

The Musings of a Harari on Harari things:
A public conversation with Hararis

August 2022

I had the opportunity to watch the film, *Faya Dayi*, with my mother. It's a movie situated in Harar, Ethiopia, attempting to present a unique glimpse into the life of a denizen of the Harari region. It's a movie with subtitles.

My mother, having been born in the city of Harar—raised equal parts in Harar and Dire Dawa and regularly frequenting Addis Ababa, all major cities in Ethiopia—had no need for subtitles, or so we thought. Myself, I definitely needed the subtitles!

As the movie progressed, we got to a point where my mother didn't recognize what was being said, and so I read the subtitles and translated it for her into Harari.

Mid-translation, my mother exclaimed, "wahy, wahy, he's speaking in Harari." We both began to listen carefully. To our amazement, he was speaking Harari, but with a peculiar accent and awkward cadence that made it difficult to immediately recognize. Eventually, our ears would adjust and we began to better hear his "Harari."

While most of the reviews for this film, that I've seen, have been positive, they've also all been written by non-Hararis. As the filmmaker, Jessica Beshir, sets out to tell a specific story, I, with all the hubris I can muster, hope to offer the rare Harari perspective.

Just like the young boy's "Harari," I found the film a garbled up distortion of what Harar truly is—or, at least, what it was. This is less a critique of Beshir but rather more of a commentary on the current state of Harar and who gets to tell its story.

The film is shown in black and white but wades through the greys. It blurs the lines between fantasy and real, stillness and motion, country and city, sinful and pious, Oromo and Harari, black and white, high and sober—the boundaries have been broken and one creeps into the other's domain.

An ostensibly devout man carefully dons his costume and recites religious passages but also sings love songs; the non-stop cha't (qat) industry in the countryside is juxtaposed to the once bustling city that has been halted by its addiction to and abuse of the same plant; the Harari speaking characters do not sound Harari. These paradoxical binaries are abound in the film.

For most people watching this film, where I suspect the intended audience is in the "West," the takeaway is the angst of young Ethiopians, afforded an opportunity to directly tell their stories, unencumbered by experts' interpretations of complex matters, stripped away of color and clamour, literally and figuratively: the young are in search of work, love, family, escape, worship, and how the local "drug" problem, cha't, cuts through it all. A foreigner might see these local expressions of universal human experiences as the true story of Hararis.

The astute observer, with adjusted ears and familiarity with Ethiopia's cadence, will notice the political undertones of the film. Although the film was shot in the Harari region, an ethnically diverse region with Oromos making up the largest population, the focus was on Oromos with some brief interactions with Hararis.

Effectively, this is an Oromo film and an Oromo narrative. The socioeconomic angsts are probably common across the Oromo region if not most of Ethiopia and it would have been impossible not to include the political frustrations of the Oromo subjects in the film.

However, since the backdrop to the film was Harar, I was acutely curious to see how Harar and Hararis might be portrayed. Were we central to the story, in the background, or a prop?

With the boundaries blurred, our inclusion was imperceptible. We were bystanders who would fleetingly come in and out of focus by way of songs and language and story that paradoxically did not sound like Harari.

I couldn't tell if this was to give homage to Hararis or legitimize the film's being situated in Harar.

While this question remains to be answered I want to revisit a question I alluded to earlier: who gets to tell Harar's story?

The most persistent subject of the film was cha't; the second was the story of Aw Zul-Qarnayn, the film's alleged founder of cha't. This was supposed to be a Harari folktale. Yet, I couldn't recognize it as a Harari story.

I know of Dhu al-Qarnayn and the other elements that were drawn from the Islamic scriptures and traditions—whom the faithful perceive as sacrosanct—used to cobble together this film's folktale. But, I thought, such a distortion would belie Harar's Islamic prestige.

I went searching for answers. I asked a few Hararis of all ages, between 30 to 80 years old, what they know of Aw Zul-Qarnayn and cha't. I rummaged through decades old boxes of an anthropologist's field notes and found a hand written loose sheet of paper on this same subject. I perused through books and papers on the subject of cha't. Nothing matched the story in the film!

Instead, I'd eventually stumble onto a famous local curator of Harari mythology, Abdulmuhaymin Abdulnasir, who took pains to make clear that Dhu al-Qarnayn was different from his Harari namesake, who have now been clumsily merged.

So, I come back to that nagging question: who gets to tell Harar's story? Has Bashir really captured a snapshot of what Harar is, or has become, or is becoming? Or is she contributing to shaping what it will become? And to what end?

The characters in Faya Dayi—and Harar, for that matter—are victims of their circumstances, victims of cha't and now victims to the gaze of the "West" as this version of their story is told and commodified to provide the viewer a vicarious high.

Who gets to tell Harar's story?

In 2015, James Jeffrey wrote for CNN, "Harar unchanged: Inside Ethiopia's timeless city of mosques." It was a wonderful piece brimming with praise for Harar. The way he described Harar made it sound like an immutable city forever captured like an inclusion inside amber. It was a great article; who could find any fault in it? Yet, every Harari I know who's revisited Harar in the last couple of decades always laments at all the changes they see.

Who gets to tell Harar's story?

Earlier this year the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto held their recurring "Hidden Stories Symposium" (a fitting name) where one of the stories showcased was the Harari manuscript tradition. It was a brilliant presentation and I couldn't be more pleased with Harari art and culture being celebrated and shared with the world.

While I can't fault the celebration of Harari culture, especially when done so well, I also can't help but wonder why Hararis are being celebrated in absentia. I only heard about this event after the fact and I don't believe any real attempts by the museum were made to invite Hararis.

It shouldn't be a foreign idea—"nothing about us without us." This raises the question: for whom are these stories being curated? And of course...

Who gets to tell Harar's story?

Yebo, a self-described Pan-African media agency, in speaking about Harar reduces it to "the emperor's backyard"; the head of social media for the UN Environment Program calls one of the Harari gates by its Amharaized name; a book titled "Invention of Ethiopia" effectively erases Hararis from Ethiopia's story; the Prime Minister of Ethiopia makes a menacing message to some unidentified Hararis abroad but instead of calling them *Hararis* he calls them by the exonym, and now pejorative, *Adere*. (He's notably eschewed uttering our proper name, Harari, when publicly asked about our case, save that one time he visited Harar just before becoming Prime Minister while he was courting support).

There are so many more examples; too many to list. And so much to be said about each one. Some are innocent and at times silly mistakes. Some are not.

Under imperial Ethiopia, our voices were muzzled. Today, it's being drowned out.

Who gets to tell Harar's story?

Is it local tourist guides who spin yarn for their unsuspecting adventurers, academics for their dissertations, journalists for a story, the tourist bureau who need to attract visitors, Hararis in the diaspora that haven't visited in a long time, politicians for political ends, the local quasi-religious folk or custodians of tombs high off their cha't...?

What if a non-Harari tells a good Harari story? What if a Harari tells a bad one?

I don't know if it's practical, or even desirable, to categorically bar whole groups of people from participating in Harar's storytelling. But when they fail to tread carefully, or are found trespassing they should be called out.

It's also worth noting there isn't one single Harari narrative. We have a myriad of voices and different perspectives amongst ourselves. But we also have the ability to self-regulate, self-correct. There are internal controls. Or, at least, there were.

Faya Dayi, as far as I can tell, intended to highlight specific issues in Harar: the hopes and dreams of despairing Oromo youth, the socioeconomic dependency on cha't and its ravages on the local populace. For me, it unwittingly exposed a completely different issue:

Who gets to tell Harar's story?

Not unlike Marshall McLuhan's global village, there is a global Harari community—dare I say a global Jugal (Jugal is the wall that defines the city of Harar). In fact, due to forced displacement, there are more Hararis outside of Harar than inside.

Harariach United, an online group (Instagram/Snapchat) of young Hararis, for a moment, tapped into this global community and gave it voice. I thought it was a fantastic initiative, although incomplete. The voices of elders were considerably less pronounced, naturally, in this online space, however.

There are new online (YouTube) Harari media channels cropping up, trying to find their voice too in this ever so fluctuating landscape. They're mostly occupied by the "middle aged," closer to the latter part of the age spectrum.

While the cacophony of *other* voices try to define and redefine Harar and Harari's past, present and future, it's important we lay our claim and fiercely, and unapologetically, tell our own stories. And we should be careful not to be caught flat footed or found wanting.

There's immense power in telling a story. Words have power. I don't expect others to relinquish this power. Therefore, more Hararis should start reclaiming this power. We should harness this power. We should tell more stories and listen to more stories. In particular, we should also empower our elders and breathe life to their stories.

Ultimately, if we aren't telling our own stories, others will tell them for us. And if those who are capable of telling good stories don't, then we'll be left with the alternatives.

So, pick up a pen, grab a microphone, bend an ear... go tell a story, and make it a good one.

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