead you</i>
<i>Cindigiini ma wuxuu ku dhacay ceelaan cidi gaarin?</i>	<i>Have you lost your common sense in a deep pit?</i>

What dismays Aweis about his fellow Somalis is more than the ongoing thirty-two-year-old civil war that tore apart one of the most homogenous countries in Africa. The fact that Somalis are about ninety-eight percent Muslim despite 141 years of exposure to the gospel deeply grieves him. Aweis' passion for his people may remind one of apostle Paul's desire for his people to be saved even if that could mean the hypothetical probability that he gets separated from Christ:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, Romans 9:1-3, NKJV.

Needless to say, Aweis' love for his people knows no bounds. It is his sincere wish that each and every one of them would follow the Lord. Aweis often takes tremendous amounts of risk so that his fellow Somalis can hear the gospel in a way that they can understand.

¹⁹⁷ Aweis A. Ali, *Rag iyo Rabbi: Suugaan Nabadeed Soomaaliyeed* (Men and God: Somali Poetry on Peace) (Nairobi, Kenya: Maandeeq Publishing, 2020), 40. The English translation has been slightly polished by the author.

East, West and North Africa

When Aweis' denomination sent him to reside in Senegal and minister in North Africa, a fellow Christian asked him how he would feel about going to a country without Somalis to minister to. Aweis paraphrased a well-known maxim by saying, "They can take me out of the Somali peninsula, but they cannot take the Somali peninsula out of me." By God's providence, Aweis met dozens of ethnic Somali Djiboutian Muslims studying at a university in Dakar, Senegal. On top of his official ministry assignment, Aweis started ministering to the Somali students.

Aweis revived and expanded the Somali ministry in much of the Somali peninsula from 1997 to 2001. Dozens of house churches, fellowships and Bible study groups popped up in Somali cities, towns and faraway villages in the Horn of Africa. An ordained Somali Christian elder in the Lower Shabelle region of Somalia described Aweis' role in the Somali ministry in his country as "The single most important thing in the Somali ministry since the arrival of the Mennonite Mission and the SIM in Mogadishu in 1953 and 1954, respectively."¹⁹⁸ The apparent hyperbole aside, one would be hard pressed to find a Somali Christian (past or present) who is more effective, more qualified, more educated, more generous and more committed to the Somali ministry since the first missionaries settled in Daymoole, British Somaliland, in 1881. The fact that Aweis' ministry transcends the Somali peninsula sets him apart from other Somali Christians, whose ministry is often limited to the Somali people. Another Somali Christian in eastern Ethiopia described Aweis' contribution to the Somali ministry as "a divine intervention."¹⁹⁹

A common motif of the testimonies is that Aweis encourages, supports and advocates for local leadership of the Somali ministry. When Aweis' primary focus was on the Somali ministry, he appointed qualified local ministry leaders. He made sure they had the training and the financial provisions they needed to minister effectively to their people.²⁰⁰

While traveling with Somali ministers in eastern Ethiopia, members of the federal military twice opened fire on their vehicle in Gode, mistaking the church-owned vehicle for a contraband truck. The military detained Aweis and other ministers in a military camp in Dhanaan town. They were eventually released, after their case was thoroughly investigated. Aweis and his ministry partners were also detained in Jijjiga, Kebridehar and Kelafo. They were released each time when their identities and credentials were confirmed. Somali ministers who were traveling with Aweis during these challenging times include Rev. Ali Adawe., Rev. Omar B., Rev. Garaad,²⁰¹ Ali G. and Abdi Osman.

Aweis has a long history of traversing major towns and remote villages in the Somali peninsula, encouraging isolated Somali Christians, sharing the gospel with Muslim seekers and organizing house churches, fellowships and Bible study groups during these field trips. According to one Somali pastor, Aweis first visited him in an inaccessible village in the Somali Region of Ethiopia

¹⁹⁸ Rev. Abukar M., Personal Communication, 10 November 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Pastor Ali S., Personal Communication, 10 December 2020.

²⁰⁰ Abdinur F. Personal Communication, 12 January 2020.

²⁰¹ "Garaad" is a pseudonym for a widely-respected Somali Christian minister.

using every transportation mode he could acquire, including “trucks, motorcycles, donkeys and finally on foot.”²⁰²

Conclusion

While Aweis never shies away from admitting his intense love for his fellow Somalis and their salvation, he is not tribalist or nationalistic by any stretch of the imagination. Aweis ministered in several African countries and faithfully served the local communities in these world areas. He takes the Great Commission very seriously and is determined that as many people as possible hear the gospel in a way they can understand. He considers following Christ the most important decision anyone could ever make. Where people spend eternity is of paramount importance to God.

Some of the experiences the Lord used to keep Aweis growing in his Christian faith include the regular persecution he faces and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The persecution reminds him that he indeed lives a godly life (2 Timothy 3:12), otherwise there would not have been any reason to be persecuted for his faith; forces of darkness are known to hate the light of the gospel. The pilgrimage enriched Aweis’ faith and made his resolve to continue following Jesus Christ even stronger, regardless of the persecution and inconveniences.

²⁰² Pastor Muhumed M., Personal Communication, 19 September 2020.

CHAPTER 23: PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND

“One pilgrimage is more effective than a thousand sermons.”

-Aweis A. Ali

Introduction

The Land of Israel is precious to Christians because of its connection to Jesus’ earthly ministry; this is where he was born, grew up, ministered, died, was buried and resurrected. Jesus himself was also Jewish and regarded this land as holy, as taught in the Hebrew Bible. While the core of the Holy Land is in Israel, it also extends to areas that fall within western Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and south-western Syria. Because the Christian faith bases its beliefs on historical events, both the Holy Land and the Bible back up the claims of Christianity; this is one reason pilgrims return home with their faith affirmed and strengthened.

Much of the Holy Land’s significance stems from the religious importance of Jerusalem, which is the most sacred city to Judaism. This city, which is known in Hebrew as *Yerushalayim*, is also the location of the First and Second Temples. As one of the oldest cities in the world, Jerusalem has been the holiest city in Judaism since the 10th century BC. Israel became a magnet that draws Christian pilgrims who are attracted to its holy sites. The historical and religious significance of the Holy Land stirs the hearts of Christian pilgrims and brings them closer to God.

A sacred journey

Pilgrimage is an essential component of the Christian faith and there is a strong and ancient tradition that attests to the role of pilgrims in the Church. Pilgrims often visit sites relevant in the Bible (especially in the Holy Land) and other historic places associated with later saints and their ministry. Pilgrimage is not tourism; it is a divine kindling that arouses and inspires the soul of the believer. Pope Benedict XVI summarized Christian pilgrimage this way:

To go on pilgrimage is not simply to visit a place to admire its treasures of nature, art or history. To go on pilgrimage really means to step out of ourselves in order to encounter God where he has revealed himself, where his grace has shone with particular splendour and produced rich fruits of conversion and holiness among those who believe. Above all, Christians go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to the places associated with the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. They go to Rome, the city of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul and also to Compostela, which, associated with the memory of Saint James, has welcomed pilgrims from throughout the world who desire to strengthen their spirit with the Apostle’s witness of faith and love.²⁰³

²⁰³ The Vatican, “Apostolic Journey to Santiago de Compostela and Barcelona: Visit to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI.” Vatican.va. 6 November 2010.

Aweis' 2019 pilgrimage to the Holy Land took him to Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian territories. This tour had a defining impact on his spiritual reinvigoration. A pilgrimage to Israel had been a long-held dream for Aweis since following Jesus in 1986. As a Muslim, he attached a particular spiritual significance to Mecca and as a Christian to Jerusalem. The spiritual awakening this city (and the entire Holy Land) represented to Aweis was epic.

Traveling with Team Divine



Team Divine. Photo by Aweis A. Ali

Aweis traveled from Nairobi with dozens of Kenyan Christians under the name “Team Divine.” He returned home a transformed man. While on the pilgrimage, Aweis served as the self-appointed Team Divine photographer. He took hundreds of photos on his iPad. One team member gave him the name “Aweis the paparazzi.” Sites Aweis visited in Egypt include the Pyramids of Giza, the Sphinx, the Suez Canal, Springs of Moses, the Wilderness of Sin, Rephidim, the Mountain of St. Catherine and the well where Moses met his wife, Zebura, daughter of Jethro, who was the priest of Median.

https://www.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/speeches/2010/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101106_cattedrale-compostela.html (accessed 03 December 2021).

An indelible experience



Aweis carrying the cross with the help of father Korir.

Carrying a large wooden cross through the Via Dolorosa (the Way of the Cross) road was one of the most touching spiritual experiences Aweis had during the pilgrimage. This route is believed to have been taken by Jesus Christ through Jerusalem to Calvary, where he was crucified. Father John Korir helped Aweis carry the large cross to symbolize how Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry the cross, according to the three synoptic gospels.²⁰⁴ This powerful reenactment left Aweis awestruck. He touched and saw physical manifestations of his Christian faith and described the experience as priceless. Aweis remarked that the reenactment renewed his focus on Christ.



Aweis at the Wailing Wall (The Western Wall)

Aweis commented that the pilgrimage to the Holy Land left an ineradicable mark on his life that would continue to nourish him spiritually for decades to come. Aweis compares the effects of the pilgrimage on his life to the effects the Evangelical Theological College, his alma mater, had on him. Both experiences deepened his walk with the Lord and enriched his Christian faith. As is detailed in this book, Aweis endured horrendous persecution in Somalia that left scars on his life; he describes one of the benefits of this pilgrimage as spiritual healing. This curative experience gave Aweis a new purpose in life and his faith in God was irrevocably transformed because of this sacred journey.

The pilgrimage was so transformative that Aweis plans to also visit other important Bible lands, including Turkey and Jordan. The seven churches in Revelation (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyateira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea) are in Western Turkey. Jordan also has some important Bible sites, including Bethany beyond the Jordan, the site of Jesus' baptism, the cities of Gerasa, Pella, Philadelphia and Aman, the capital of the country, which was also the

²⁰⁴ Father John Korir helped Aweis carry the cross. The Father is a Kenyan Roman Catholic and a Comboni missionary serving in Egypt as an international parish priest. He is also a lecturer on interreligious dialogue and Islamology at Dar Comboni Pontifical Institute in Cairo.

capital of the ancient Ammonites. Other important biblical sites include the Jabbok River, where Jacob wrestled with the angel of God, as well as Mount Nebo, where Moses was shown the Promised Land before he died, the Dead Sea, Gardara (Um Qais), Aron's tomb, Petra, the King's Way, Edom, Madaba, Lot's Cave, Moab and many other significant Bible locations.

Conclusion

Aweis' pilgrimage to the Holy Land had a transformative effect on him; his walk with the Lord deepened and he experienced marked spiritual growth and new humility. Other than the bloodletting persecution he and his house church experienced in Mogadishu in the mid 1990s, no other Christian experience in Aweis' life had such an immensely striking impact on his life as a disciple of Christ. Because of this divine experience, Aweis' interest in the Holy Land was boosted and his conviction of the importance of Christian pilgrimages became heightened.

Somali Christians have always acknowledged the larger-than-life role Aweis plays in Islamic ministry in the Somali peninsula. However, Somali Christians were the first to express their opinion and appreciation in poetry. Even a Muslim widow whose husband was assassinated while still a Muslim seeker but assumed to be a Christian chimed in with a poem dedicated to Aweis. The widow composed and recited one of the most heartfelt poems ever composed to recognize Aweis' contribution to Islamic ministry in the Somali peninsula.

CHAPTER 24: POETS’ TESTIMONIES

Introduction

Somali Christians have long recognized Aweis’ crucial contribution to Somali ministry and expressed their opinions both in prose and in poetry. It is significant that Somalis have composed poetry to honor Aweis – this is a new phenomenon in the small but growing Somali church. Aweis, one of the most high-profile Somali Christians and, arguably, the most credentialed Somali minister to date, transcends tribal and regional trappings. He has produced competent Somali ministers from various clans and regions in the Horn of Africa.

Somali Christians from different regions in the Somali peninsula took the initiative to commemorate Aweis’ constructive contribution to Somali ministry and his love for his people, irrespective of their clan affiliation. Somali poetry is alliterative and metrical and deals with subjects ranging from serious issues to humorous matters. Because of the Somali people’s fervent affection for poetry, Margaret Laurence, a Canadian scholar and novelist, termed the Somalis a “nation of poets”²⁰⁵ and Richard Burton, a 19th century British explorer, called them “a nation of bards.”²⁰⁶ Following are the poems (all but one) composed by Somali Christian poets to commemorate Aweis’ indisputable role in the propagation of the Gospel in the Somali peninsula.

The first poem

This poem was composed by a Somali Christian poet and hymnologist from northern Somalia:

<i>EEBBAHEEN KU DHAWR</i> ²⁰⁷ Y. B. Xirsi	MAY GOD PROTECT YOU Y. B. Xirsi
<p><i>Aweis ina Abukar Eebbe doortayoow Arintaad waddaa Way Aloosantee Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p> <p><i>Abwaanadii dhammaan Waad ururisoo Xigmaddii Ilaah Uu afkooda dhigay Waad iftiimisee Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p>	<p><i>Aweis, son of Abukar God chose you. Your ministry Has flourished. May God protect you</i></p> <p><i>All the poets You mobilized, The wisdom which God Placed on their lips –</i></p>

²⁰⁵ Mohamed Diriye Abdullahi, *Culture and Customs of Somalia*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 75.

²⁰⁶ Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in Somalia*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1854, 91.

²⁰⁷ Y. B. Xirsi, “*Eebbaheen Ku Dhawr*” in Aweis A. Ali (Ed.), *Maansada Masiixa* (Anthology of Somali Christian Poetry), Volume 3 (Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publication, 2012), 4.
<https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/maansada-masiixa-vol-3/> (accessed 11 January 2021).

<p><i>Ammaantuu Ilaah Uu naga mudnaa Abwaanadu qoreen Yaad ururisee Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p> <p><i>Eraygii Ilaah Maanso lagu xafido Adigaa qoroo Ku abaal lahee Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p> <p><i>Aweisow adeeg Aan u baahannahay Ayaad keentaye Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p> <p><i>Hadyadaha Ilaah Walaalaha in badan Uu siiyay baad Uunka siisaye Eebbaheen ku dhawr</i></p>	<p><i>You harvested it.²⁰⁸ May God protect you</i></p> <p><i>The praises of God, Which He deserves, The poets composed them And you compiled them. May God protect you</i></p> <p><i>Poetry which helps To memorize the Bible – You authored it.²⁰⁹ We give you credit. May God protect you</i></p> <p><i>O Aweis, a ministry Which we all need – You brought it forth. May God protect you</i></p> <p><i>Poetry is God’s gift. Many of the believers – He gave it to them And you spread this gift. May God protect you</i></p>
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²⁰⁸ The poet is alluding to Aweis’ founding of the popular series “*Maansada Masiixa*” (Anthology of Somali Christian poetry.)”

²⁰⁹ The poet is alluding to Aweis’ poetic translation of the Gospel According to Matthew: Aweis A. Ali, *Injiilka Shariifka Ah* (The Noble Gospel). Somali Bible Society. Mogadishu, Somalia, 2020.

The second poem

Amin A. Ahmed is the most prolific Somali Christian poet and hymnologist. He hails from southern Somalia and composed this poem to highlight Aweis' impact on Somali ministry:

AWEIS LOOGU MAGAC DARAY Amin A. Ahmed	THEY NAMED HIM AWEIS Amin A. Ahmed
<p><i>Aliflaydan maansada Ujeeddadaan u tiriyay Iska allif igama aha Waa wax uurka iga jiroo Ka rog oodda leeyahay</i></p>	<p><i>This vowel-based poetry, The reason I composed it is not a simple one. This poem is from my heart. Let me herald it now.</i></p>
<p><i>Aroor waliba heer bay Joogtaa adduunyadu Aadmiguna sidoo kale Ayaankiisu kala wacan</i></p>	<p><i>This world is indeed Forever evolving And some people are truly More fortunate than others</i></p>
<p><i>Ambad ruux ahaayoo Intuu iblaysku lumiyay Loo asteeyay naar baa Alle qaaddir weeyee La tusaa iftiinkiyo Ilayskii ka daahnaa</i></p>	<p><i>Some people are lost, They are misled by Satan, They are headed to hell. Since God is powerful, He shows them the Light, The revelation they missed.</i></p>
<p><i>Inkastooy sidaa tahay Qaar illaawin baa jira Ilaa haatan mahadiya Ciise Masiix abaalkii Uu iyaga u galayee Ruuxna aan istaahilin Ammaan iyo bogaadin Isma lihi u ololee Una eexan maayee</i></p>	<p><i>Having said all that, Some never forget God, They thank him regularly Because Jesus chose them, He did them a favor. If one does not deserve Praises and congratulations, I will not compliment them, I do not engage in nepotism.</i></p>
<p><i>Odayada u soo kacay Faafintaa Injiilkiyo Axdigii ay qaadeen Inay oofiyaan jecel Walaalaha ururiyoo Midnimada adkeeya Midka ugu aqoon dheer Ina Abuukar weeyoo Aweis loogu magac daray</i></p>	<p><i>The trained elders Who preach the Gospel, They all obey The divine covenant, They gather the brothers, They unite the believers. The most educated one Is the son of Abukar, They named him Aweis.</i></p>

*In yar haddaan ka ifiyana
Cid uu eed ka galay iyo
Isla wayni kuma arag
Afxumana warkeed daa
Waa Masiixi asaloo
Dhan kastood ka eegtaba
Astaamihii Badbaadshaha
In li'i huwadayoo
U arxama dadkoo idil
Eebbe dartii u wada jecel*

*Waxaa intaa u sii dheer
Inuu Ilaahay siiyay
Oori aad u wacanoo
Gooriyo ayaanba
Inay wada adeegaan
Noqdaan uliyo diirkeed
Abidkeed u taagane*

*Allow qoyskan barakee
Kana yeel il aan gurin
Aakhiriyoo adduunna
Nolol aayatiin leh
Ku idlaysta weligii*

*Let me explain more.
He insults no one,
He is not arrogant,
His mouth is holy,
He is a real Christian.
However you look at him,
He is clothed in
The likeness of Christ,
He helps all people,
He loves them because of God.*

*Let me not forget this,
The Lord God gave him
An amazing wife.
They serve together
Every day and every night,
They are like a hand and a glove,
They are always united.*

*God bless this family,
Keep them prosperous.
This world and the hereafter
Give them hope
And eternal life.*

The third poem

This poem was composed by a Somali Christian poet from northern Somalia:

<p style="text-align: center;">Aarka Noo Kacay Abwaan A. K. Q. Dictionary</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Our Dependable Lion Abwaan A. K. Q. Dictionary</p>
<p><i>Abaal nin galoo</i> <i>Oo adeegi</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa amiir jira</i></p>	<p><i>A man who helps</i> <i>A man who serves</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is a true prince</i></p>
<p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i> <i>Agoontii shalay</i> <i>Anfac weyduu</i> <i>U arxamayoo</i> <i>waa ileys baxay</i></p>	<p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent by God</i> <i>The deprived orphans</i> <i>Who were without food</i> <i>He was kind to them</i> <i>He is a shining light</i></p>
<p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo direy</i> <i>Abtirsiimiyo</i> <i>Ehel iyo qolo</i> <i>Aan anfacin ummad</i> <i>Ma amaano</i> <i>Uma bogo abid</i></p>	<p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i> <i>Tribal lineages</i> <i>Clannish nepotism</i> <i>Which fail nations</i> <i>He does not engage in them</i> <i>He hates them with a passion</i></p>
<p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i> <i>Ardaydiisana</i> <i>Aqoon iyo cilmi</i> <i>Anfacaysuu</i> <i>Abid siiyaa</i></p>	<p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i> <i>The people he serves</i> <i>He teaches them well</i> <i>He enriches them</i> <i>By his instructions</i></p>
<p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i> <i>Amranaad tahay</i></p>	<p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i> <i>He is God's anointed</i></p>

<p><i>Eebe soo diray</i> <i>Arligeenana</i> <i>Eray barashada</i> <i>Adaa anfacoo</i> <i>U mariyay horay</i></p> <p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i> <i>Abriskiyo cadaw</i> <i>Allaan baryayaa</i> <i>Inaad arag abid</i></p> <p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i> <i>Allaan baryayaa</i> <i>Albaabka janada</i> <i>Aweis iyo xertu</i> <i>In ay ku kulmaan</i> <i>Aamiin wada dhaha</i> <i>Ummaddiiyey</i> <i>Aabbo waakane</i></p> <p><i>Aarka noo kacay</i> <i>Waa Aweis oo</i> <i>Waa aqoon yahan</i> <i>Alle noo diray</i></p>	<p><i>Commissioned by God</i> <i>He aided our country</i> <i>He taught the Bible</i> <i>He is an asset to us</i> <i>He made our nation better</i></p> <p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i> <i>I am praying to God</i> <i>That serpents and enemies</i> <i>Never find him</i></p> <p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i> <i>I am praying to God</i> <i>That at the gates of Heaven</i> <i>Aweis and other disciples</i> <i>Meet there joyfully</i> <i>All of you say, "amen"</i> <i>O my people!</i> <i>Aweis is our father</i></p> <p><i>Our dependable lion</i> <i>That is Aweis</i> <i>He is an educated man</i> <i>He was sent to us by God</i></p>
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The fourth poem

This poem was composed by a Somali Muslim poetess from southern Somalia. Her late husband, Mohamed Qorey Saalah, was killed by Islamists in 1995 after mistaking him for a Christian. Qorey, as he was known, was a young Muslim seeker and a friend of a few Somali Christians who were later killed for their faith. The widow decided to withhold her name for her own privacy and protection.

Ma badnee ogaada Xaaskii Qooreey	Such a man is so rare Qorey's Widow
<p><i>Magacii Ilaahee Muunaddiisu waynayd Ku billaabay miinkaan Iyadoo markhaati leh Yaan maanta qirayaa Muslimnimadi Qooreey Marwadiisi baan ahay Ilmo muluqa oon korin Isagaa ka mowdoo Way koreenna maantadan Mid Aweis la midahoo Maatida u roonee Marna aan ilaabayn Ma badnee ogaada</i></p>	<p><i>I start this poem In the name of God The magnificent one In front of witnesses I am declaring today That Qorey was Muslim He was my late husband Our children were small The day he was killed They are now grownups A man who is like Aweis Who helps the weak Who never forgets them Such a man is so rare</i></p>
<p><i>Maydkiisoo weli yaal Madax rasaasi kaga taal Aweis yaa mar noo yimid Wuxuu maal uu heli karay Iga saaryay midigtoo Muluqshihi salaanyoo Tacsiyeeyay maamadi Marxabeeyay aaboo Nala aasyay maydkii Magaciis Allow dhowr Mid Aweis la midahoo Maatida u roonee Marna aan ilaabayn Ma badnee ogaada</i></p>	<p><i>Before the body was buried His head ridden with bullets Aweis came to see us All the money he had He gave it to me He greeted the kids He comforted mom He consoled dad He attended the burial May God protect his name A man who is like Aweis Who helps the weak Who never forgets them Such a man is so rare</i></p>
<p><i>Agoontii mar qurana Aweis muu illaawin La wadaagyay murugadi Malcamaduu ka bixiyoo Mid qura ha noqotee Ciidna muu illaawin Mar uu diroo taleefoon Ama maal na siiyo Markastay ahaataaba Waa mid naga warhaayay Mid Aweis la midahoo Maatida u roonee Marna aan ilaabayn</i></p>	<p><i>He is close to the orphans Aweis never forgets them Sharing their pain with them He paid for their education Not even one orphan Did Aweis forget He calls us by phone He gives us some money Every day and every night He is connected to us A man who is like Aweis Who helps the weak Who never forgets them</i></p>

<i>Ma badnee ogaada</i>	<i>Such a man is so rare</i>
<i>Mowlow kaal Aweisoo</i>	<i>O God, help Aweis</i>
<i>Maalin iyo habeenba</i>	<i>Every day and every night</i>
<i>Marxabbee adigu oo</i>	<i>Assist him honorably</i>
<i>Midigtiisa noqo oo</i>	<i>Stay by his side</i>
<i>Maalintaa qiyaamana</i>	<i>And the Day of Judgment</i>
<i>Uunku wada madluumoo</i>	<i>When so many are terrified</i>
<i>Mid mid loo mutaxanyoo</i>	<i>When no one can aid another</i>
<i>Magac iyo maal jirin</i>	<i>Neither name nor money help</i>
<i>Murugada ka dhowroo</i>	<i>Protect him from sorrowfulness</i>
<i>Deeqdaada maanshee</i>	<i>Be generous to him</i>
<i>Mid Aweis la midahoo</i>	<i>A man who is like Aweis</i>
<i>Maatida u roonee</i>	<i>Who helps the weak</i>
<i>Marna aan ilaabayn</i>	<i>Who never forgets them</i>
<i>Ma badnee ogaada</i>	<i>Such a man is so rare</i>

While translating poetry compromises its integrity, my translators and I did our best to minimize the damage a translation inflicts. I pray we have been as successful as possible. Poets occupy a coveted place in Somali society. There is a belief in Somali culture that prayers offered in poetry are more powerful than those expressed in earthly prose. Poets spoke clearly about their views of Aweis, also a poet, thus immortalizing him and themselves in the Somali consciousness. I am certain that generations of Somali Christians will read this book and the poetry about Aweis, the most influential living Somali Christian. Somalis are inclined towards poetry and admire the intimate ways a poet can speak to them. Poetry inspires and illuminates the cognizance of its audience. Any reader who likes poetry will find this chapter the most evocative and most insightful chapter of the entire book.

The eloquent way poets expressed their opinion on Aweis, his character and his ministry is remarkable. Chapters upon chapters of prose could not have accomplished what the above four poems skillfully illuminated about the place of Aweis A. Ali in the Somali church. I thank the poets for choosing to testify in poetry. This was their idea and I thank them for doing it in a culturally suitable manner. When I asked one of the poets why he chose poetry instead of the much easier prose, his response opened my eyes, “Prose will be unfair to Aweis because it is not beautiful enough. Poetry is the best because it is the language of God and his angels.” The poet added, “I challenge you to write the entire biography in poetry.” I respectfully declined that challenge! Though I like poetry and paremiology, I do better in humble prose.

Conclusion

Somalis are known for their powerful and evocative poems. The ability to compose meaningful poetry is considered a divine gift. Prayers and praises presented to God in poetry are believed to be more effective than those composed in lowly prose. The fact that several Somalis expressed their opinion on Aweis in splendid poetry illuminates the role he plays in Islamic ministry in the Somali peninsula and beyond. Only a small minority of Somali Christians were ever recognized

in poetry composed to honor them. Aweis feels blessed to be among those selected to be honored in the immortal language of poetry.

As the biographer, I was deeply touched by the stirring testimonies of the poets. The cultural way the poets testified about the biographee and his ministry is admirable. Needless to say, translating poetry diminishes its quality. It is my prayer that the English translation can at least convey the general essence of the message so splendidly devised by the poets. Somalis are known as poets par excellence, most likely more than any other people group in the world. Somali culture in fact revolves around oral poetry and Somalis take their poetry with them wherever they relocate to, far or near.

EPILOGUE

Writing this biography has been one of my greatest achievements to date. It was divine inspiration that made me realize the importance of this work. I witnessed the hand of the Lord and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit during the hard work of writing this book. I observed resources miraculously becoming available to me and difficulties quickly disappearing. When my mind felt blank and I could not find anything meaningful to write, I prayed and received guidance on what to write and how to write. While it is tempting to personally take credit for this historic work, I give all the credit to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is not an ordinary book; it is about the life and the ministry of a man of God whose impact on Somali ministry is written in stone. This biography is the result of fasting, prayers and dedication. Without any doubt, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in Somali spirituality and culture. It is also bound to become a textbook for any Christian, local or expatriate, who is interested in Somali church history and mission work. A book like this has not been written in the history of the Somali church.

I prayerfully pondered this for weeks: why is Aweis the only survivor of a house church of fourteen members? Why were twelve of them martyred for their faith in quick succession? Why did one of them survive the carnage to die of “natural” causes at the age of thirty-seven? Why was Aweis spared? There is no evidence that he was holier than any of the martyrs or that his prayer was better or that he fasted longer than any of them. Since hindsight is 20/20, many believers now know that God had a plan for Aweis. When God has a plan for you, things will pan out as God intended them because it was never about your might or mind. God did not save Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego because they were perfect. He did not rescue Paul and Peter because they were so amazing; he preserved them all because he had a divine plan for them. The same God rescued Aweis so that many might know him because of his ministry. I pray that God continues protecting Aweis, his wife and their children.

I did not write this book for money; I authored it for the benefit of the Somali church and for the larger Islamic ministry all over the world. Every Christian worker among Somalis who does not read this book is deprived of an essential resource. Any Somali Christian who does not read this book will remain unaware of much of the history which is carefully chronicled in this book. Any Somali Muslim who does not read this work will continue believing that to be a Somali is to be a Muslim. Such a person will continue believing the enemy’s propaganda that equates Christianity to carnality. The center pole that holds this book together is the biographee, who is one of the holiest disciples of Christ in the Somali peninsula. This book is the most tangible evidence that the gates of hell are still unable to prevail against the Church. Satan conspired against the Somali church and the Somali community of faith defied all odds and kept growing in the midst of unspeakable atrocities.

The PDF version of this book is available for free for the glory of God; consider sharing it with any Christian with a global view of the Church. Any Christian who is passionate about Muslims hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ or any disciple of Christ who wants to see how God works in the persecuted church will greatly benefit from this important work. The very God who walked with Enoch and Methuselah walks today with the persecuted church. Just like the early

church, God communicates with these modern-day saints through dreams and visions. These Christians consider persecution a badge of honor because Christ-likeness is the criterion for real persecution, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution,” 2 Timothy 3:12, NKJV. Without a doubt, the persecuted church is a fortunate church.

Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD, PhD – candidate

WHAT OTHERS SAID ABOUT THIS BOOK 2/2

A very fascinating biography that introduces readers not only to the biographee but also to the reality of Somalia during these troubled last decades. The reader will acquire an insight not from an expatriate but from a local person who lived in Somalia during these very difficult years. Reading this book will enrich your knowledge of the persecuted church in the Muslim world.

Mons. Giorgio Bertin, O.F.M.
Bishop of Djibouti and Apostolic Administrator of Mogadishu, Somalia

Dr. Naol Befkadu Kebede has skillfully written a compelling book about the life and ministry of our brother and friend, Aweis A. Ali. As we read this stirring spiritual biography, we hear Christ calling us to take up our cross and follow Him. Each of us who has been blessed to walk with Aweis has been enriched and inspired by this Christ-follower, “of whom the world is not worthy!” (Hebrews 11:38). We pray the Lord will grant us the courage, humility and strength to follow Aweis’ example of surrender and obedience to Christ’s mission.

Dr. Jerry D. Porter
General Superintendent Emeritus
Church of the Nazarene

A testimony to a different Somalia, this book challenges long-held beliefs about the monolithic nature of a country usually reduced to mere generalizations. Aweis Ali’s life attests to a little-known Somalia where a Christian community thrives against all odds. This inspiring account of Aweis Ali’s journey as a Christian in Somalia shows how it indeed takes courage, conviction and character to follow one’s heart and embrace a new faith.

Helmi Ben Meriem, PhD
Specialist in Somali Studies

Courage, Conviction and Character is a remarkable book. It is the life story of Aweis Ali. A compelling story of his coming to faith in Christ, experiencing extraordinary persecution and emerging as a significant Christian leader in the Horn of Africa. But it is much more; it is also a nuanced and important glimpse into Somali culture as well as the internal dynamics of Somali Christian missions. While it was engagingly written for those interested in the Islamic ministry, it is also a very important book for anthropologists and missiologists. I highly recommend this to all who have an interest in both the culture and the mission of the Church in Somalia.

Ron Benefiel, PhD
Former President
Nazarene Theological Seminary

Courage, Conviction and Character is a masterpiece of great faith and fortitude, surmounting unbelievable obstacles, challenging the daily perseverance of a deeply devout Somali Christian who single-handedly changed the religious and cultural landscape of Somalia. Somalia is a country which remains devoid of religious diversity and tolerance. However, Aweis is its proverbial “prophet without honor” who leads the way by example, never giving up hope and believing in the Somali people. Naol has penned a remarkable biography which is critically brilliant, evocative and awe-inspiring. Aweis shows that it is a divine imperative to rise above the clan, to deal justly and kindly with all. Naol reveals how Aweis never shied away from critiquing and confronting politics be it the fledgling church or society. This biography is a treasure trove of Somali history, culture and poetic language making it a canonical text in its own right.

Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin, PhD

Author of *The Last Two Jews of Mogadishu: Living Under Al Shabaab’s Fire*

One of the best tributes one can pay to a teacher, researcher, or author is to say, “I have learned from him/her.” I have known Dr. Aweis Ali for many years now, for some of those years, he was my next-door neighbor. But I must say without hesitation that I have learned much from Naol Befkadu Kebede’s book about Aweis – about his upbringing, conversion to Christianity and his ministry experiences. Even more, in *Courage, Conviction and Character*, I have learned about Somali culture, the history of Christian missions in Somalia, Islam as it is practiced there, cross-cultural hospitality and the practice of missions. There are many lessons to be learned from the life of Aweis Ali and this book is on my list of recommended reading for Christians serving in cross-cultural ministry and gospel-resistant areas.

Rodney L. Reed, PhD

Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs

Africa Nazarene University

This is a must-read book for understanding the history of Christian missions among Somali people. Through the story of Aweis Ali’s life, Naol Kebede explores the history of the Somali church: persecutions it faced, relationships with Western missionaries and the challenges and opportunities of evangelism among Somali people today.

Darara Gubo

Founder and Owner

Darara Law Office LLC

This is a remarkable biography of Dr. Aweis A. Ali. Dr. Naol Befkadu Kebede did an outstanding job in putting together such a transformative book. I know Dr. Aweis to be an amazing person with an amiable personality and he is pleasant to work with. He has a very strong commitment to the Christian calling and conviction to grow Christianity in Somalia and the world at large. His work is of a very high quality and impactful.

Isaac Litali, CPAK, CS, MBA
Ministry Resource Facilitator
United Bible Societies

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD, is a theologian, a student of missions and a PhD candidate in leadership. He grew up in Addis Ababa where he regularly interacted with his Somali neighbors. Naol's love for the Somali people grew rapidly, which stimulated his studies of missions so he could better minister to the Somali people. Naol has authored three books on missions, culture and theology; he also contributes regularly to mission journals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Africa map



Africa Map. Map credit: Nations online

Appendix B: Somalia map



Somalia Map. Map credit: Nations Online

Appendix C: Mogadishu map



Mogadishu map. Map credit: Map Soft World

Appendix D: Ethiopia map



Ethiopia Map. Map credit: Nations Online

Appendix E: Selected Somali Christian Martyrs



Aweis interviewing the late Somali Christian martyr, Pastor Hussein Adan Ahmed (1962-2006). The interview took place in Mogadishu, Somalia, on 11 January 2000.

#	Name	Martyred
1	Liibaan Ibraahim Hassan	1994
2	Ahmed Ayntow Gobe	1994
3	Saleban Mohamed Saleban	1994
4	Isma'el Yusuf Mukhtar	1994
5	Mohamed Aba Nur	1994
6	Ali Kusow Mataan	1995
7	Mohamed Abdullahi Yusuf	1995
8	Nurani Madey Madka	1995
9	Khalif Dayah Guled	1995
10	Bashir Mo'alim Mohamud	1995
11	Prof. Haji Mohamed Hussein	1996
12	Mohamed Sheikdon Jama	1996
13	Faarah Ibraahim Adaawe	2000
14	Shueb Maalim Madkheyr	2004
15	Dr. Osman Sheik Ahmed	2005
16	Mariam Mohammed Hassan	2005
17	Pastor Hussein Adan Ahmed	2006
18	Ali Mustaf Maka'il	2006
19	Hassan Mo'alim	2008
20	Mohamed Yusuf	2008
21	Ahmadey Nur Osman	2008
22	Mansuur Mohamed	2008
23	Sayid Ali Sheik Luqman Hussein	2008
24	David Abdulwahab Mohamed Ali	2008
25	Nur Osman Muhuji	2008
26	Prof. Da'ud Hassan Ali	2008

27	Rehana Ahmed	2008
28	Ahmed Matan	2009
29	Fatima Sultan	2009
30	Ali Ma'ow	2009
31	Sheik Mohamed Abdi	2009
32	Maaddey Diil	2009
33	Omar Khalafe	2009
34	Amina Muse Ali	2009
35	Mohamed Sheik Abdirahman	2009
36	Ali Hussein Weheliye "Ali Weyneh"	2009
37	Mumin Abdikarim Yusuf	2009
38	Abdirahman Haji Omar	2009
39	Marriam Muhina Hussein	2009
40	Mohammed Ahmed Ali	2010
41	Abdirahman Muse Yusuf	2009
42	Husein Muse Yusuf	2009
43	Madobe Abdi	2010
44	Mu'awiye Hilowle Ali	2010
45	Yusuf Ali Nur	2010
46	Mohammed Guul Hashim Idiris	2010
47	Osman Abdullah Fataho	2010
48	Nurta Mohamed Farah	2010
49	Asha Mberwa	2011
50	Abdirahman Hussein Roble	2011
51	Juma Nuradin Kamil	2011
52	Guled Jama Muktar	2011
53	Zakaria Hussein Omar	2012
54	Mariam Muhina Hussein	2012
55	Mohammed Sheikh Abdiraman	2012
56	Farhan Haji Mose	2012
57	Rev. Abdi Welli Ahmed	2013

Naol Befkadu Kebede, MD, is a theologian, a student of missions and a PhD candidate in leadership. He grew up in Addis Ababa where he regularly interacted with his Somali neighbors. Naol's love for the Somali people grew rapidly, which stimulated his studies of missions so he could better minister to the Somali people. Naol has authored three books on missions, culture and theology; he also contributes regularly to mission journals.

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