Summer of 2025 in a Toronto Park
The Extended Family Gathering – the Jeddawis

The sun was warm on our faces in the community park for "Introductory Roots Day." The air was a mix of grilled spices, aromatic Harar foods, and sweet cakes from many *Jeddawi* families in Toronto. Each family or group of friends sat under a shade, be it for '*Bercha*' or ladies chatting, chanting, singing and catching up with relatives and life stories, especially talking about diaspora born children and how to make connections, as well as keeping the family ties, and not to forget that our identity goes back to the roots in Harar, Ethiopia.

We began in a large circle in a park, and a microphone was passed around.

"Let's share," said Gesi Bedri, the master of ceremonies. "As the proverb goes, *'A tree without roots is just a piece of wood.'* Let us remember our roots. Tell us where your family is from and a special memory, if any."

The elders' faces glowed. Brother Kamil spoke of the friendly Hyenas in the hills of Harar. Gesi Abdurahman remarked on the interplay of the swift snatches of eagles in the big meat market of Harar, and Gesti Niyya described the smell of rain in Jugol, "the smell of life." But when the mic reached the youth, the mood shifted. A teen named Mahir shrugged. "Yeah, my mom made me come." His friend Mohammed giggled, "I'm just here for the food." I saw the elders' smiles fade. The connection felt thin, and Amir thought of another saying: *'When an elder dies, a library burns to the ground.'* In fact, we are risking countless libraries.

After the circle, we found Gesti Rahma under an oak tree, with a beautiful, embroidered hat, Kofia (or Ge'ye Keloyta) on her lap. "I made this for my son," she said, tracing the patterns. "Each color a different hope. It is a language. And we are becoming illiterate." *'Knowledge that is not passed on is like a sealed treasure chest, full of value, but useless to others.'*

Her son Hassan walked over. "Mom! Tell us the story of Harari Kofiya?" He hugged her.

She swatted him playfully. "It is history. You look at your phone. That is fine. But the Kofiya is made from the heart. *'The old horse knows the way,'* but you must be willing to follow."

Her talk on the meanings woven into the Kofiya (the traditional Harari cap) was both captivating and enlightening. The intricate patterns and vibrant colours tell a rich story of identity, faith, and community. Here is a summary of her insights.

1. *A Unified Cultural System:* The Kofiya is not an isolated item but part of an integrated dress system that includes attire, ladies' trousers, and even domestic crafts like *mottach* (baskets). This stylistic unity reinforces Harari's cultural identity.
2. *Symbolism in Stitch and Colour:* The fine geometric embroidery is a distinct Harari hallmark. Common patterns, such as the diamond (or tablet), may symbolize protection and community, while the radiating design on the crown often suggests a central focus, such as faith or family. Vibrant colours typically denote festive wear or special status.

3. *Spiritual and Social Significance:* As an Islamic head covering, the Kofiya expresses modesty, respect, and religious identity. Socially, it is integral to ceremonies and daily life, with specific caps worn for weddings and other occasions, blending unique Harari heritage with Islamic tradition.

What a lesson! Historical and cultural insights! After learning these, then, Ahmed became serious. "I know. But we hear the words and miss the music. *'To know the road ahead, ask those coming back,' but sometimes the road back feels so far away."* Referring to losing a language means losing the roadmap of the culture!

Later, at the picnic tables, Gesi Murad and Gesti Nunn served food; most of the families brought assorted food, including *Hulbat, Halawa, Mushabak,* rice, and others. "In Harar, said a newcomer to Toronto, Zahida, my mother sang while cooking a traditional dish. Here, I find the spices, but not the song. The taste is lonely, yet it hits with an amazing impact." Adding, *'You can't buy at the market what grows in your garden.'* Wow, a deep adage.

Gesti Maya nodded. "Online recipes are just a list. They don't tell me who laughed in the kitchen." *'A recipe has no soul. You, as the cook, must bring soul to the recipe,'* agreeing with Zahida. "That's it!" the organizer said. "We're losing the *heart*. The 'why.' *'A people without the knowledge of their history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.'"*

Uncle Hassan spoke firmly. "The young don't listen. They don't respect the old ways. *'If the calf is full of milk, it will not suckle.'* They are full of new things and forget the old." He looked at a group of boys and girls.

Layla, a girl with blue lines in her hair, heard him. "It's not about disrespect," she said, her voice respectful but firm. "It's about belonging to two worlds. *'A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking because its trust is not in the branch but in its own wings.'* You ask me to trust the branch, but you also taught me to use my wings. How can I embrace a heritage that doesn't seem to want to embrace *me when I have grown in a foreign land*?"

The air went still. Ouma Maymuna looked from Uncle Hassan to Layla. "The cloth changes, but the thread is strong," she said softly. *'A single thread may be weak, but woven with others, it becomes strong.'* "Your blue hair is bright, like my rebel sister's thread. It is part of the pattern." And your anger, she said to Uncle Hassan, "is a thread of fear. *'Fear is the glue that keeps you stuck. Faith is the solvent that sets you free.'* Pulling too tight will snap it. We must weave with care." A reflection on some misunderstandings and disconnections between the diaspora kids and their parents.

The tension broke. Then, looking at the mix of eager and hesitant faces, Hakim had an idea. "Who's up for volleyball? *'You can't cross a river without getting wet!'* Let's play!" He ran to set up a net on the field. Some boys and girls helped him out.

His friends agreed, relieved for action. The elders initially hesitated. "*For young bones*," Gesti Maya chuckled. *'No matter how tall the tree, it grew from a small seed.'* We were all young once."

The game started with just the youth. It was awkward and hilarious. From their blankets and seats, the elders watched. They saw Layla set up a spike for Ahmed. They saw Mohammed laugh as he tripped. They weren't just "disrespectful youth" anymore; they were kids full of life, working as a team.

Gesi Towfek nodded. "Look at them. *'The young cannot teach tradition to the old, but they can add new rhythms to the old song.'"* Strikingly, the old are missing out on teaching the young the Harari language, and this was visible and felt in the park!

A volleyball sailed wildly and landed near Gesti Muna. Amir jogged over. "Kaka Hassan, come on! We need a real server!" Hassan stood, a boastful glint in his eye. *'An old gem may be found in a new setting,'* he said. "*I was the champion of my High School team*!"

Inspired, Maya ran to Auntie Lula. "*Ekhista*, you can be on our team and just stand in the back! Be our specialist!" Soon, the teams were wonderfully mixed. Uncle Hassan was paired with Layla. He surprised everyone with a fierce spike. "I played for my high School team!" he declared again. The young looked at him with awe, not wariness.

The game was chaotic and joyful. The young dove and scrambled. The old strategized and placed careful shots. Auntie Lula cheered from the back line. Ahmed high-fived Murad. The playfield became a perfect, wordless conversation. They were building a new memory, right there in the park, proving that *'those who play together, stay together.'*

When the game ended, everyone collapsed on the grass, breathless and smiling. The barriers were gone. Layla brought water to Uncle Hassan. "*You were amazing!"* He beamed with pride.

As the sun began to set, the organizers called it a day of memory. All the families cheered on, and new acquaintances exchanged contacts. The organizers held it tight. It was more than a thread. It was a story. The awkward circle had shown us the gap. The conversations and the volleyball game had built a bridge across it. We were all gardeners, and as the African proverb says, *'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'* Together, we had watered our living heritage with shared stories and new joy, ensuring it would go far. Wished all the families well, and we will meet again next year, Insha'Allah.

All these reminded me of my father's powerful quote on nurturing and preserving home characteristics.

It is the awakening
in the inner depth of the heart
that awakens the realms of appreciation of own strength and values.
Both ignorance of own cultural values
and the veneer of modern cultural civilization
enslave the mind.
Do not be your own cultural destruction guide.
Set aside assumptions, personal baggage, and skirmishes
Come together to bond and uphold Harar's footprints!

Hope there is a takeaway for everyone and encourage others to do the same; a yearly gathering, and share a story, if you happen to have one. Insha'Allah, see you next year for another Harari story and connections!

By Professor Abdi Khalil, 9 October 2025