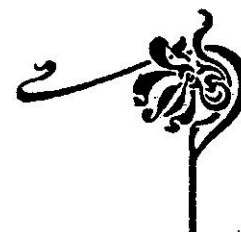
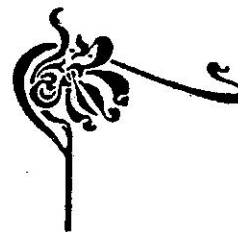


Memories to keep



Hootoksi Tyabji

Memories to keep

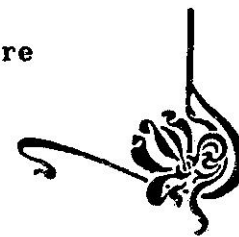
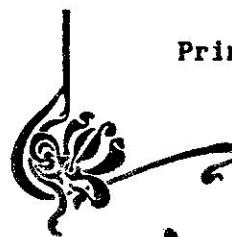


Memories to keep

by
Hootoksi Tyabji

Illustrations by
Ali Ahmed Hussein

Printed at Curriculum Development Centre
Mogadishu





Foreword

When humanity has visited the moon, it takes a good deal of imagination to predict what will happen in the years to come.

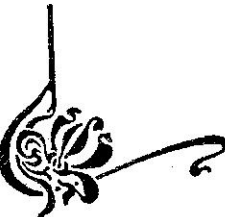
We must look into the future with hope and international good will. I believe that this world, as large as it seems, is really very small indeed. Modern technology has made this possible; but it is the spirit of man and an understanding of his diverse culture and ethnical characteristics, that makes it real.

I give my highest appreciation and regard to Hootoksi for the effort she has made to introduce our culture to seemingly foreign people. This endeavour is rare and the presentation of books such as this, especially for children, can forge the understanding I speak of.

On behalf of many Somali poets who are aware of this effort, I thank Hootoksi and Robert, who has encouraged her, and I hope there will be others like them to carry on this work.

Hassan Kayd

Col. Hassan Kayd (Retd)
Mogadishu
30 June 1988

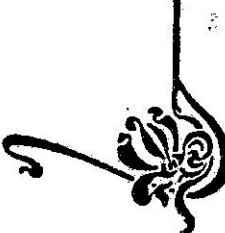


Preface

Children the world over speak a language all their own irrespective of race, tongue or creed. They always communicate well and know how to respect each other. Their ability to love and be loved, to laugh and to cry, to enjoy life to its fullest and live for the moment without a care for the past or a thought for the future, has inspired me to write these poems. In them I have tried to capture some of the nomadic child's lifestyle in Somalia.

These poems are dedicated to our boys Michel, Farhad and Adil, and all children who live the essentially nomadic way of the international civil service. As we move from one country and culture to the next, from one set of friends to another, and one school to yet another, I would like my boys to have this remembrance of our times in Somalia. Even if it is only a fleeting memory, we shall cherish and nurture it as we once again pack our goods and chattel to venture forth to new horizons....

Hootoksi Tyabji
Mogadishu, June 1988





Acknowledgements

Without drawings or pictures, few children's books are worth the paper they are printed on. My heartfelt thanks go to Ali who has so beautifully embellished my poetry with his art.

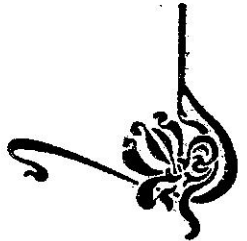
I would like to thank Madelaine and Hassan for extending their hand in friendship and for their patience with my endless questions, and my maid Muraya who spent many hours between chores telling me about nomadic life in her country.

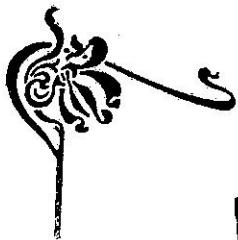
Lastly but most importantly, I thank my husband Robert for the visualization, layout and editing of this book. Without his support and encouragement this would have remained yet another idea in the archives of my mind.



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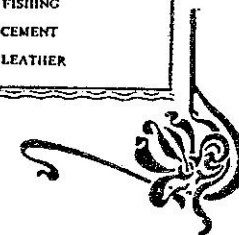
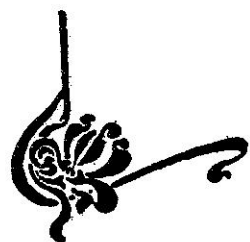
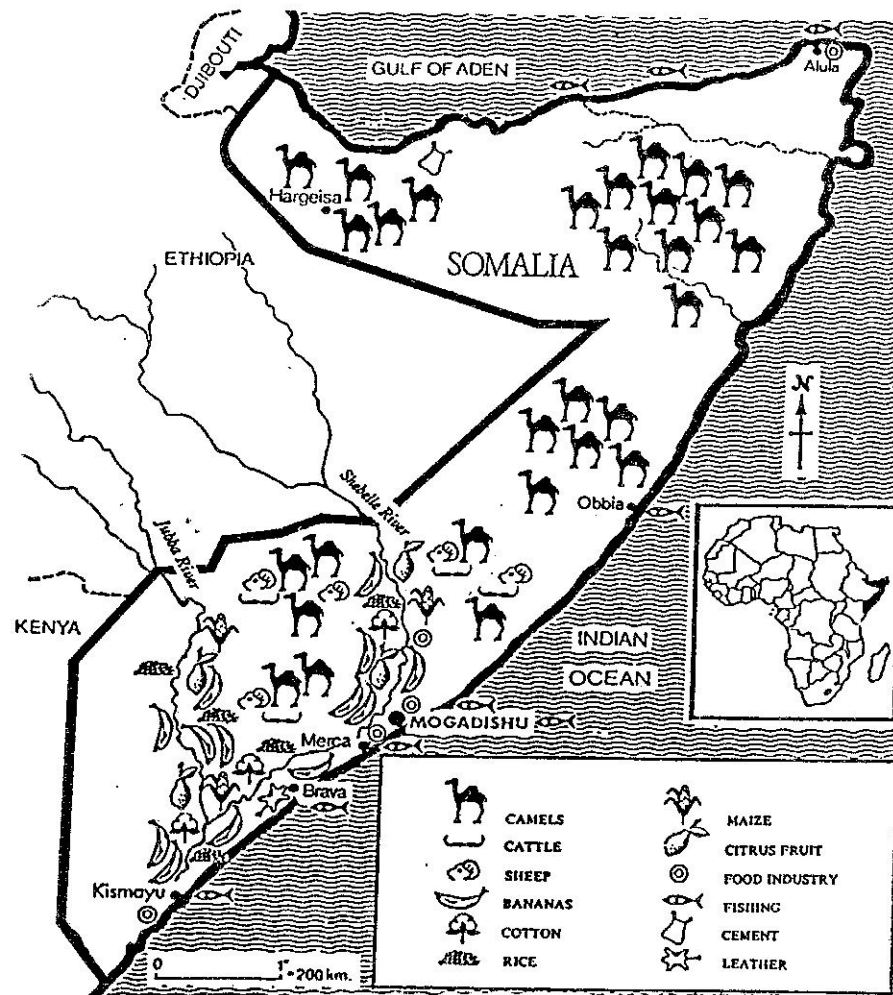
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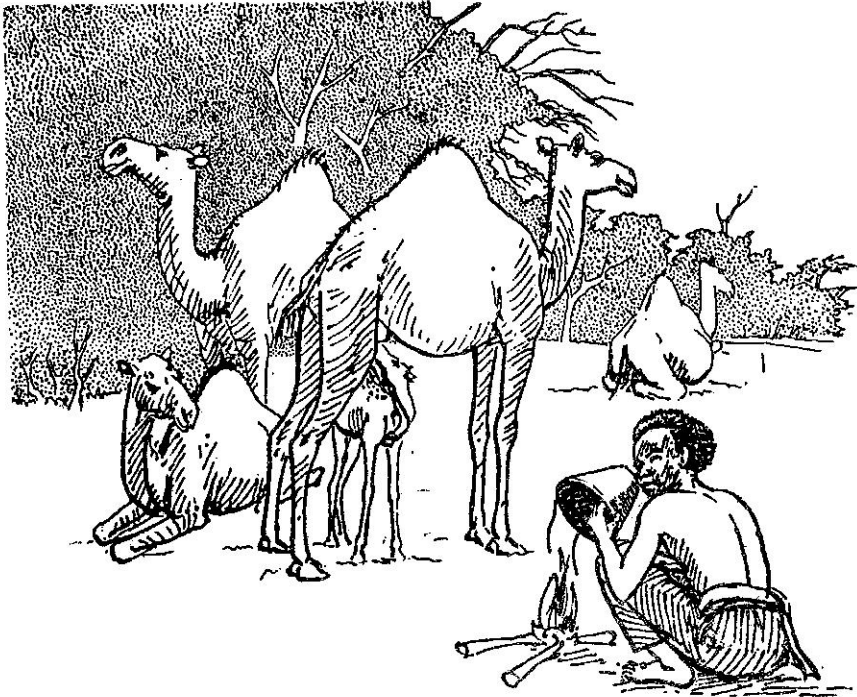
Do You Know?

Look at the map. Can you see how closely Somalia resembles a 7? Look at the coast-line. It is the longest of any country in Africa. Most of the land is sandy and covered with bush. The two main rivers are the Shabelli and the Juba. Maize, sugar cane, bananas and citrus fruits are grown on the fertile land between them.



There are no definite seasons like spring, summer or winter. It is mostly hot and dry throughout the year, though there are two rainy periods. *Gu* is the time of maximum rainfall when fresh grass for the animals abounds and the wells are full to the brim. *Dyer* is when it rains lightly, and *jilaal* is the dry season when the fierce heat of the sun burns the land and man and beast suffer the most intolerable hardships.

It is thought that there are more than 8 million people in Somalia. Nearly half of them are nomadic. They belong to clans who with their camels, cattle, goats and sheep, range far and wide in search of water and pasture. The rest of the people farm the land or live and work in towns.



Did you know that Somalia is the world's only nation of nomads? They live in dome shaped houses called *aqals*. These are built by the women, using materials found in the bush. The *aqal* is like a tent. It can be dismantled and packed away on the back of a camel to be moved to the next site. Only women and children sleep indoors. Men sleep under the stars! Nomads live mostly on camels' milk and meat. Can you guess which season they like best, and which they dread?



Most farming families live between the Shabelle and Juba rivers, where the soil is fertile and water is plentiful. Some own the farms, others do not. Most are very poor and often entire families are employed to work on large plantations. Children have to work very hard picking fruit or packing bananas, which are exported. Farming families live in huts made of wattle. These are not dome shaped like the *aqal* but circular with vertical walls and conical pointed roofs.

Most townspeople work for the government, or are traders. Mogadishu is the capital. It has many old buildings in the Arab style. These remind us that it was once a great trading port with ships calling from as far away as China. Did you know that most of the houses are built of coral?

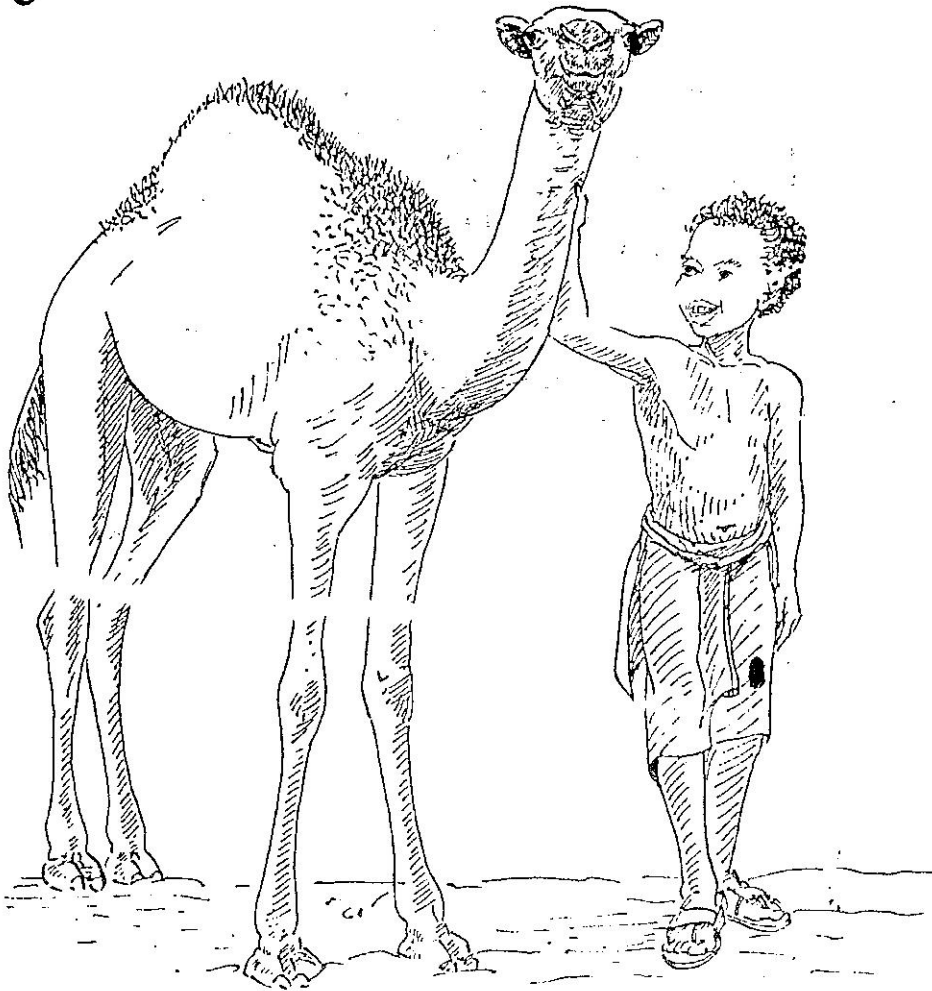
All Somalis follow the Muslim religion. Most children, even the nomadic ones, attend small Koranic schools to learn about religion and life.

All the people speak Somali, but only started to read and write it after 1972. This was when Somalia adopted the Roman script, which is the script used in English and many other languages. With knowledge of the basic rules, you too can learn to read and pronounce Somali words. Here's how. When you see c's, don't pronounce them. Example: Cali is read as Ali. When you see x's, pronounce them as h's. Example: Xassan is read as Hassan. See if you can read this: *Subax wanaagsan; maku hadashaa Ingiriis?* It means "good morning; do you speak English?"

The Somalis are well known for their poetry and people love to talk at length exchanging news and reciting poems. One of the best known and loved poets was Moxamed Cabdile Xasan. He was a fearless warrior who tried to drive the British from Somalia and later became a national hero. In Mogadishu, there is a statue of him riding his horse to battle. Here is a verse from one of his poems called *A Somali Journey* which he wrote for a nomad on the eve of his departure to Zanzibar

*On every side of you i now would place
Prayers from the Holy Koran to bless
your path*

*That ills may not descend nor evils harm,
And you may travel in the peace of faith*



Me and my Camel

Walking on through dust and heat,
Other nomads I might meet,
Oh! what a delightful treat
For me and my camel!

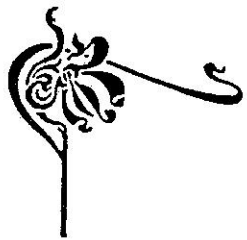
Today we passed the baobab,
Gnarled trunk just a stub,
Scratched our backs, rub, rub, rub,
Just me and my camel.

There I see a dik-dik run,
Chase it off, oh what fun!
Now the day is almost done
For me and my camel.

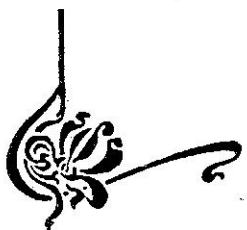
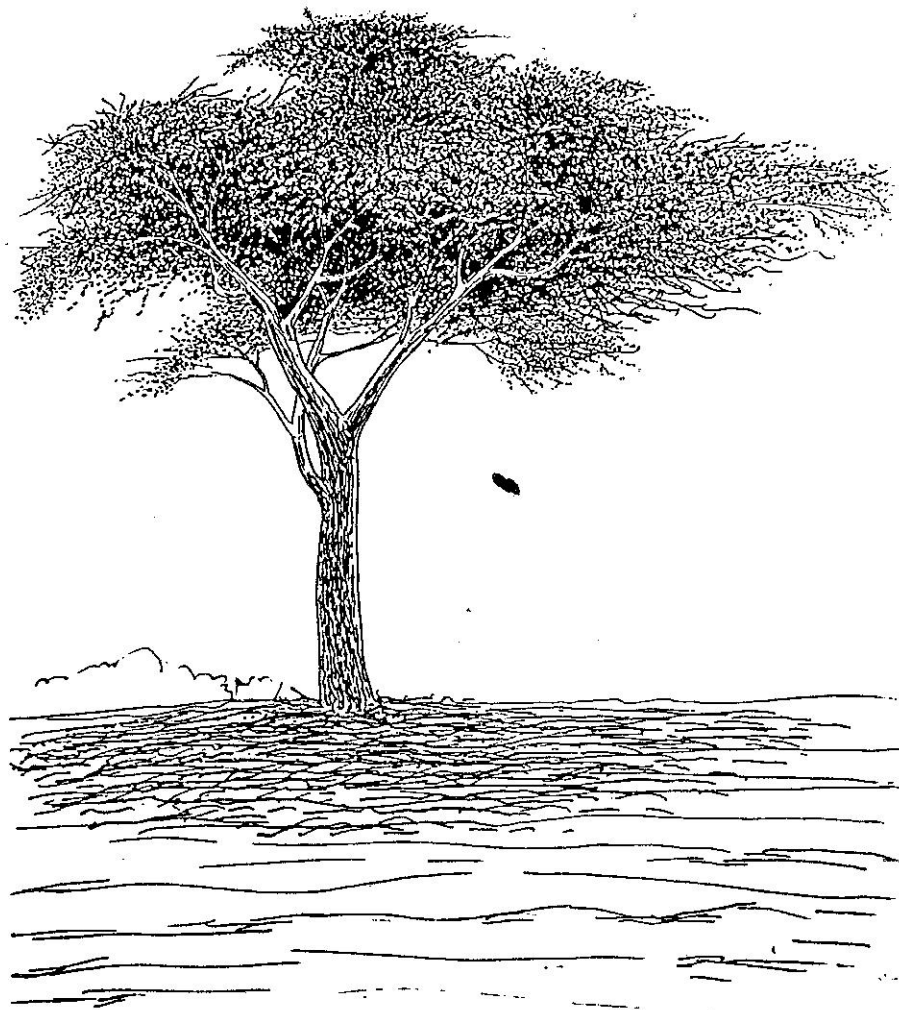
I am weary but I'm glad,
No time to be dull or sad
T'was a good day that we had!
Me and my camel.

*Among the nomads, the women and girls
look after the sheep and goats. Men and
young boys take care of cattle and camels.*

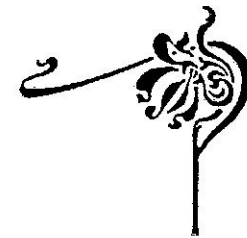
*The dik-dik is a tiny graceful and slender
horned antelope, commonly seen in the bush
throughout Somalia.*



8



The Acacia Tree



9

Have you seen the acacia tree?
Growing in the bush for me
Spreads her branches ever wide
Under her for shade I hide

Have you felt her thorny spikes?
Camels eat and really like
Acacia trees grow in the sand
Spread their branches through my land

Have you seen the acacia tree?
In the night she comforts me
I sleep under, she above
Protects me with her love

Have you ever tried counting the thorn trees you pass on a trip through the bush? A thorn tree is one of the species of acacia tree common throughout Africa. There are millions of these scattered all over Somalia. Have you ever studied one closely, or taken shelter under it from the sun or rain? It makes a wonderful roof for the nomad. The animals too are thankful for its protection, especially in the hottest part of the day. Camels eat its thorny leaves and the nomads use many parts of the tree to build their agals.





My House

My mother is so clever she,
Builds my house from a tree!
The *dhigo* curved and oh so strong
Hold up my house for very long.

Covered then with *caws* so fine,
The beautiful design on mine,
Was woven for *Hoyo* when she
Left her home and family.

Inside are mats from grasses made,
They wear so well and hardly fade,
My house I love and it can go
Where I want it to and so

When it is time to pack and leave,
We take it down and then we heave,
It on my camel's back. Look! see
My house goes everywhere with me.

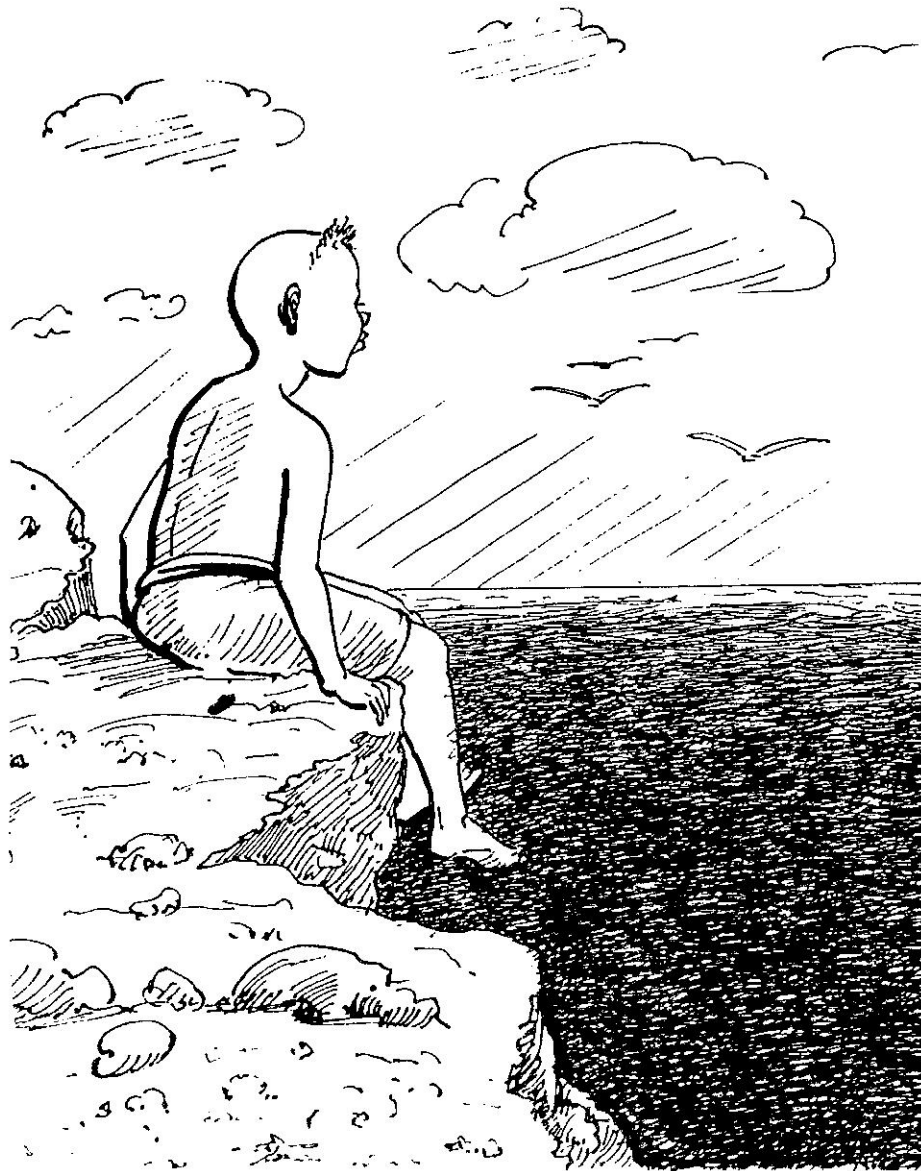
dhigo - wooden poles that make up the
frame of the house.

caws - mats

hoyo - mother

Wouldn't you like to live in a house
which you could pack and carry off with you
wherever you go? A nomad's aqal is dome
shaped like an Eskimo's igloo. Building it
is very hard work. First the poles or
dhigo for the frame are carefully
selected from the roots of the acacia tree.
Some must be long and thick, others short
and thin. Have you tried to bend a pole and
have it stay in that curved shape after you
let go? Each *dhigo* must keep its proper
shape. Women spend many days curving the
poles by a complicated process using ash
from the fire. Once the poles are ready the
mats that cover them are woven. They are
made from different grasses collected from
the bush. They are waterproof so that no
rain can get in.

The mats inside the house are used for
praying and sleeping. Nomads need no
furniture in the house.



The Sea

Blue sea, splashing waves,
Surf along the endless sand,
Treasures in her depths I know not,
Life I cannot understand.

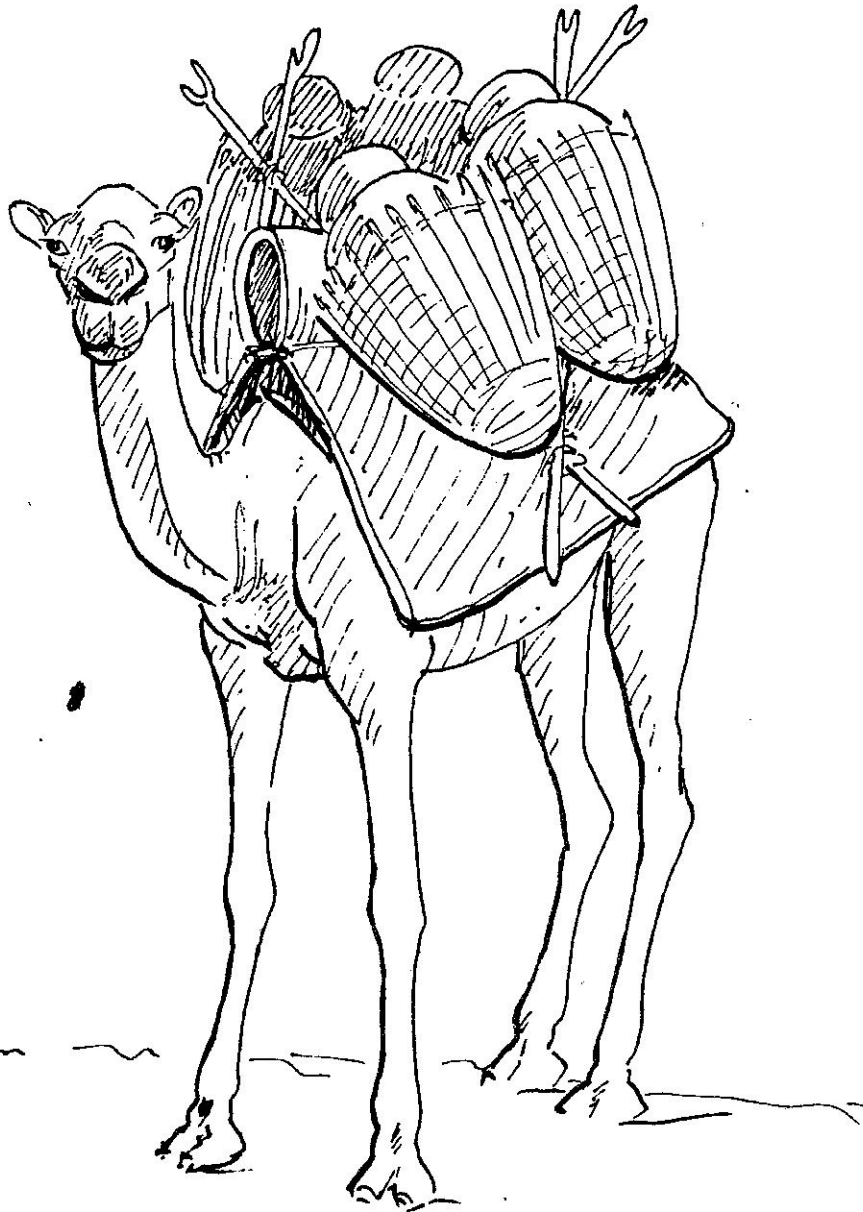
Fish of every size and colour
Hues that take my breath away!
Green plants, shells and little fishes,
Darting here and there to play.

All is peaceful calm and quiet,
Who rules waters of the sea?
Are there clans, do they fight battles?
It is all a mystery.

Out I gaze, the blue gets deeper,
How I love to watch the sea
She goes on forever sparkling
On into eternity!

Somalia has some of the most beautiful beaches I have ever seen and the waters of the Indian Ocean are especially blue and sparkling. Unfortunately there are many sharks near Mogadishu and it is extremely dangerous to swim.

Have you ever gazed out at the sea and wondered what treasures it hides? Or explored the tidal pools to find strange and wonderful creatures? You would see myriads of brilliantly coloured fish darting in and out of coral caves and crevices. What a wealth of life there is just waiting for you to discover!



To a Camel

Greetings to you my friend,
 Let me rub your back,
 For today we journey onwards,
 And on you we'll pack
 Things we own and love so dearly
 You will carry all,
 Carefully I'll lash them on you
 You're so big and tall!

First the *aqal* and the *dhigo*
haans on either side
 Important household bits and pieces
 On your back they'll ride.
 Now the load is tied securely
 And when it is done,
 You trudge on never complaining,
 Of your load, the sun.

You are all my wealth and comfort
 Walk along with me
 Through the bush the thorns and bramble,
 Tonight I'll set you free!

Haans - containers used for storing
 milk and water.

What is your most treasured possession?
 Is it a toy, a bicycle, a computer? If you
 asked a nomad, his answer would be "My
 camel, of course!" The nomad gets his food
 from it, he uses it to carry all his things
 and he raises herds which he can later sell.
 His whole life depends on his camels. Female
 camels are preferred because they provide
 milk. They are given names such as *Qooreas*
 meaning Red Neck, and *Xees*, meaning Light
 Coloured.



I Have a Dream

I have a dream...
 Every well and watering hole
 Is full upto the brim,
 Abo's camels, Hooyo's goats
 Are full and well and trim.

I have a dream...
 Every child in the bush
 Will learn to read and write
 So story books and history,
 Will constantly delight!

I have a dream...
 That pasture is a-plentiful
 And hearts are filled with joy
 So radiant smiles shine on the face
 Of every girl and boy!

Abo - Father
 Hooyo - Mother

A nomad's life is full of hardship. The family keeps moving from place to place in search of water and food for its animals. When there is no rain, the water holes run dry and many animals and people die.

In the bush there are no schools. Children learn about the Holy Koran in Koranic schools. Most have no other books to read and are not taught any of the interesting subjects you learn at school.

There are no hospitals and very few doctors in the bush. Sick people have to walk for miles to the nearest town to get medical attention.



A Bridal Gift

Now the fibers they are ready
Collected from the *galool* tree,
Tied in bundles waiting for
My other friends to join me.

I have tied the *kebad* between
Two poles, and the fibers dyed
Will soon form astounding patterns
This *kebad* is for a bride.

This *kebad* will be the finest,
For my child deserves the best,
While we weave my friends become
My sisters, and we reminisce.

And the work becomes much lighter
As the day melts into night,
Memories flash right through my mind
And I weave as they delight!

I recall your birth so well
That radiant smile and happy face!
As *Abo* held you in his arms
We thanked Allah for His grace.

Now my little one has blossomed
And you're off into the sun,
You will marry, make your own life
With Hassan, your chosen one.

As I finish off this *kebad*
Each knot that I tie with love,
Has a prayer and blessing woven
For protection from above.

galool - species of acacia tree
kebad - mat which forms outer cover for
the *aqal*.

Every nomadic woman wants to weave a
kebad for the marriage of her daughter.
This outer covering protects the *aqal* from
the rain and the sun, and the designs woven
into it are intricate and beautiful. The
kebad is woven from plant fiber which is
collected from the bush and prepared. The
weaving is done by about ten women, all
friends, and the few days spent together in
this way are a lot of fun! Many jokes are
shared and poems recited.



Dhig Dheer

Dhig Dheer was a cannibal
People were her food,
One ear lobe hung oh! so long
And she was ALWAYS rude!

Her nose was very sensitive,
She smelled you miles away
And people quaked in fear and hid,
Children could not play!

Her daughter was a kindly soul,
But what was she to do?
No one dared to visit her
And she nobody knew!

One fine day two nomad girls
In need of food and water,
Saw Dhig Dheer's hut and fortunately
Were met by her daughter.

She treated them most kindly
And served human ribs and meat,
Which tasted strange, they vomited,
"What is this meat we eat?"

She could not answer for she heard
Her mother coming back,
She quickly wrapped her guests in mats
And hid them in a sack.

"I smell young flesh" screeched Dhig
Dheer loud
Her daughter did reply,
"Mother dear, you smell the lady
Fresh in today's pie"

"I cannot stop, I've seen a boy
I simply have to eat!
His flesh hangs loose, it's tender, fat,
What a delightful treat!"

When she had gone the girls emerged,
And they resolved to kill
This cannibal, this Dhig Dheer who
Ate folks at her sweet will.

They hurriedly held a meeting
With the daughter and she said,
"If you can damage Dhig Dheer's ear
She might as well be dead!"

For that is where her power lies,
At night she's at her worst,
We'll put hot irons in her ear
If she doesn't smell us first!"

The girls poured blood over themselves
To take away their smell
As Dhig Dheer walked in through the door
They pushed her, and she fell.

Then quickly pushed a red hot iron
Into her ugly ear,
She cried to Satan for his help
He simply wouldn't hear.

She died that night, the sky was full
Of clouds, then came the thunder
And lightning like was never seen
Which made the people wonder.

They slowly ventured out and heard
That Dhig Dheer was no more
They cheered and sang, their land was safe
Safer than ever before!

Every country has its own favourite folk
tales and fables. In Somalia many of these
were not written down until very recently,
but were passed on orally from one
generation to the next.

This poem is based on a folk tale about
Dhig Dheer who is widely feared by little
children. When mothers want their naughty
children to behave, they call "Watch out, or
Dhig Dheer will come to get you!".

The Greedy Man

24

Have you heard this story
Of a very greedy man
Who ate and ate the whole day through
Believe it if you can!

He ate from wife and neighbour
He ate the village out,
And soon he couldn't fit through doors
For he was very stout!

He journeyed down to Merka
A nomad passing by,
Fed him well with goats and sheep
Then he began to cry.

"Oh, nomad friend, my plight is sad
I need a *sheikh's* advice,
For no food satisfies me well
Not camel, goat or rice.



My problem is my appetite
Do I eat like a bird?
The *sheikh* has special medicine
To satisfy, I've heard."

25

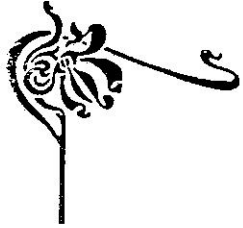
Now when the nomad realized
The greedy man's intent
He quickly packed up all his goods
And on his way he went

"Hey you! Stop, why hurry now?"
The fat man bellowed long,
"Come chat with me while I devour
Some food, you sing a song"

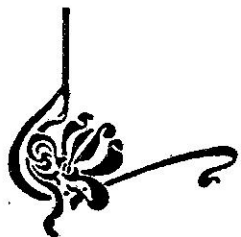
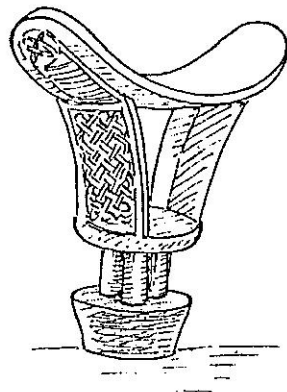
"Oh thank you for your kindness, sir"
The nomad did reply,
"But I don't want to be here when
You come passing by!"

Merka - a coastal town south of Mogadishu.
sheikh - a religious teacher and healer.

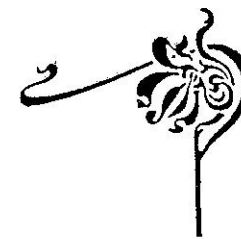
This poem is also based on a Somali folk tale. Why do you think the nomad wanted to get away from the fat and greedy man?



26



My Barkin



27

Lying on my *barkin* I am
Comfortable as can be,
See the sun, he just begins to
Raise his golden face for me.

All around the bush awakening,
Sounds of busy insects, birds,
And my *Abo* gathering all the
dheels and *haans* and camel herds.

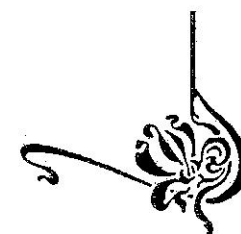
Now he comes to wake me, quickly,
Take my *barkin*, I must run,
Help my *Abo* herd his camels
Till the day is done.

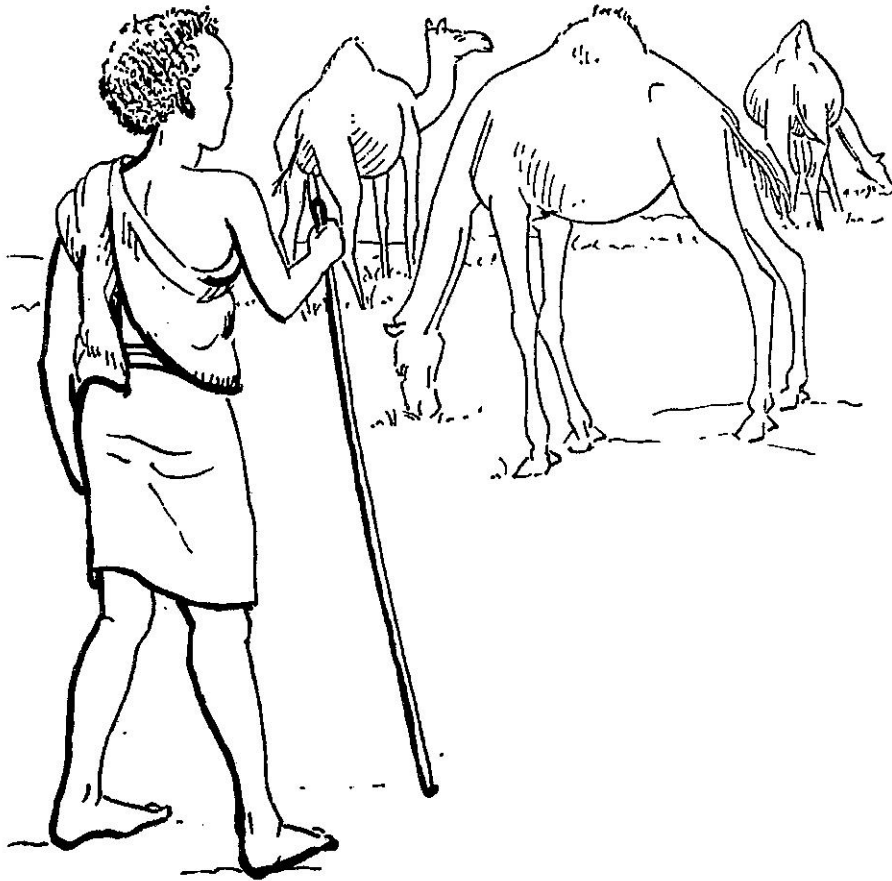
While I walk I often wonder
What lies there beyond the sand,
Could it be another planet,
Is it different from my land?

Nightfall slowly creeps upon us
On my *barkin* I will rest,
Picturing what lies beyond
This bush I know and love the best!

barkin - nomadic head rest

Have you ever tried to rest your head on a pillow made of wood? A *barkin* is made of wood and carved on both sides. Nomads say it protects them against snakes and scorpions. The unmarried ones use it to protect their elaborate hair styles. Would you like to try sleeping on one sometime?





Song of a Nomad Boy

I can choose to walk a mile,
I can choose to rest awhile
I can make another smile
I can wait patiently
Till a water hole I see!

I can choose not to eat,
Walk and walk until my feet
Cannot stand the sand and heat
I can choose the path I tread
Knowing not what lies ahead
I will live my life with joy
Glad to be a nomad boy!

Among the nomads, each member of the family is responsible for different chores. The women look after the sheep and goats, make and build the aqal, cook the food and fetch water. Men and young boys look after the camels. They do not sleep in the house with the women. When a father thinks his son is old enough to take care of the camels he is allowed to herd them on his own. This is an important day for the young boy.



The City or the Bush?

Did you hear that Adley talking
Of his visit to the city
Driving in a motor car,
Didn't use his legs, a pity!

He saw strange things all around him
Roads were long and black and smooth,
People bustled, jostled, hurried
Shouting, screaming, very rude!

Buses, cars, taxis moving,
Up and down in strange array,
He enjoys the city bustle
That is where he wants to stay.

He would like to take me with him
But I really could not go
This nomadic life sustains me
It's the only one I know!

In my mind an image always,
This land is the place I love
Camels, goats, and milk a-flowing
And my favourite baobab.

baobab - this tree has a very thick and gnarled trunk. At certain times of year it has beautiful pink flowers.

Many nomadic families are now moving into the large towns and cities because they imagine that life there is easier. Some are forced to leave the bush because of drought. If you were a nomad, where would you choose to live?



My Father Went a-Walking

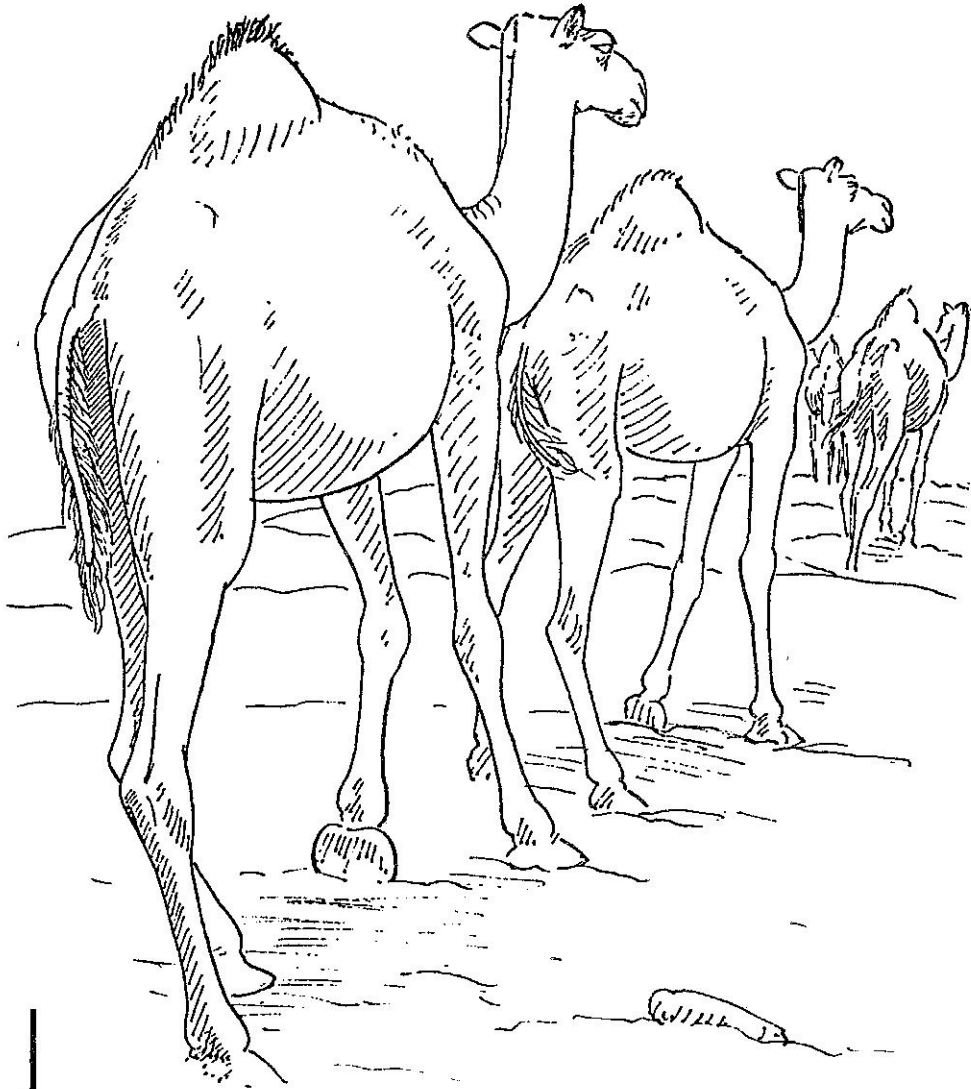
My father went a-walking,
A-walking through the sand
He took his herds of camel
Walked through his land.

My father went a-walking,
He stopped to take a rest
To water all his camel herds,
What a treat, the best!

My father went a-walking,
Stopped for a drink of tea
Exchanging news and chit-chat
To bring back home to me!

My father went a-walking,
With lilting step and laugh,
He is a vital link
In the bush telegraph.

In the bush there are no telephones, newspapers or magazines. But the nomads know what is happening not only in Somalia but in other parts of the world as well. How do you think they get this news? Iswaraisy or news exchange plays a very important part in the nomad's life. A traveller from a town carries news and passes it on as he travels along. The news moves so fast that it is called the bush telegraph. Because of this, there is a saying that in Somalia there is no secret!



Camels in the Sand

On a long and dusty road
Not a blade of grass,
Just a line right through the sand,
Watch the camels pass.

On and on for days they go
In the blazing sun,
Heads held high they look ahead,
Till the day is done.

Then they rest just for a while
As dawn lights up the land,
Endlessly they keep on walking,
Through the timeless sand.

*Have you ever driven through the bush?
You will have noticed that the scene was
much the same for miles on end, stretches of
land covered with thorn trees. Often, in the
hot sun, you would see a mirage and imagine
that the sea was just ahead. One of my
favourite memories of Somalia is this
picture I see before me of the bush with a
line of camels walking away into the
shimmering horizon.*



Hooyo, Abo, Leila and I
Were a happy family
We had our camels, goats and sheep
We roamed through bushland free!

My Abo was a clever man
He knew where we should go,
He knew the wells and watering holes
Where fresh pasture would grow.

My Hooyo was incredible
She cared for us so well,
We slept inside her *aqal* fine
Where many a story she'd tell.

Sometimes our neighbours lived close by
And sometimes far away,
We went to school, that was the rule
And there we learned to pray.

One day Abo left us alone
When it was hot and dry,
In the season of *jilaal* when water
is scarce
My sister began to cry.

For she was sick, her stomach hurt
She could not eat or drink
My Hooyo nursed her night and day
She didn't sleep a wink.

Now on the fifth day of her illness
Leila could barely talk
We packed our things and off we went
The witch doctor we sought.

We found him and we told our story
By the fire bright,
He looked at Leila, covered her eyes
And then gave me a fright.

For he began to brand her with
A flaming rod, she cried
I couldn't bear to see her pain
So I went off to hide.

The next day we set off again
Leila would be well,
The evil spirits that made her sick
Were burned away to hell.

Alas, t'was not to be, for soon
Leila got worse and worse
And no witch doctor could remove
This suffering, this curse.

We sent for Abo, he came quick
And held her to his breast,
Her smile filled him with happiness
She closed her eyes to rest.

She never woke up from her sleep
But lay peaceful and still
We buried her that afternoon
I knew t'was Allah's will.

In many parts of Africa, the witch doctor plays a very important role in the lives of the simple village folk. In Somalia people believe that some illnesses are caused by evil spirits which can be banished only by the witch doctor. Sometimes herbs and roots

of trees are used as remedies. Often a fierce dance or some other ritual like branding or drinking the blood of a freshly slaughtered goat is believed to restore the patient's health. These remedies may cure some ailments but often they do more harm than good. But for the family living in the bush, a witch doctor is often the only person to bring relief and comfort as medical doctors are scarce.

In this poem the little boy loses his sister whom he loves very much. He feels sad, but he has been taught to accept as the will of God whatever life brings. You may have heard people say "Insha Allah", which means "if God wills it". This helps to make bearable every tragedy or failure.



Hope

T'was in the season of *jilaal*
 When times are hard for man and beast
 And water holes are but a few
 And pasture doesn't grow anew.

We'd walk for miles, Abo and I
 Our feet were sore and scratched
 with thorns,
 And as the sun would leave the sky,
 Another of our camels die.

Undaunted, on and on we go
 From one dry well to watering hole
 On the horizon, an endless row
 Of herders with their beasts in tow.

No sign of rain, no clouds in sight
 Our families waited silently,
 Their prayers so fervent, no respite
 It's dry, it's hot, day and night.

Hunger, fatigue, throats so parched
 The land burned, the cracks showed deep
 And patiently we searched, we marched,
 With heavy step and backs arched.

Another step I could not take.
 My father rocked me in his arms
 And softly whispered as he spoke,
 My strength renewed by his hope.

*Can anyone live for long without water?
 Drought causes great misery and suffering in
 Somalia. Entire herds of cattle and many
 nomads die, yet life is faced with courage
 and hope.*