



East Africa

CULTURE

Government by Magic Spell

Saida Hagi-Dirie Herzi is a fiction writer from Somalia. In 1991, unrest grew in her homeland after clans in the north finally drove the country's long-time dictator and his followers from power. Civil war erupted in the 1990s, as these clans fought among themselves to control the government. This short story is set in Somalia before the civil war began.

When she was ten, Halima learned that she was possessed by a jinni. The diagnosis came from the religious healer of the village, the Wadaad. . . . With that Halima became famous. The story of her jinni was known from one end of the village to the other within hours after the Wadaad had told her mother. Everyone talked about Halima and her jinni—what it might do and what it might be made to do, for her and for the village. . . .

When Halima was under the spell of her spirits, . . . she experienced a feeling of power, as though she could do things beyond the reach of ordinary human beings. She felt good then. Moreover, whatever she undertook, her spirits seemed to lend a helping hand. Because the fortunes of her family, indeed those of her whole clan, prospered at the time, Halima as well as other people assumed that it was the spirits' doing. In time, Halima came to be regarded as a blessing to her family, an asset to the whole clan. And she gloried in the special status her spirits gave her.

It was because of her special powers that Halima was summoned to the capital. A big part of her clan was there. The most important and powerful positions in the government were held by people of her clan. It had all started with one of their men, who had become very powerful in the government. He had called his relatives and found big government jobs for them. They in turn had called relatives of theirs till the government had virtually been taken over by Halima's people. And that had meant quick riches for everyone concerned. . . anything that had stood in their way had been pushed aside or eliminated. At the time when Halima was summoned, her clan controlled the government and with that the wealth of the country so completely that no one dared to challenge them any more. . . . Still they wanted to secure for themselves the extra protection of Halima's supernatural powers. . . .

Halima did let herself be persuaded to go, but, before she went, she consulted her spirits. They asked her to perform two rituals. One was to prepare 'Tahleel,' a special type of water over which certain rituals were performed. People drank it or bathed in it to benefit from its powers. The second was to perform daily animal sacrifices to Gess Ade, the clan's twin spirit. . . .

In the city . . . Halima wasted no time carrying out the two requests of her spirits. She asked two things from the leaders of her clan. She asked

them to bring all the water resources of the city together in one central pool to facilitate [make easier] the performing of the ‘Tahleel’ and she requested the building of a huge slaughterhouse at the eastern shore. . . .

To centralise the city’s water system, two huge water reservoirs were created. . . . This way, all the water consumed in the city came from the same source, and when Halima put her spell of her ‘Tahleel’ on the two reservoirs, it reached everyone.

One of the effects of the ‘Tahleel’ was to cure people of curiosity. Those who drank it stopped asking questions. Above all they stopped wondering about the actions of the clan’s leading men. They became model subjects doing without question, without objection, what they were told to do. . . .

As things kept going well for the tribe and her, Halima became more and more sure that she was the cause of it all. The clan’s leaders too were convinced that they owed their continued success to Halima and her spirits. They heaped honours on her. They consulted her on all important issues and her counsel often proved invaluable. It was Halima, for instance, who thought up the idea of the shortages to keep the common people subdued [quiet]. Shortages of all basic commodities were deliberately created and they kept people busy struggling for bare survival. They did not have the time or energy to spare worrying about the goings-on in the government. The leaders of the clan felt more secure than ever.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How did members of her clan use Halima to keep themselves in power?

2. Do you think that the author supported the government of Somalia at the time she wrote this story? Explain why or why not.

Activity

Use library and Internet resources to find out what has happened in Somalia since this story was written. Prepare a short report on government in Somalia in the 1990s.