

A letter from Jamaame

Jamaame¹: the breadbasket of Lower Jubba, Somalia, is now a bread case, a worn out bread case with many holes. The ex-Margherita² appears to be isolated and numb. Araara Bridge³ is blown up and the main road to the town is almost impassable.

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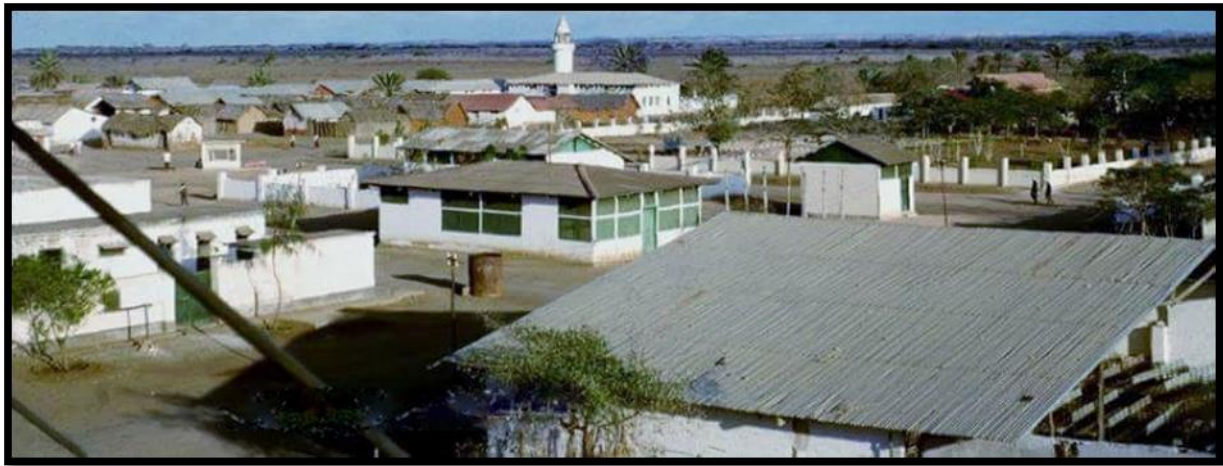


Figure 1: View of the Italian built part of the town. Government offices and the cinema. Circa 1960s.

The appearance of the town has completely changed. I cannot recognise the Jamaame I had known. I cannot believe that this is Jamaame, the vibrant town which used to be full of vitality with organised chaos and cultural evenings of (Anyagow, Masawey, Tumburo, Kabeebey, Shabaay, and Saar)⁴. Fig 2. Few people are strolling aimlessly on the main road to the main mosque. The cinema building and the commissioner's house lay in ruins, and so are many other important government offices and landmarks. Derelict and dilapidated. The only asphalted road in the town seems to have narrowed in width with potholes, mud covered sections and waterlogged

¹ The Name was Chiamama, a Mushunguli word for a beautiful, fragrant flower produced by shrubs found in the swamps around the town.

² The Italian colonial administration gave Jamaame the name Margherita. Named after Princess Margherita of Savoy (Margherita Maria Teresa Giovanna; 20 November 1851 – 4 January 1926). She was the Queen consort of the Kingdom of Italy during the reign (1878–1900) of her husband, Umberto I.

³ Built by Antonio Badoni S.p.A in the 1930s, worldwide engineering company. It had built the Posphorus Bridge in Turkey, a series of bridges on the river Po and autostrada A1 in Italy and many more historic buildings and structures.

⁴ Different folklore dances of Gosha and pastoralist communities of Lower Jubba.

segments. Devastated and very depressing sight. A sight which has left a very painful feeling in my stomach during my entire trip in this once beautiful, fascinating, and remarkable town (Fig 1) with its well renowned tolerance, clan diversity, and unity as one harmonious community: a microcosm of the Somali nation before the continual clan violence.

Few cafes and shops along the road are open for trade. Few customers are lazily enquiring about prices of items in the shops and few customers are ordering food hesitantly in the cafes. Shop owners and waiters in the restaurants seem to be



Figure 2: Masawey dancers performing in Sunguni, a farming village on the equator near Jamaame.

dillydallying when serving customers. Life seems to be very stagnant and bone idle. It really is a dreary, tired old town. One can feel that many of its residents are in a state bordering on destitution. The long destructive internecine war in the 1990s has taken its toll on Jamaame more than on most of the other districts in Somalia.

In the 1960s and 1970s the town used to boast a number of schools, mainly elementary and intermediate. Fig 3. The medium was English as well as Arabic. Schools were under the managements of a Mennonite Mission from North America and that of Al-Azhar Foundation of Egypt. There were also adult classes in Italian in the evenings funded by the Italian consulate in Kismayo. The North American charity was running the English medium boarding school. Some non-boarders were also admitted. The Arabic medium Al-Azhar school was a favourite for the religiously devout families in the town. The sight of hordes of students with distinctive and colourful uniforms streaming to and from schools used to be one of the characteristics of the town. There is hardly any sign of that now. You can see only Quranic schools in the middle of (Buulo Dabadheer, Dhasheeg Dabeel and Buulo

Qodaxleey)⁵ but formal schooling is almost non-existent. The sad thing is generations of Jamaamans schooled here are now in every corner of the world. These are medical doctors, engineers, teachers, agronomists, veterinarians, economists, politicians and business men and women. If only they would start to put something back to their community.



Figure 3: The white building at the far right side of the picture next to the silos was the state comprehensive school.

The civil war has laid waste a resource rich town with huge potential in farming and animal husbandry. Juba River and its oxbow lake, Webi Urow, are less than 2 km away from the town. Surrounded with the most fertile land in Jubba valley, thousands of hectares of agricultural land are under-cultivated and remain unproductive. Subsistent farmers are struggling to feed their families let alone produce the surplus that this town had once been renowned for. Note that the centre for banana export from Jubba plantations to Italy and Middle East was in Jamaame. Now these plantations are mostly abandoned.

One morning, in dawn, I sauntered to Lokoneh⁶. I was enthralled by the natural scenery, beauty and luxuriant vegetation along the banks of the river. I am sure Baambila⁷ and Cismaan Moota⁸ could also be as verdant. Fig 5.

However, there were no swimmers and no mothers to do their weekly laundry on the banks. There were no students who used to come here on Friday picnics. The whole area looked like a ghost settlement. The cable boat for crossing and its attendant were at the other side of the river. He waved for me to ensure if I wanted to cross. I waved back with a hand signal to say no. He meandered slothfully and disappeared into the canopy of the giant mango trees laden with shining and colourful fruits. Those were all the varieties of Jubba mangoes: Dhoocho, Booribo, Shuunshuunle, Buruqle, Sacfaraan, Maqaar-geel, etc. I could see that a significant number of old

⁵ Three neighbouring sections of the town.

⁶ A spot at the bank of the river for crossings and for watering livestock.

⁷ A farming village and a river crossing area.

⁸ A farming village and a river crossing close to Jamaame.

stout mango trees along the banks had fallen into the river. Many others were cut for charcoal by marauding militias from different warring factions who had been terrorising the peace loving farming communities in all these localities.

With a friend, I decided to pay a visit to Maana Mofo village of Sheikh Murjaan and Beled Raxmo village of Sheikh Farxaan religious communes, both of which are on the west bank of Jubba river. I can vividly remember how disciples in both Sheikh Murjaan and Sheikh Farxaan communes had practised meditation and contemplation of Allah through *dikri*⁹. I used to admire their *dikri* ceremonies when trying to reach religious ecstasy in an astonishingly synchronised body movements and pleasing orations. Different fraternal orders such as Qadiria, Axmedia, and Saalixia congregated twice or more annually in order to engage in a variety of ritual practices intended to help them realise union with Allah: beautiful, melodic and very hypnotic recitations of *dikri* and salutations for the prophet, his companions and ancient Muslim saints.



Figure 4a: Araara Bridge built by Antonio Badoni SpA in the 1930s. Now it is totally destroyed.



Figure 4: The main mosque of the town.

Now. No *dikri*. No communal gatherings. No ziyaro¹⁰. And no shrines. All the shrines in Maana Mofo and Beled Raxmo were obliterated beyond recognition. Some stray dogs and few cows were basking on the ruins. Walking on a narrow footpath through the rubble of the shrine of Sheikh Murjaan, I nearly stepped on a large stool of cow dung. Beetles and large flies swarmed out of the excrement. My friend carefully stepped over it. An indigenous sweet old lady, under a Mukay¹¹ tree just opposite her house, greeted us with sincere affection and genuine *Reer Goleed*¹² hospitality. ‘Hadhawaada he.’ This means you are very welcome here, feel at home. She was

⁹ *Dikri* literally means remembrance.

¹⁰ Visits to shrines.

¹¹ A giant semi tropical tree.

¹² A confederation of Somali clans, mainly from Somali ‘Bantu’.

carrying bunches of freshly picked ambooga¹³ in an old plastic bag. I know how succulent, delicious and nutritious a salad can be made of this humble, ubiquitous and wild herb. She volunteered to give us some water. We were grateful for the cold drinking water on that hot and humid Maana Mofo afternoon.

One thing which has inspired me during my stay in the town was the profound sense of community evident in the neighbourhoods. That concept of Reer¹⁴ Jamaame is very much alive and thriving. Families who are not that fortunate to receive remittances from overseas or don't have regular income are now and then supported by those neighbours who are relatively better off.

As we were waiting for the boat, the smell of the wet alluvial soil on the river banks, the scent of wood smoke coming from kitchens in the village and the aroma of some wild flowers evoked quite archaic emotions and sweet nostalgic memories of my childhood. The coolness of the mango forest (Jiimo) and its gentle aromatic odour gave me an exquisite sense of deep tranquillity and belonging.



Figure 5: Aerial view of Jamaame. Webi Urow, the oxbow lake can be seen on the left of the photo.

My friend and I strolled back to Jamaame after crossing the river on the cable boat. The seemingly endless vacuity and desolation between Mana Mofo and Jamaame was both striking and dismal. Silence is broken only by rustling of dry grasses and the leaves of mango trees, and the occasional screeches of monkeys and baboons on the trees. We passed through Shaambukey¹⁵, deserted and dusty, just before Maghreb prayers. Few chicken and goats were roaming in the village. Old men and women in front of their mud huts and barns were gazing at us. Bugeey¹⁶ shambas of maize,

¹³ Wild spinach and *Amaranthus* species.

¹⁴ Reer in English is a combination of family/clan/community in one word.

¹⁵ A farming village on the east bank of Jubba river near Jamaame.

¹⁶ Flood plains between west of Jamaame and Jubba river.

mung and kidney beans and sesame on the left side of the footpath seemed to have been neglected for many years.

As we entered the town, the muezzin had called for the evening prayers. Mosquitoes. Its irritating buzz and whining noise overwhelmed me. It kept circling my head, looking for a place to land and bite. As anxious as I had been to get to Jamaame, so I am now anxious to leave. Jamaame looks broken but not down. It may appear that that the sun shine is extinguished, the beautiful cobalt blue sky over Jamaame is gradually darkened and a horrible howling wind with dust began to slash the streets and the houses. Surely Jamaame is going to come out of these doldrums and despair in the near future with the energy, vigour and resilience inherent in its population.

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