

Youth in Somaliland: Education and Employment

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Somaliland is, in many ways, very similar to many other small sub-Saharan African countries. The streets of Hargeisa, the capital city, are booming with vibrant activities of small-scale busi-

nessmen and women, construction sites and with countless number of billboards advertising education institutions. In fact, if it were not for the equally as numerous billboards signs announcing the work of different types of local and international NGOs, one could easily forget that a little over twenty years ago, these streets were scenes of overwhelming physical destruction, displaced people and countless number of young people roaming around with AK47s. In effect, in 1991 when Somaliland broke away from its union with the former Italian colony and the state of Somalia, and adopted the colonial borders of the Somaliland British Protectorate of 1884-1960, reconstruction processes had to start from the ground. Lacking international recognition, the bulk of financial and intellectual responsibility for social, economic and political reconstruction processes fell on the shoulders of local communities and the Somaliland diaspora.

Two decades on, Somaliland is still internationally unrecognised. This places severe economic constraints on the territory: lack of recognition means that Somaliland does not qualify to borrow from bilateral and multilateral agencies and this restricts the country's ability to carry out much-needed large scale infrastructure projects such as roads, irrigation dams and electricity grids. Foreign direct investment inflows are rare as foreign investors are reluctant whilst local entrepreneurs' access to credit markets outside the country is difficult. Crucially, it also me-

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ans Somaliland cannot participate in international fora for the developing of treaties on trade, maritime resource use, and law enforcement. Nevertheless, even with these major structural constraints, Somaliland has managed to make positive progress towards economic growth.

Still, there remain major challenges for Somaliland. One of the most significant of these is widespread unemployment. A recent labour market survey conducted in three districts of Somaliland by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) finds that over 70 percent of the population is unemployed. Given the demographic youth bulge, two of every three Somalilanders are under thirty years old; it is not a surprise that youth (aged between 15 and 30) are overly represented as unemployed persons. The situation for the urban youth is more severe than that of rural youth in the country – this is to be expected as youth continue to migrate to the towns and cities and the skills mismatch between what young people are able to do and the needs of an evolving economy continue to be exacerbated. It is worth noting here that youth unemployment is by no means unique to Somaliland – many countries in Africa and even in the OECD face a similar conundrum.

To address this challenge, the Government of Somaliland (GoSL) in January 2013 initiated a national employment strategy with an objective of finding ways to ways to further develop, restructure where necessary and appropriate, and transform the Somaliland economy into a sustainable and equitable economy capable of generating decent employment for all Somalilanders. A vital part of this process was to understand the extent of youth employment and un-

employment taking into account regional specificities. The administration recognised that to fully appreciate the intricacies of the economy and the labour markets and to be able to formulate coordinated and targeted employment policy programmes and interventions, engagement with Somalilanders from all walks of life across all regions of Somaliland was paramount. With this in mind, the process started by engaging with regional stakeholders in six major cities in Somaliland – Las Canod, Cerigabo, Burco, Berbera, Hargeisa and Borama. The completion of regional consultations led to a national employment conference in Hargeisa in July 2013 where all stakeholders were brought together at the national level to discuss short, medium and long-term employment strategies.

In this brief text I will outline the employment situation of youth in Somaliland based on the findings from the national employment strategy mentioned above and from my research in the country. I will focus on the labour market outcomes of educated youth. By this I mean young men and women who are graduating in large numbers each year from the many universities in Somaliland. My definition of education here only covers the fact that these young people have been awarded degree certificates by higher education institutions and considers neither the pedagogy practices of these institutions nor the qualitative descriptions of what it actually means to be educated in the Somaliland context. I spent 10 months in 2012-2013 conducting research with this group in particular. Despite their heterogeneity, one thing that educated Somaliland youth seem to have in common is the social status attached to having a university degree which tends to allow them to negotiate entry to different social clusters. Following on from this, it is possible to say, albeit with caution, that their situation in general terms is better compared to youth who have not graduated from universities.

What does it mean to be unemployed in Somaliland?

One of the difficulties with employment statistics is that they tend to show only the general situation and offer little on the specifics and the human side to employment experiences on the ground. For example, although the statistics in Somaliland put youth unemployment at 75 percent (ILO, 2013), this figure does not tell us whether the 25 percent of employed youth

are fully employed and whether their jobs allow them to secure decent livelihoods. Similarly, the figures do not tell us whether the 75 percent of the unemployed youth are actively looking for work or not. In addition, these figures are far removed from the social realities on the ground and what it actually means to be employed or unemployed in Somaliland.

Employment and unemployment are in many ways social concepts embedded in complex social (and cultural) relationships that go beyond a dichotomized definition. In a recent interview in Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland, a young man pointed out to me that being unemployed meant that even though he is approaching thirty years old, he still lives with his parents and is not able to get married “no girl wants to marry me as I cannot provide for them... I don't know when I will be able to fulfil one of the most important aspects of being a man, supporting and taking care of my wife and children.” (Interview, April 2013). Another pointed out that he no longer likes to go outside stating “everyone who knows me – neighbours, old teachers, friends' parents, want to know where I work. Telling them I still don't have a job, and I have graduated from university two years ago, is difficult” (June 2013).

It is important to note when talking about Somaliland youth and their experiences that the term ‘youth’ in any context is not a homogenous concept. Crucial differences exist in the socio-economic background of youth and these differences play a determining role in the labour market outcomes of particular groups. For example, given the fact that the majority of social services are available in urban rather than rural areas, youth in urban Somaliland tend to have better access to education and subsequently to employment. Moreover, education and labour market outcomes for female youth are very different from those of male youth regardless of where they reside. In addition, if we analyse the social structure where clan plays a huge role in the day-to-day life of an average Somalilander, membership in a particular clan can also have significant influence on youth experiences in the labour market. These differences mean that youth-related employment analysis should be nuanced and contextualised and take into account not only geographical locations but also the socio-economic status of youth.

Youth and higher education

As pointed out earlier, one increasingly noticeable feature on the streets of Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland, is the large number of billboards advertising education institutions – mainly universities offering courses from Bachelors in Business Administration to Masters in Engineering Management. In fact, in Hargeisa alone, a city of estimated 725,000 people, 14 universities are competing aggressively to attract young people. For Somaliland as whole, 23 universities were registered with the higher education commission as of March 2013. To put in perspective, these 23 universities are mainly catering for a small portion of the 45 percent of the estimated 4.1 million Somalilanders who are urban and rural dwellers. The remaining 55 percent are nomads who spend their days following the grazing routes with their camels – arguably the most valuable and cherished creature in the Somali culture reflected in the many sayings and poems dedicated to them!

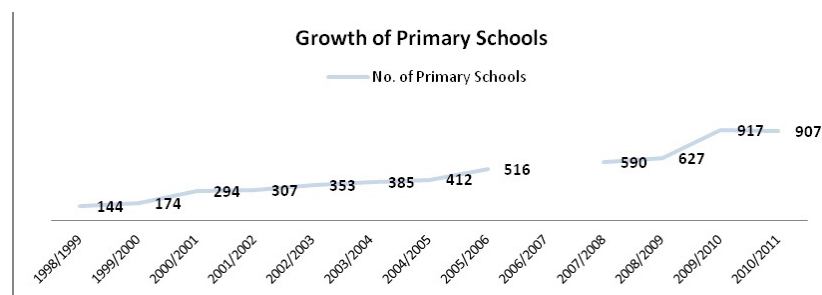
The expansion of the higher education and education in general in Somaliland has been especially remarkable in the last ten years. Reconstruction of the sector had to start from scratch as the majority of the schools, especially those in Hargeisa and Burco, the two largest cities, were completely destroyed during the Somalia Air Force's bombings in the late 1980s and the subsequent civil wars from 1988-91 and 1994-96. The destruction went further than the physical buildings. The majority of the educated cadre were either killed during the war or fled and became refugees outside the country.

Faced with a new and fairly weak international-ly-unrecognised government, coupled with a very small number of people with experience in manage-

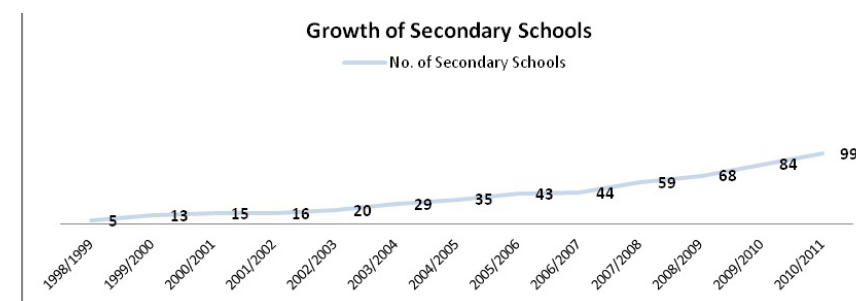
ment of education, the community, with the help of the Somaliland diaspora, had to rise to the challenge of filling this gap. They had to learn very quickly how to take on the traditional role of the state in the provision of this social service. Fast-forward to the present, education across all levels has evolved from community led initiatives to a big business with new players, including those from neighbouring countries (Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda), constantly entering the market. Demand for education, given the current demographic trend, is unprecedented.

The mushrooming of educational institutions means that the majority of Somaliland youth now have more access to education, including higher education, compared to a decade ago. As the graphs below depict, the number of primary and secondary schools has been increasing steadily. Similarly, the number of students enrolled and that of teachers have also increased. Although still lagging behind somewhat, girls' enrolment rates also continue to grow. A point to note here is that even though in aggregate the number of educational institutions continues to grow in Somaliland, this growth is not uniform across the country. There are significant differences between rural and urban areas and between Hargeisa, the capital, and the rest of the country. These differences mean that young people in rural areas of Somaliland have limited access to education, at all levels, compared to those located in urban areas, especially those located in Hargeisa, Borama or Burco.

At the outset, the expansion of education, specifically higher education, should be good news for any country, and more so for Somaliland given its recent history of conflict and displacement. This is also true given the global knowledge-based economy where the ability and speed of workers to adopt technology from other countries determines to a great extent productivity increases and thus economic growth. But, we have to be careful here; for a country to be able to fully utilise the advantages of globalisation and the much-hyped knowledge transfers, many other factors need to be



Source: Graph created by author using data from Somaliland In Figures 9th Edition (2011). Data for 2006/2007 was not available



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considered. The development stage of a country and its economic structures are amongst the vital factors. For Somaliland, tangible outcomes of its optimistic participation in the globalised economy can be seen in the increased imports of eggs from Yemen, chicken from Brazil and canned fish from Vietnam. These are household consumption items that can be sourced in abundance in the country.

Similar to its fully open economy, the higher education market is also liberalised, with players from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda frequently establishing university franchises with their Somaliland partners. Together with other locally-established public and private institutions, a large number of young Somalilander graduates enter the labour markets every year. For example, in 2011, 1135 students graduated from the three big universities in Hargeisa (University of Hargeisa, Golis and Admas). Approximately 28 percent of these graduates were females. In regards to faculties, about 64 percent of all graduates were awarded variants of business administration and information and communication technology-related degrees. The concentration of students in these two faculties is evident across all universities in the country. To understand the full implication of this concentration, the next section briefly analyses the Somaliland economy and questions the correlation between the skills graduates are entering the markets with and the human resource needs of the economy.

Somaliland economy

Looking at the structure of the Somaliland economy and its current development stage, the relevance of higher education sector at its current form becomes questionable. Somaliland economy is a fully-liberalised market economy that depends heavily on the

export of livestock to the gulf markets. Agriculture, mainly livestock constitutes approximately 59 percent of the Somaliland GDP with the service and industry sector contributing 34 and 7 percent respectively. The heavy export concentration on the livestock sector to a more or less single market is problematic not only in the inherent volatility given the nature of the sector (in the past the trade has been disrupted by bans by Gulf countries on livestock imports from the Horn of Africa due to fears of Rift Valley Fever), but also in the heavy dependence on a single buyer. Further, this sector has very limited job creation capacity as it mainly exports live animals and has not diversified into the export of secondary value added products.

On the manufacturing side, apart from the few bottled water industries, the sector is crucially under-developed. The large-scale foreign direct investment needed to bring to life sectors such as fishing, mining, and tourism, all with significant potential for job creation, are difficult to find. Even with ample investment opportunities in the country, non-Somali foreign investors are cautious, thanks to Somaliland's peculiar political status.

One of the most important features of the Somaliland economy which has shown both growth and resilience is the micro, small and medium size enterprises (MSME) sector – key words here “micro” and “small”. This definition of the sector ignores the usual formal and informal dichotomy. In fact, in the Somaliland context, the line between formal and informal MSMEs is blurred and not that relevant. The MSME sector in many ways reflects the entrepreneurial energy of the average Somali man and woman and although relatively small, it has been a vital sector in employment creation. However, the sector faces significant constraints (lack of access to financial

support – apart from the limited banking services by the money transfer companies, Somaliland does not have a banking sector, high costs of electricity, limited roads connecting to market centres, lack of skilled employees, difficult and ambiguous licencing and taxing requirements) and generally operates in a difficult and very competitive environment.

Some of these constraints can be quite severe and prohibit the growth of business. For example, a restaurant owner in Baki, a farm village in the west of the country, recently pointed out to me that the high cost of diesel means he can only turn on his generator five hours a day. This restricts both his ability to store the large volume of food items needed to respond to demand and the number of hours he can operate his business. Another resident, a farmer, showed me a large truck standing idly and said that because of the bad roads and the heavy rains, he could not transfer his watermelon harvest to the market in Borama (the nearby city). He was left with hundreds of watermelon quietly rotting in the truck (Interviews in Baki, Awdal August 2013).

What does this mean to youth with a university degree?

The present structure of the Somaliland economy tells us that there are significant structural constraints that impact the ability of the economy to create employment and thus directly impacts the ability of youth to secure jobs. However, it is also true that the economy is producing, albeit limited, jobs especially those related to the MSME sector. The implication here is that the type of skills needed are those that supports MSME development such construction workers, electricians, carpenters, engineers, and other related technical and vocational skills. At the present time there is a crucial shortage of these skills. An owner of an electric company reported in a recent interview that “when a generator breaks down, I have to fly a technician from Kenya or Ethiopia... this is very costly for me.” (Burao, June 2013).

This economic and labour market reality is not in line with what the universities are producing. As pointed earlier, the trend across all universities across the country is the heavy concentration of students in business and computer-related faculties. Of course the economy does indeed need accountants and managers, but the numbers graduating each year with these

degrees far outweigh the demand in the labour markets. My conversations with university managements across three regions in Somaliland highlighted that these universities are acutely aware of the prevailing mismatch but are constrained by the lack of sufficient funding to allow them to recruit qualified teachers and equip their laboratories with the expensive kits needed for the science/technical faculties.

Taking the above into account, it is important to note that the value of education and higher education in particular, for youth goes beyond labour market outcomes. Being a post-conflict country, having young people from different regions of Somaliland studying together and exchanging ideas can build social cohesion and understanding. In addition, given the high status placed on higher education, a youth with a university degree tends to feel respected and trusted which could lead to youth being more involved in other aspects of society such as politics. Of course one of the caveats here is that, similar to the labour markets, the pedagogy practices at universities have to be attuned to the needs of the society and of quality not to undermine the current respect for the qualification. In other words, universities have to be embedded in society and reflect the society accordingly. However, given the current trend where the entry costs and requirements to create a university are relatively low and demand unprecedented, the incentives for universities to do more than the bare minimum is limited. With funding constraints, limited faculty and facility capacities and high competition, universities crucially need financial and intellectual support to allow them to look beyond student numbers and to start thinking about their role in the social and economic development of Somaliland.

Youth experiences in the labour markets

Apart from the apparent mismatch between the skills needed in the labour markets and those being produced by the higher education institutions, there are other specific labour markets and social and cultural processes that accentuate youth unemployment outcomes across the regions.

Firstly, across all Somaliland regions, there is generally very limited flow of information between job seekers and employers and most young seekers do not know where the jobs are. Somaliland remains a predominantly oral society which means information

flows about jobs hardly move outside friends and clan circles. Apart from a few job adverts from the government and the international development organisations, not many jobs are posted in public domains. A young man told me in an interview that “I finished my money printing CVs and finished my shoes walking around asking from one office to another whether they have any openings” (Hargeisa, August 2013). For female youth, finding the time to look for work in this environment is extremely difficult given their day-to-day responsibilities in the households.

Secondly, difficulties in the recruitment processes make youth give up early on in their search. Even for the few jobs that are posted in the public domains, youth often face difficulties applying as they fail to meet the arduous experience requirements. In addition, many find it difficult to follow the recruitment process – creating CVs and writing cover letters in English, even with a university degree, proves very difficult for the majority of graduates in Somaliland.

Thirdly, my discussions with university graduates in Somaliland highlighted that unemployed graduates do not always actively look for work. The assumptions that there are no jobs in the economy (possibly because youth do not know where jobs are or how to access them), and the general-accepted wisdom amongst the young that the few jobs available are offered along clan lines, discourages youth from looking for a job. In addition, the majority of unemployed graduates I spoke with are only willing to work in the ‘suit-and-tie’ office jobs of large organisations – usually the NGO sector and the few large telecommunication and remittance companies, and are not willing to look for work in the MSME sector where jobs are actually being created. It is plausible this is due to the extremely high social status attached to a university education. The graduates’ expectations of the value of university education seem to be in constant conflict with the labour market reality. This of course raises questions about the extent to which universities prepare these young people to enter the labour markets.

Finally, the structure of the Somali society where qabiil or clan plays a crucial role in social protection and development, adds yet another complexity in the labour markets. As pointed out earlier, labour markets are very much social constructs and in many ways they reflect the prevailing (sometimes historical) social characteristics. This means that in the Somaliland

context clan, regardless of its many positive aspects, can create inefficiency in the labour markets where some jobs get allocated on the basis of clan lineage and not on the merit brought from ability and skills of the job seeker. A large number of university graduates whom I spoke with emphasised this trend and some went as far as saying clan is the only route to get employed in Somaliland.

My research in Somaliland highlighted that clan dynamics in the labour markets are neither simple nor straightforward. Although at the macro level clan units look cohesive especially in dealing with clan-wide concerns, significant class structures exist within the clans and sub-clans. These social classes can be determined, although not comprehensively, by wealth. Other indicators of class include an association to a prominent individual, being from the diaspora or having a close association to one, and having education. Interestingly, these classes can at times form links with similar classes beyond the boundaries of a particular clan. At the micro level these classes are hard at work and I would argue that although clan is indeed important in the functioning of the labour markets, it is not sufficient for the mechanism – employer from clan x giving a job to seeker of clan x, to work. Other class and personal relationships have to be in place, and these relations are crucial in how graduates fare in the labour markets.

Furthermore, the types of jobs that graduates seek can also determine which relations they need to call upon. For example, if a graduate is looking for a job in the public sector, it is common practice for them or their parents to approach their aaqil or sultan (clan leaders) and ask the leaders to speak on their behalf to a specific minister (usually from the same clan) and recommend them for employment in that ministry. Of course it is also possible to use other routes to approach employers. For example, one young man in describing his job search explained that although he was not related to the employer, he took his well-known and respected uncle to represent him and his request to the employer. Although there were no clan affiliations, the status of the uncle and his prior relationship with the employer was an avenue this young person could utilise to get a job. His strategy was indeed successful.

In many ways, the clan and social connections work as a system of recommendation and reference.

In an environment where a serious information asymmetry exists on the skills of workers and the location of job vacancies, these social connections are crucial in linking job seekers and employers. Of course this is heavily biased towards youth with effective (and profitable) social connections that they can utilise when needs arise.

What next?

Looking at education and the labour market experiences, it is true that educated youth in Somaliland face many challenges. I would argue, however, that they equally have many opportunities. As Somaliland continues to develop and as the government takes steps to streamline the higher education sector and correct inefficiencies in the labour markets, youth employment outcomes will continue to improve. In addition, Somaliland youth in general are surrounded by very supportive social/clan structures that if pushed in certain directions could prove very beneficial for youth development. With the right incentives, clan efforts could be channelled towards youth-oriented activities such as creating youth trust funds for entrepreneurial ventures.

To really understand youth employment in Somaliland, we have to move away from categorizing youth as being employed and unemployed. Social/cultural understanding on what it means to be employed and unemployed is crucial for the creation of effective and targeted interventions. Equally important is an in-depth understanding of youth categories and how they interact with the labour markets. Understanding social processes within the labour markets is also vital given that labour markets are made up of people who reflect how society functions.

In addition, the government, with the help of development partners, youth organisations and higher education institutions, needs to launch awareness programmes that will work towards educating Somalilanders about their economy and the functions of and opportunities within labour markets. This could help young people form realistic expectations about

the types of jobs they can secure. Youth and society's perceptions about the economy and the labour markets in general are possibly one of the most powerful and effective tools to improve job allocation in the economy.

The fact that two-thirds of Somaliland's population are young people means the country's major strength lies in this demographic trend especially given the fact that Somaliland is in its early years of reconstruction and development. What is crucial for the Somaliland government is to ensure that the right policies and programmes are put in place to capture the energy and enthusiasm of youth especially in their efforts to access higher levels of education and employment. Somaliland youth exude confidence and need to be given an opportunity to rise to the challenge of helping Somaliland develop in spite of its lack of international recognition. Involving youth will not only give them a sense of pride and nationalism, but will also help reduce the large number of them leaving Somaliland every day, through dangerous means, hoping to find meaningful life elsewhere.

Finally, the Somaliland government, the Somalia government, the African Union and the international community need to make a decision on the status of Somaliland very soon. Transforming the Somaliland economy into one capable of generating the required levels of jobs, will require significant investment into sectors that are traditionally avoided by development agencies and small scale investors (i.e. large infrastructure projects). Postponing the outcome of recognition or some other type of legal status has crucial implications for the long-term development of the country and subsequently to the livelihood of a large percentage of the population; the youth. Although recognition arguments are usually formed on past grievances, current and future implications of lack of it need to be brought to the table and discussed openly and frankly. In my opinion, the Somaliland youth should hold responsible all the above named parties for helping them realize their right to decent livelihoods.

The Litigant

Ali Jimale Ahmed

He was frail, emaciated, and gaunt from years of harsh life that had made him trek the length and breadth of the Somali deex plains. It was a Friday morning when he came to visit us in our village, in one of the corners of the capital. We used to call our corner a dark alley, because all the surrounding, more affluent areas were lit, while our village, in the heart of the town, was thirsty for electricity. An older friend of mine used to call it Harlem. I didn't understand his meaning at the time, but nevertheless it sounded exotically appropriate. Harlem. My friend had heard about Harlem from an old Mennonite teacher. A congenial old lady with freckles dotting the landscape of her still pretty face, my friend would reminisce. At times, he would flaunt a song or two he learned in her class. My favorite was "Old MacDonald had a farm," which, to my utter surprise, my mother, through me, also liked. Tell your friend, she would say each time I did a rendition of the song, complete with gestures and onomatopoeic grunts, to sing to his teacher, a song of the Arlaadi. And without waiting for an answer, she, in her crooning voice would sing of the virtues of beans, and of the daunting task of warding off a neighbor's cattle from scouring the field.

To us kids, an ode to beans was the furthest from our minds, as that did not ignite our imagination. I vaguely remember my older friend's Mennonite teacher's comment to my mother's ode to beans: she described it, he said, as a kind of graffiti. That was a strange kind of comment, I thought, since graffiti was what I saw splashed on walls with chevaux de frise on top to discourage trespassers. (Cheval de frise was, I learned in high school, an ingenious idea to embed razor spikes into the top of the wall surrounding

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a house for protection. For some odd reason that I cannot explain, the spikes reminded me of my mother's description of scarecrows.) My mother's stories about beans and sca-

recrows did not appeal to me or my friends. We liked to hear stories spun about far away places. And Harlem was one such place. Sometimes, I pronounced it as Harram, the Arabic word for "sinful and forbidden." Harram, excuse me Harlem, was in America and it sure sounded like a sinful place, a forbidden corner in the midst of the Big Apple. The Apple, according to my knowledgeable friend, was another name for New York City. Anyway, it intrigued me that our corner had similar characteristics with other corners of the world. After all, we weren't alone living in the midst of darkness, squalor and filth. There was something international about squalor and filth-dwelling, I reasoned.

Each Friday, well let me put it this way, every other Friday, my parents used to invite all, or almost all the elders of the village to a bun session. Coffee beans were cooked in seething hot sesame oil or butter ghee. The eldest man was to eat first. Most of the time it was Grandfather Madaq. Well, to be sure, he wasn't my grandfather, but we were told to call him that out of respect. Grandfather Madaq was in his early 80s and childless. Actually, he never got married, which made most of the community; I mean those who were old enough to gossip and talk about certain stuff, either fear or pity him. It was also reported that he never lost his first baby teeth. Some kind of mystery was associated with that, but it was always beyond our youthful understanding. I personally liked Grandfather Madaq a lot, and that, I think, was why my mother always invited him to our house.