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Verses of mercy: how Somali oral traditions can mitigate conflict and support IHL

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A painting by Somali artist Abdinasir Abdikadir Mohamed, also known as Abdinasir 4C.

The universality of international humanitarian law (IHL) assumes that its principles transcend cultural, geographical, and political boundaries. However, this presumption is challenged by the

complexities of how IHL is perceived and implemented across different sociocultural contexts. Bridging the gap between theoretical universalism and practical application requires strategies that are sensitive to local cultural and normative particularities.

In this post, part of the Emerging Voices series, Ayan Abdirashid Ali explores how Somali literary traditions, particularly Sugaanta Soomaaliyeed, offer a unique and effective means of aligning IHL's ethical framework with local cultural narratives, thereby enhancing its legitimacy and effectiveness. By weaving together legal and cultural perspectives, she highlights how such traditions can serve as powerful tools for fostering peace and reconciliation in conflict-prone regions.

The universality of IHL is a foundational presumption, one that suggests its principles transcend cultural, geographical, and political boundaries, applying equally in any conflict zone.[1] However, this assumption is not without complexities, especially when examining how IHL is perceived, received, and ultimately implemented in diverse sociocultural contexts. A perception of universality does not guarantee its realization. In practice, there are often stark divergences in how IHL is understood, accepted, or even contested from one society to another. This gap between the actual and the perceived must be acknowledged and addressed. While IHL aspires to be universal, its principles often require deliberate and tailored engagement to become truly resonant and actionable at the local level.

In this respect, IHL cannot rely on theoretical universalism alone; it requires strategies for operationalization that are acutely sensitive to the cultural and normative particularities of the contexts in which it is applied. The IHL community, therefore, bears the responsibility of identifying, amplifying, and leveraging culturally specific elements that can enhance the law's relevance and impact. In a social sense, IHL is already equipped with tools and mechanisms designed to support its effective implementation at the local level. As both custodian and vanguard of IHL, the ICRC recognizes this imperative and regularly seeks to strengthen the normative framework with tools[2] that facilitate integration and promote the local acceptance and enforcement of international humanitarian law.

A Somali has two aces in the hole

His Faith in Islam and

his Lyrical Poetry[3]

In Somalia, this imperative begins with the recognition of existing traditional laws of war, particularly as articulated through the *Bir Ma Geydo* — the customary principles that, as the ICRC has famously described, protect those "spared from the spear".[4] The ICRC has eloquently highlighted the parallels between the *Bir Ma Geydo* and IHL,[5] underscoring a symbiotic relationship between traditional Somali legal norms and the principles of IHL. This alignment fosters a sense of local ownership and agency over humanitarian laws.

However, questions remain about the depth and extent of that agency — questions that point to the need for considerable acceleration. While the ICRC's recognition of *Bir Ma Geydo* as an analogue to IHL in Somalia is significant, it remains largely declaratory and lacks the transformative reach needed to embed IHL meaningfully within Somali governance and public consciousness. A formal acknowledgment alone is insufficient if it does not engage with the cultural narratives and mediums through which Somali social order is communicated and sustained.

To make IHL a living moral discourse in Somalia, its principles must be conveyed through Somali modes of thought and expression, aligning with the nation's unique cultural frameworks. Such an approach would transform IHL principles into deeply held societal values, promoting a structure within which humanitarian principles are organically upheld and sustained.

"Somaalidu been wey sheegta, lakin ma maahmaahdo."

Translation: Somalis could tell lies but lies are not told in proverbs.

As a corollary, an equally critical yet underexamined phenomenon in Somalia is the essential role of Somali oral literature – *Sugaanta Soomaaliyeed* – which stands as the primary and most respected medium for expressing traditional social and legal imperatives that define the boundaries of acceptable conduct. In Somalia, *Sugaanta* functions not merely as a vehicle for cultural expression; it is a robust epistemic repository of moral and legal philosophy. It is within *Sugaanta* that the ethical tenets governing behavior during conduct are most vividly articulated.

In a context where oral traditions hold greater authority than written law, *Sugaanta* functions as a vital mechanism of ethical transmission. Unlike conventional statutory frameworks that may be perceived as externally imposed, *Sugaanta* is woven into the Somali psyche, conveying moral imperatives that resonate deeply within the collective identity. Through poetry, parables, and proverbs, it expresses normative values that align closely with the principles of IHL, such as the sanctity of life, restraint in warfare, and the protection of the vulnerable.

This literary tradition, steeped in centuries of contemplation, is far from being a mere cultural curiosity. It serves as a powerful vehicle for reinforcing the normative legitimacy of IHL, particularly in a society where oral tradition is the primary means of transmitting moral knowledge. The distinct way in which Somali society articulates its own ethical and legal codes through poetry, proverbs and storytelling offers a unique avenue for cultivating local agency over IHL.

As Professor Yahya Aamir aptly observes, poetry is "an absolute instigator and it is known to provoke warfare".[6] Similarly, Sheikh Ali Waajiis notes that "poetry carries much power in Somali society and it is an area that is constantly protected or shielded from misuse".[7] This influence is reflected in the well-known proverb – *aflagaado waa astaan dagaal* – meaning "slander is a symbol of war".[8] Understanding poetry's capacity to incite conflict reveals its equal potential to promote peace. By harnessing this influence, IHL actors can strategically engage Somali oral literature to reinforce humanitarian values, deter violence, and promote reconciliation in conflict-prone regions.

As an instrument of moral guidance, *Sugaanta* embeds ethical precepts within poetic and narrative forms that promote respect for human dignity, restraint, and empathy, qualities essential in times of conflict environments. Its prose and verses convey principled lessons that guide behaviour where ethical injunctions are established with relatable verses. These literary forms promulgate virtues such as restraint, compassion, and respect for human dignity, imparted not through detached mandates, but through speech that speaks to the Somali heart and moral imagination. [9] As a result, the core values of IHL are internalized as a powerful instrument of moral instruction, allowing the ethical frameworks articulated by *Sugaanta* to serve as an authentic, locally relevant guide for navigating the complexities of conflict.

The performative nature of *Sugaanta* during poetry recitations and literary events also creates spaces for dialogue, reflection, and the communal affirmation of humanitarian principles. Significantly, *Sugaanta* has historically played an instrumental role in mediation and conflict resolution within Somali society. The rich and evocative language of poetry and proverbs enables mediators to articulate shared values and identify common ground, fostering dialogue and reconciliation among adversaries.

In the literary environment of war and peace, a profound dialectic between conflict and conciliation emerges. The spoken word is a primary means through which the moral terrain of warfare is navigated, expressed through a variety of literary forms. These include *maanso* or *gabay* (epic poetry), *geeraar* (lyrical verse or prose), *buraanbur* (female poetry), *sheeko* (stories), *dood* (debate), *maah maah* (proverbs) and *hees* (songs). These genres serve as epistemic repositories of collective wisdom, offering both lamentations of violence and, paradoxically, instruments of pacification. Each form carries its own gradation and purpose, yet all are united by a shared function: to balance notions of honour, lawfulness, and reconciliation, acting as essential forces both catalyzing[10] and curbing conflict.

While all these forms contribute to the literary framing of war and peace, poetry, prose and proverbs have a central function. Poetry (*maanso*) and prose (*geeraar* or *guuroow*) are often composed extemporaneously and function as moral adjudicators. They critique the structures of warfare — sometimes encouraging it, whether overtly or covertly, and at other times acting as deterrents.

This culture is powerfully conveyed by the poet (*abwaan*), a revered figure who holds exclusive authority over words, an influence that has historically rivalled that of warriors. The poet's verses are rich with allusive imagery; they speak of resilience tempered by mercy, honour guided by restraint, and justice infused with compassion. These words draw the listener deep into the heart of the ideals being exalted or scrutinized, compelling them not only to understand, but to embody those values. A well-rendered *gabay* is not merely heard — it is felt, wielded like a blade that cleaves through layers of the psyche, piercing both mind and spirit. The audience does not passively receive its message; they become enmeshed in the moral stakes of the verse, urged to weigh their actions with a sobriety as heavy as the repercussions of vengeance or the redemptive mercy of forgiveness.

To strategically augment the legitimacy and efficacy of IHL, leveraging *Sugaanta* involves demonstrating the inherent congruence between the ethical precepts embedded within Somali literary traditions and the humanitarian norms enshrined in IHL. These traditions are not foreign to the ethos of IHL; on the contrary, they reflect its core injunctions — against indiscriminate violence, in protection of non-combatants, in upholding the principle of distinction, prohibiting unnecessary suffering, preserving human dignity, and safeguarding inalienable rights and protections even amid the chaos of battle. In this way, *Sugaanta* becomes a powerful medium through which IHL is translated into a form that resonates deeply with the Somali psyche, thereby imbuing the law with local relevance and normative legitimacy. This is where cultural resonance takes root — where IHL is not only communicated, but internalized and, ultimately, actualized.

***Author's annex**: Of the many humanitarian themes in Sugaanta Somaaliyeed the following examples may be of interest.*

I. Proverbs

"Dagaal wiil ba ku dhintee, wiil kuma dhasho"

Translation: "In war, a son may die, but no son is born from it."

This proverb emphasizes the tragic, irreversible loss of life in conflict and calls for the preservation of life, aligning with the humanitarian value of the sanctity of life.

"Dagaal guri dumay iyo geeri baa laga dhaxalaa"

Translation: "Ruined homes and death is inherited from war."

This proverb emphasizes the destructive nature of war and the irreversible consequences it brings. In a more symbolic sense, it conveys the sanctity of life by emphasizing the irreparable loss that war causes, particularly the loss of life and it similarly conveys the theme of restraint in conflict, as it urges individuals to recognize the costs of violence.

II. Poetry

The theme of restraint in conflict are embodied in the poetry of Laashin Xussein Weershe, a revered poet from the Abgaal clan, renowned for his unparalleled mastery of the Shirib. The Shirib is a poetic form and dynamic cultural tradition that exists among the Abgaal clan. In this gathering, the clan comes together, enveloping the poet as he recites, with each verse weaving through the collective consciousness. The performance of Shirib is a spectacle of rhythm and movement, where the audience becomes an active participant, joining in with the synchronized stamping of feet and the rhythmic thrusts of spears and ulo (sticks).

As the poet pauses to absorb the energy of his listeners, the sound of a seashell, blown to produce a resonant, trumpet-like call, marks a break. This sound, rich with meaning, invites the audience's response, an expression of communion between the poet and his people. Here, poetry transcends the written word, becoming an immersive experience, where both the poet and the audience partake in a ritual of cultural expression and collective memory.

Extract of the Poem, Hadaan ley dooran dagaal iyo waxaan ridaa

By Laashin Xusein Weershe*[11]*

1. Hoooo Hooo Hoo Hooo Helay wayaaaa Helay wayaaaaa Hooooo

Translation: prolonged recitation of these literary filler words which are used to mark the opening and close]

2. Aniga hadaan, aniga ley doorahaayn leyna dabajoogin deg deg na aan ciiyoow leygu siin derajo iyo gar Dagaal iyo waxaan kici haya weerar dhabadheer haddi uu aduunki yiraada...

Translation: If I am not stood behind by and am not chosen, and I am not quickly granted respect and rank, and the right, I will wake up an attack that prolonged and chronic if the universe allows.

The call for respect and rank suggests that violence may arise in the presence of oppression or disregard. This underscores the importance of avoiding conflict by granting respect and meeting needs before things escalate, thereby promoting restraint in conflict by avoiding the provocation of violence.

3. Dadna wuxu heeshiiyaa hadu kala dhambeeya...

Translation: People are in agreement when there is concessions and surrender.

This line emphasizes the necessity of **compromise**. It speaks to the principle of **peaceful resolution**, where **concessions** are made. The implication is that, through restraint, all sides can find common ground, highlighting that **peace requires restraint and cooperation** from all involved.

4. Sad miya in leys dila raggana raggana doorka laga socodo dan miyaa?

Translation: Is it in our interest to kill men and to lose the role played by men, is it in our interest?

Here, Weershe reflects on the futility of killing and the loss of roles that occurs in war. He questions the cost of conflict, whether it is in anyone's best interest to kill and lose the contributions of people. This is a direct call for restraint, questioning whether violence is truly worth the involved consequences.

5. Dagaalkaan batte dhabada dheereyay dan miyaa?

Translation: Is this prolonged conflict in our interest?

This line questions the value of continued conflict, highlighting the destructive nature of prolonged warfare. Weershe encourages reflection on whether the community benefits from ongoing war. The line advocates for restraint by suggesting that if conflict is not in the interest of the people, it should end, aligning with humanitarian principles of minimizing suffering and seeking peace.

6. Ee dan miya in leys dila, raggana doorka laga socodo, dar xumo na layse, waxan illaah la duceysanaya

Translation: Is it in our interest to kill men and to lose the role played by men, is it in our interest, misery has killed us, and we seek refuge in God.

This line deepens the earlier reflection by emphasizing that violence leads to misery, and that war brings unnecessary suffering. The plea for God's refuge shows a desire for peace and spiritual guidance. The focus on misery caused by war highlights the urgency of resisting further violence and seeking peace.

7. Magaaladda dab aa lagu gubay, ee daxal madoobaatay

Translation: The city has been burnt with fire and our inheritance has been darkened.

This line metaphorically describes the devastating consequences of war, with the burning city symbolizing both the physical destruction and the loss of communal heritage. The darkening of inheritance represents the loss of future potential due to conflict. Weershe underscores the irreversible damage caused by war, suggesting that restraint in conflict is vital to prevent such destruction

8. Magaladda ninki lugu dilay ba diya la qaada... waxna la toogahayn aya dib loo raadsha...

Translation: A man killed in the city is administered with the Diya.. and where no person is shot or stabbed is the condition that we seek.

Here, Weershe addresses the practice of paying compensation (Diya) for death, suggesting that death is never the desired outcome. He contrasts this with the ideal scenario, where violence is avoided, and no one is harmed.

9. ee iss dugaansho somaliyeey nabadda uu duuba dhabeel caafimaad aan helnay ee dawo nabadeed...

Translation: Somali familiarity is woven at times of peace, and we have received winds of health and the medicine of peace.

Weershe concludes by celebrating peace as the ultimate restorative force. The winds of health and the medicine of peace metaphorically suggest that peace brings both healing and prosperity. This reinforces the theme of restraint in conflict, urging the community to choose peace over violence.

References

[1] This discourse unfolds across two distinct dimensions; firstly, as in the realm of codification, encompassing state practices and the extent of state-centric adoption of IHL and secondly, the focal point of this post, the reception and resonance of IHL principles among local populations.

[2] See ICRC IHL databases.

All translations are by this author.

[3] Mahmud Siad Togane, 'The Poet's Death is His Life' (2006) 6(10) *Bildaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 86.

[4] See Musa Yusuf Hussein, Mohammed Abdilaani Risaash and Ibrahim Haji Wa'is, *Spared from the Spear* (1998) <*https://blogs.icrc.org/somalia/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2015/09/Spared-from-the-spear-EN.pdf*>, archived at *https://blogs.icrc.org/religion-humanitarianprinciples/spared-from-spear-traditional-somali-behaviour-warfare/*>.

[5] And there is extensive forthcoming research from this author on the traditional Somali laws of war.

[6] Interview conducted by this author in Xamar Weyne, Mogadishu on 11 June 2024 for a forthcoming book chapter in the series, *The Laws of Yesterday's Wars*, edited by Dr Samuel White (Brill, 2025).

[7] Interview conducted by this author in Bondheere, Mogadishu on 11 June 2024 for a forthcoming book chapter in the series, *The Laws of Yesterday's Wars*, edited by Dr Samuel White (Brill, 2025).

[8] The proverb highlights the profound significance of words and speech within Somali culture, particularly in conflict. Words hold immense power and here it implies that verbal aggression can lead to real-life consequences, where a mere insult or false accusation can ignite conflict, much like an overt declaration of war. It reflects the value placed on respect, dignity, and honor in Somali culture, where insults can breach these values and escalate situations rapidly.

[9] Besides Islam and that which regulated by the religion, it is through the literary culture that morally and socially acceptable conduct is relayed, in every area of life.

[10] This must be recognized as it not merely an instrument furthering peace. For example, it may be used in the reviving of historical grievances or in fanning the flames of enmity between lineages and it can be employed to agitate past wounds which galvanize action or provoke retaliation.

[11] Shaciye TV, 'Shirib Hadaan ley dooran dagaal iyo waxaan ridaa' (YouTube, 21 February 2013) 00:00:00-00:02:45 <*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzBZkfB5SD0*>. Notice how Weershe offers both lamentations of violence and, paradoxically, instruments of pacification. In the poem, Weershe begins with threatening remarks reflecting frustration and the potential for violence but paradoxically shifts to repeatedly call for peace and pacification.

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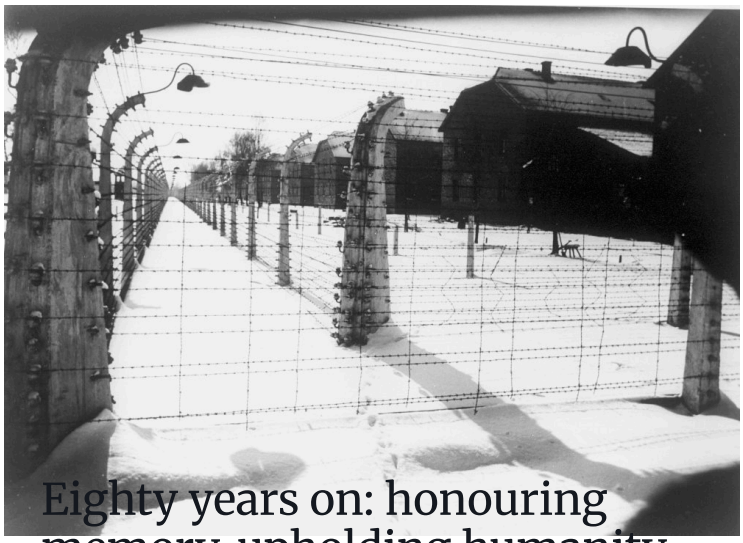

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