

Somali Poetry



A Part of Life



This article is based on a talk recorded at the Transcription Centre, London by MUSA HAJI ISMAIL GALAAL and MARGARET LAURENCE. Examples have been added from Somali Poetry: An Introduction by B. W. ANDRZEJSKI and I. M. LEWIS. This is one of the first volumes in the new Oxford Library of African Literature. It is published this month by the Clarendon Press, Oxford. Its sober garb belies a witty and entertaining book.

'ABDI DEEQSI, nicknamed 'Cinema', beat out the rhythm of the first *heelo* on an empty petrol tin one day in 1945. His lorry had broken down in a desolate place near Zeila. He called this type of poem *balwo* which means in Somali 'evil' or 'misfortune'. It soon became popular on the radio. Its name originally deterred the superstitious but around 1950 it gradually came to be called *heelo*. Lorry drivers are particularly given to this form of verse; in Somaliland a certain romance attaches to the lorry drivers since their decrepit trucks have replaced the camel caravan. Medical dispensers and dressers like the *heelo* too:

*Oh doctor, I have a pain in my heart,
Give me treatment, but don't put me in hospital!*

Its 'hedonistic and ecstatic treatment of love', say Andrejewski and Lewis, has brought it into disrepute with the more elderly and pious. Mahammad Hassan, a Somali writer of Arabic verse, lived above a room where young men gathered to sing these love songs. His daily devotions and his nightly sleep were disturbed so he started a poem:

*Oh my God, my God, have mercy on us and save us from
the balwo.*

WHETHER IN LEAN TIMES or in times of plenty, Somalia is always a land where songs are made and sung, for poetry is a living art among Somalis, and their poems are an intense expression of both the sorrow and the rejoicing, the pain and the triumph, which the will of Allah allots to the life of every man.

MUSA GALAAL is in the Ministry of Education, Somali Republic. MARGARET LAURENCE is the author of *The Tree of Poverty, Nairobi*, (The Eagle Press) which is a study of the characteristics of Somali Poetry. B. W. ANDRZEJSKI, who is at the School of Oriental and African Studies, is the author of many linguistic papers on the Somali language. I. M. LEWIS, of the University of Glasgow, is an anthropologist who has worked for some years among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa.

The faith of Islam is strong among Somalis, and this provides a unifying force among people who are divided into many tribes and sub-tribes. Another force also binds Somalis together, whether they live in the Somali Republic itself, or in French Somaliland, or Northern Kenya, or parts of Ethiopia. All Somalis, of whom there are an estimated seven million, speak the same language. The Somali language is considered by linguists to belong to the Cushitic group of the Hamitic languages. It is a somewhat difficult language, but one which possesses an extremely large vocabulary and a huge folk-literature. As Somali is not written, but only spoken, most of this literature has not yet been recorded. Attempts are now being made to render Somali into a written language, and it may not be long before the literature and traditions of the Somali people will be set down and preserved.

THERE IS NO SPECIAL CLASS of professional poets in Somaliland. But, since poetry has great social importance, skill at versification can have greater prestige than arms or wealth. Sheik Mohammed 'Abdille Hasan, who used to be known in England as the 'Mad Mullah', fought against the colonial regime from 1900 to 1920. He is accepted as being one of the greatest Somali poets.

Poetry passes from mouth to mouth. Naturally this can lead to distortion. But Andrejewski and Lewis have compared different versions of the same poem and found a great deal of faithfulness to the original. This is to a great extent due to formal rules; if a word is changed it has to conform to rules of alliteration. It is also due to the phenomenal memories of a people who have grown up in an oral tradition: sometimes they are word-perfect after a single recitation of a poem.

All the various forms of Somali poetry share this common feature of alliteration, which in Somali poetry is different from that in most other languages. A Somali poem, no matter how long it is, should be alliterated by a single consonantal sound, which should occur in one or two prominent syllables, according to the type of poem. In the *qabay*, alliteration must occur in two syllables in each breath-group, one somewhere in the first portion and the other in the last portion. Andrejewski and Lewis further explain: "The same alliteration is maintained throughout the whole poem. If, for example, the alliterative sound of a poem is the consonant *g*, in every hemistich there is one word beginning with *g*. A poem of one hundred lines (two hundred hemistichs) will therefore contain two hundred words beginning with *g*. Similarly, if the alliterative sound is a vowel, in every hemistich there is one word beginning with a vowel."

The passage below illustrates these principles; it alliterates in g.

1 <i>Dhaachaan ka gabangaabsaday e</i>	<i>waygu geliseen e</i>
2 <i>Gooddiga Ban Cawl buu fakhrigu</i>	<i>geed ku leeyahay e</i>
3 <i>Gaajada huggeedii miyaa</i>	<i>galabta i saaray?</i>

1 *I lately sought this plight for myself and you put me into it,*
 2 *On the edge of the 'Awl Pain, poverty has a tree (to sit under),*
 3 *Have the garments of hunger been put on me this evening?*

BOTH POET AND AUDIENCE are very much alive to the standards of correctness required for all the types of poem. Andrzejewski and Lewis say that they have 'not met even one Somali who could state them explicitly. Yet these standards are universally accepted and there is seldom any difference of opinion as to whether a particular passage is correct or not'. The classification of Somali poetry is mainly based on two prosodic factors: the type of tune to which the poem is chanted or sung, and the rhythmic pattern of the words.

THE GABAY is a long narrative poem backed by a simple melody which is chanted at a majestic tempo. The reciter does not modulate his voice and this gives an impression of restraint. It is usually composed on a philosophical theme; any lightheartedness is satirical. It has recently become an important weapon of political propaganda. A good *gabay* composer is an asset to a party; the public will enjoy listening to him even if they disagree with his views. Here are two extracts from *The Death of Richard Corfield* which reappeared in 1959 on a political broadsheet distributed in Mogadishu. It was composed by the 'Mad Mullah' after hearing of Corfield's death at Dul Madoba in 1913. Many of the lines start with the injunction 'say' in the manner of the Koran:

1 *You have died, Corfield, and are no longer in this world,*
 2 *A merciless journey was your portion*
 3 *When, Hell-desired, you set out for the Other World*
 4 *Those who have gone to Heaven will question you, if God is willing;*
 5 *When you see the companions of the faithful and the jewels of Heaven,*
 6 *Answer them how God tried you.*

27 Say: 'Great shouts acclaimed the departing of my soul.'

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28 Say: 'Beasts of prey have eaten my flesh and torn it apart for meat.'

29 Say: 'The sound of swallowing comes from the lion and wailing from the hyaena.'

30 Say: 'The crows plucked out up my veins and tendons.'

THE GERAAR is shorter than the *gabay* and is also unaccompanied. The chant is swifter and the melody livelier. Traditionally it was recited on horseback. It was often chanted to abuse your enemy and to raise the morale of your own soldiers. War is the usual subject matter. In the style can always be detected a note of rapid movement. The following extract of the final lines from a *geraar* called *The Limits of Submission*, by Faarah Nuur, describes how the poet's clan had for a long time lived in submission to a stronger group, but were driven in the end to rebel and to assert their independence:

*If they are still not satisfied,
 At the time of early morning prayers I prepare,
 The dark grey horse with black tendons,
 And with the words 'Praise to the Prophet' I take
 The iron-shafted spear,
 And drive it through their ribs
 So that their lungs spew out;
 Then they are satisfied!*

THE JIFTO is almost the same length as the *gabay*. It has always been less popular than the *gabay* and the *geraar*. It reached its peak in the poetry of Sayy'id Mahamed 'Abdille Hasan but is now apparently going out of fashion. Its mood is usually melancholy and reflective. The *wiglo* is a song with a definite purpose; it is recited by those on guard who must stay awake all night. The *dhaanto* are used for marching songs or rallying songs for an important occasion.

Other forms of Somali poetry are the *buraanbur*, which are women's songs, the *halaanhal*, a type of free verse which is becoming rare nowadays, and the *guroow*, which is sung at gatherings such as weddings, and which resembles the *gabay*, though lighter in tone and simpler in meaning.

THERE ARE 'POP SONGS'. These are the modern *hees* and the *heelo*. The word *hees* means any kind of song: it is now often applied to any song with a political theme. It is the popular poetry of the modern urban community. The whole poem is continuous. There is little use of allegory as can be seen in a song called *Indenendence*. This celebrates the unification of the former British Somaliland Protectorate with the ex-Italian Somalia, and the creation of the independent Somali republic.

*Freedom and dignity have reached us,
 We have brought together the two lands.
 Glory to God!
 Say: 'It is God's victory,
 It is God's victory!
 We are victorious.'*

THE STORY of the *heelo's* invention by 'Abdi Deeqsi, nicknamed the 'Cinema', has already been told. The *heelo* is formed out of a sequence of two-line poems and is thus quite different from the classical forms. The audience claps or stamps to the lively rhythm: there may be a lute or a tambourine for accompaniment. The separate ele-

ments may be sung by the different reciters and the only unifying thread is the theme which is usually love and occasionally politics.

The subject is elaborately treated in metaphorical symbols such as:

*Like a sailing ship caught in a typhoon
I set my compass towards a desolate land,*

The desolate land symbolises the absence of the poet's beloved and the typhoon his feelings. Unlike the poems of the classical tradition the *heelos* disappear after a few months in the same way as the modern *hees*.

*All your young beauty is to me
Like a place where the new grass sways,
After the blessing of the rain,
When the sun unveils its light.*

THIS SHORT *heelo* illustrates one of the many purposes of Somali poetry, for in every land men have always composed songs for the women they loved. Among Somalis, most major events of life, whether personal feelings such as those found in love songs, or happenings which concern a family or a whole tribe, are marked and recorded in songs. Each tribe has its own poets, who compose poems suitable for whatever occasion arises. If there is a tribal fight, the poet is expected to rally the tribesmen by his songs, to incite them to battle, to strengthen their courage. At weddings, when the newly married couples are complimented and given blessings and good advice, it is the poet who gives expression to the thoughts and feelings of the entire community. In politics, issues are debated throughout the country not only in discussions but also in the songs of the *gabay* poets.

ALTHOUGH IT IS OFTEN philosophical, Somali poetry is realistic. The poet deals with the world around him, with the lives of people he knows, and with the creatures familiar to him. Because most Somalis are so dependent upon their livestock, it is common to find poems composed to animals. Camels are the chief source of wealth, but the Somalis also love horses, which are used for riding on the long journeys across the plains, for hunting,

and in battles. Many fine poems have been composed to a favourite steed.

If my horse is ridden at dawn, and travels far, across the distant rivers, still he returns before sunset, as though he were a djinn, or the swiftest wind. I could never live without him—I keep him close to my dwelling, as though he were one of my nearest kin.

The Somalis say that in a land of such hardships as theirs, three things help people to survive—love of poetry, generosity, and good counsel. Somali poetry is often used to heighten generosity and to give good counsel. In the following *gabay*, Koor-jaan rebuked his elder wife for her lack of generosity to strangers who once came to her for food.

"I have learned," he said, "that it is not enough to consider only one's own immediate good in this world. A service done for those in need will act as our salvation in the next world. I charge you, therefore, not to turn away the needy stranger, for if you do, you are leading me away from the path of a noble man and into the ill fame of meanness. That is how Eve misled Adam."

Good counsel is offered by women as well as men. In the following *hees*, one of the few free-verse poems in Somali, a mother advised her daughter to be wise and prudent, for the bond between husband and wife is not unconditional, like the bond between parent and child.

"Oh, my daughter," she said, "believe me, if your burden camel strays, untended, and is lost, your husband may divorce you instantly for he is neither your father nor your mother—he is only your husband."

SO, IN ALL THESE VARIOUS WAYS, Somali poetry flourishes as a necessary and valued part of the life of Somaliland. These poems have many functions—to entertain, to educate the young, to discipline the unruly, to hearten the traveller, and to give a voice to sorrow and to love.

To end here is part of a *gabay* called "Blessing to a Friend" by Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, the early nationalist leader. This *gabay* was composed to a friend who was going on a journey, and it illustrates not only the value placed upon friendship, but also the Somalis' faith in God, a faith which sustains them in a land where life is often perilous and difficult.

Now you depart, and though your way may lead
Through airless forests thick with 'hhagar trees,
Places steered in heat, stifling and dry,
Where breath comes hard, and no fresh breeze
can reach
Yet may Allah place a shield of coolest air
Between your body and the assailant sun.
And in a random scorching flame of wind
That parches the painful throat and sears the flesh,
May Allah, in His compassion, let you find
The great-boughed tree that will protect and shade.
On every side of you I now would place
Prayers from the Holy Qoran, to bless your path,
That ills may not descend, nor evils harm,
And you may travel in the peace of faith.
To all the blessings I bestow on you,
Friend, yourself now say a last Amen.

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