

'Bitter & Sweet': A flavor of Qaasim's Contribution to Leadership Theories.

By

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Introduction

Even though the fact that Somalis have rich oral traditions is largely agreed upon by Somalis themselves and researchers who visited East Africa both in ancient and modern times, significant effort had not been spent on reflecting the lessons that can be learned. Some writers, for example, referred the land as the 'nation of poets'. The contents and substance of this oral literature was unrecorded due to the absence of Somali script, and, if any, access to it is limited to very few. Apart from the introduction of the Somali orthography back in the seventies by the military regime, no other attempt, at national level, has been made to write Somali poetry in a way that is appealing to contemporary Somali youth. Furthermore, the link between modern education and the Somali way of life, as embodied in its oral wisdom, is thematic area was never given it is deserved attention. This latter gap resulted in that some question the relevance and value of the lessons (if any) learnt in the past.

In this short article, I will be trying to analyze an infamous Somali poem 'Macaan & Qadhaadh' or "Bitter and Sweet" by Axmed I. Diriye Qaasim, a legendary Somali poet and a scholar who served under the British Colonial Administration as an officer in Odwayne District Commission¹, from an unusual perspective by connecting it to a widely researched organizational behavior phenomena – leadership. First, the aim of this piece of writing is to inspire other fellow Somalis to look back to their past and work out the common denominator with their school education to our unique context and realities. Secondly, it is attempted to highlight two key contributions that Qaasim's poem adds to the body of leadership

¹ I was honored to visit Odwayne very recently where I met some of Qasim's friends and colleagues. I have even been shown his office and which part of the town where he lived.

knowledge. On the one hand, the poet as a thinker or researcher views the subject matter (leadership) in a more holistic approach by taking into account the forces within the leader, follower and situation that interact to shape leadership style and the degree of flexibility, emotional intelligence and responsiveness which leaders are doomed to have. A quick overview of the leadership theories, however, is in order.

A Glimpse of Leadership Theories

Like the definition of any other concept, leadership had been described in many ways but few disagree that leadership is about influencing, motivating and enabling others to contribute to the common purpose and success of an enterprise to which they are members².

Since time immemorial, people have been trying to reduce leadership to few traits. The Chinese philosopher, Lao-tzu, in the 6th BCE, described as effective leaders self-less, honest, fair, and hardworking. The Greek Philosopher, Plato, on the other hand, attributed leadership to sound logical thinking and wisdom. All these attempts to construct a profile of a great leader miserably failed and many scholars gave up their search for distinctive competencies that assist in the identification of leaders. Organizational behavior scholars learned from their decade long endeavors that leadership as concept is too complex to be reduced to a checklist.

A second wave of researching leadership started late in the 1940's but the focus shifted from the trait (character) based to the behaviors of great leadership. As result of this, two broad clusters of behaviors where identified. They are task-oriented behaviors and people oriented behaviors. People oriented behaviors consider work related goals over personal matters such as doing favors to followers, listening to their suggestions and concern for their needs. The task oriented behaviors are vice versa. The one million dollar question regarding this behavior: is which of the two behaviors is recommendable? Or what is the best mix of

² There are as many definition as there authors on the face of this earth. Influence, however, or the ability to mobilise behind a vision is a key ingredient of leadership

the two styles of leadership? In an answer to these questions researchers and academicians alike took sides. The demise of the behavioral era became obvious when it assumed that high levels of task and people oriented styles are practiced. This prescription fails to account for because another key factor which determines the style, namely – the situation. In other words, the best style of the two (task and people oriented) is very much a function of the situation. Again, researchers faced the challenge to think twice and seek another paradigm.

The third wave started from where the second stopped. A new movement of scholars, came up with the idea of contingency which means that the best leadership style depends on the situation. Among these proponents was Fred Fiedler³ and his associates who suggested that leader effectiveness depends on whether the person's natural leadership style is matched to the situation. Do we change the leadership style or do we change the situation in order to match the two? Fiedler believes in that its very difficult to change the person's default leadership style because, Fiedler says, default leadership style is linked to personality and becomes stable over time. He contends that the situation should be engineered to suit the person's style. More recent scholars confirmed his argument and even proposed that leadership styles are "hardwired" more than most contingency leadership theories assume.

Other theories of leadership have been proposed by researchers. Some have questioned whether leadership matters at all? They argued that leadership is in the eyes of the follower. In other words, this latter theory emphasis the role of people's perception in the effectiveness of leadership. People do have preconceived belief which they judge one's leadership performance. Unlike others, this theory reduced to leadership a relative concept that exists only in people's perception. It highlights that leadership is as perception of followers as the actual behaviors and

³ **Fred Edward Fiedler** (born 1922) is one of the leading researchers in Industrial and organizational psychology of the 20th century.^[1] He was business and management psychologist at the University of Washington. He helped this field move from the research on traits and personal characteristics of leaders, to leadership styles and behaviors. In 1967 he introduced the contingency modeling of leadership, with the now-famous Fiedler contingency model. (Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Fiedler)

formal roles of people calling themselves leaders. According to this perspective, leaders who fail to fit these leadership prototypes will have difficulty in leading.

Macaan & Qadhaadh: Qaasim's Flavor

As a close look of the leadership literature will reveal, research on leadership has been split. The concept of leadership is looked as this or that, as black or white (trait or behavior), Task oriented or People oriented, leader or situation and etc. It is considered as 'water or oil' and torn apart into a sea of 'eithers' and 'ORs'. It is this view where Qaasim's 'Macaan & Qadhaadh', in contrast to others, challenges both classical and contemporary organizational behaviorists. The poem starts with the speaker, Qaasim himself, projecting two opposite images of himself simultaneously;

"...Dacartuba marbay malab dhashaa ood muudsataa dhabaq'e
Waxan ahay macaan iyo qadhaadh meel ku wada yaalle
Midigtayda iyo bidixdu waa laba mataanoode.."

As translated by , B. W. Andrzejewski with Sheila Andrzejewski, the above lines are ;
*(..Consider the aloe - how bitter is its taste!
Yet sometimes there wells up a sap so sweet
That it seems like honey in your mouth.*

*Side by side the sweet and bitter run
Just as they do, my friends, in me,
As I switch from sweet to bitter
And back to sweet again.)*

What makes this poem unique is not that it does magnify and bring forth an extreme elemental truth about the ability of human beings to harbor multiple contradictory characters but what Russ Moxley of the center of leadership and creativity said to be a fundamental dimension in the development of well-rounded leaders,"...ones with the competence to combine what appear to be opposites: toughness and compassion, self-confidence and humility, strong individuals and good team players." On this front, Qaasim is able to think the world self-possessed rather than apart – a quality that leaders cannot afford not to have.

Like his contemporaries (and I say so because some of these early studies are not more scientific than his poem)⁴, the poet rightly places himself among the leadership contingency theorists. Qaasim, takes 'situational factors' into account and signals its change by using the phrases "at times", "Sometimes", "as morning alters to evening" and etc. Depending on time and space, the speaker changes from " a holy saint" to a "master satan", from "one color" to "another" as morning turns to evening and back once more to morning. This thinking is clearly in line with Fiedler's contingency model where he postulated that leader's effectiveness is based on what he referred as 'situational contingency' which as a result of two factors – *leadership style* (satanic or saint style) and *situational favorableness* (morning, one color and etc).

...Marbaan ahay muftiga saahidnimo mawlacaw gala'e
Marna Mukhawi waashoo xumaha miista baan ahaye
Marbaan ahay nin xaaraan maqdaxa aan marin jidiinkise

Marna tuug mu'diya baan ahoon maal Rasuul bixinne
Marbaan ahay maqaam awliyaad maqaddinkoodiiye
Marna mudanka shaydaanka iyo maal jinbaan ahaye

(...I have my place among the holy saints,
I am one of the foremost of their leaders,
But at times I hold high rank in Satan's retinue,
And then my lords and masters are the jinns.)

Similarly, Qaasim concludes that personality traits has low explanatory and predictive power and, hence, cannot be of any use in selecting effective leaders;

Miisaanna ima saari karo nin i maleeyaaye

(...It's no good trying to weigh me up -
I can't be balanced on a pair of scales)

Finally, Qaasim diverges Fiedler and other contingency theorists when it comes to which easy to change: situation or person's leadership style? Or in other words, Fiedler suggested that it is easy to engineer the situation

⁴ Latter revision of these early researches found out many of them had methodological flaws, poor validity and reliability to describe them as "scientific" not a poem.

because leadership style becomes stable over time. Contrary to Fiedler, Qaasim depicts himself so adaptable that he is able to recognize different circumstance and adjust appropriate leadership style accordingly. Differentiating one circumstance from another, however, takes a fundamental ability of human beings called ‘Emotional intelligence’⁵. If this is the case, then isn’t Qaasim implying the necessity of some permanent, must to have, leadership traits? How then is his thought different from those early trait seekers like Plato?

Neither the answers to that preceding questions nor establishing a comprehensive link between Qaasim’s “Bitter and Sweet” and the vast leadership literature is my aim in this short article. I rather set out to associate it from an angle two seemingly unrelated pieces of intellectual work just to expend a generous offer from Qaasim when dealing with him or his work;

...ninkasta halkii kuula mudan ee ay muhato laabtaadu
Ee aanad madadaaladeed ugala maarmaynin
Iska soo mar waa kuu bannaan marinkad doontaaye

(...And now, my friends, each man of you -
If either of the paths I follow
Takes your fancy and delights your heart,
Or even if you cannot bear to lose

The entertainment I provide,
Then come to me along the path -
You're free to make a choice!)

Indeed, I chose to delight my heart and entertain thyself. You, also, can make your choice and may associate to ‘Bitter and Sweet’ with rocket science. Enjoy.

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⁵ **Emotional intelligence (EI)** is the ability to identify, assess, and control the [emotions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_intelligence) of oneself, of others, and of groups. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_intelligence)

Appendix: “Macaan iyo Qadhaadh” or “ Bitter or Sweet” in Somali & English

1. Dacartuba marbay malab dhashaa ood muudsataa dhabaqe
2. Waxan ahay macaan iyo qadhaadh meel ku wada yaalle
3. Midigtayda iyo bidixdu waa laba mataanoode

4. Midi waa martida soora iyo maata daadihise
5. Midina waa mindiyo xiirayyo mur iyo deebaaqe
6. Masalooyin talantaalliyaan=2 Omaandhow leeyahaye

7. Nin majiira keliyuun qabsada hay malayninae
8. Marbaan ahay muddeex camal san oon maagista aqoone
9. Marna macangag laayaanahoo miiggaan baan ahaye

10. Marbaan ahay muftiga saahidnimo mawlacaw gala'e
11. Marna Mukhawi waashoo xumaha miista baan ahaye
12. Marbaan ahay nin xaaraan maqdaxa aan marin jidiinkise

13. Marna tuug mu'diya baan ahoon maal Rasuul bixinne
14. Marbaan ahay maqaam awliyaad maqaddinkoodiye
15. Marna mudanka shaydaanka iyo maal jinbaan ahaye

16. Marbaan ahay murtiyo baanisaba madaxda reeraaye
17. Oo ay weliba muuniyo dulqaad igu majeertaane
18. Marna reer magaal Loofaroon muuqan baan ahaye

19. Waxan ahay nin midabbeeya oo maalinbays rogae
20. Muuqaygu gelinkiiba waa muunad goonniyahe
21. Miisaanna ima saari karo nin i maleeyaaye

22. Muslinka iyo gaalada dirkaba waan micna aqaane
23. Malaa'iigta naartiyo jannadu waygu murantaaye
24. Ninkii maalmo badan soo jiree madaxu boosaystay

25. Ee inan rag maamuli yiqiin waa I maan garanne
26. ninkasta halkii kuula mudan ee ay muhato laabtaadu
27. Ee aanad madadaaladeed ugala maarmaynin
28. Iska soo mar waa kuu bannaan marinkad doontaaye

Bitter and Sweet - English Translation
by, B. W. Andrzejewski with Sheila Andrzejewski

Consider the aloe - how bitter is its taste!
Yet sometimes there wells up a sap so sweet
That it seems like honey in your mouth.

Side by side the sweet and bitter run
Just as they do, my friends, in me,
As I switch from sweet to bitter
And back to sweet again.

My two hands, right and left, are twins.
One twin gives food to strangers and to guests,
It sustains the weak and guides them.

But the other is a slashing, cutting knife -
As sharp to the taste as myrrh,
As bitter as the aloe.

Do not suppose I am the kind of man
Who walks along one path, and that path only.

I go one way, and seem a reasonable man,
I provoke no one, I have the best of natures
I go another, and I'm obstinate and bold,
Striking out at others without cause.

Sometimes I seem a learned man of God
Who retreats in ascetic zeal to a seclude sanctuary -
I turn again and I'm a crazy libertine,
Sneakily snatching whatever I can get.

I am counted as one of the elders of the clan,
Esteemed for my wisdom, tact and skill in argument,
But within me there dwells a mere townee, too -
A no-good layabout he is, at that.

I'm a man whose gullet will allow no passage
For food that believers are forbidden to eat,

And yet I'm a pernicious, hardened thief -
The property of even the Prophet himself
Would not be safe from me.

I have my place among the holy saints,
I am one of the foremost of their leaders,
But at times I hold high rank in Satan's retinue,
And then my lords and masters are the jinns.

It's no good trying to weigh me up -
I can't be balanced on a pair of scales.

From this day to that my very colour changes -
Nay, I'm a man whose aspect alters
As morning turns to evening
And back once more to morning.

Muslims and infidels - I know their minds
And understand them through and through.

"He's ours!" the angels of Hell proclaim of me
"No, ours!" the angels of Heaven protest.

I have, then, all these striking qualities
Which no one can ignore -
But who can really know my mind?

Only a grey-head who has lived for many days
And learned to measure what men are worth.

And now, my friends, each man of you -
If either of the paths I follow
Takes your fancy and delights your heart,
Or even if you cannot bear to lose

The entertainment I provide,
Then come to me along the path -
You're free to make a choice!

-Translated by, B. W. Andrzejewski with Sheila Andrzejewski, 1993