

Somali

From an Oral to a Written Language

Abdalla Omar Mansur

Before 1972 Somalia had no official writing system for its language. In spite of this, those who bred animals (camels, cattle, sheep, and goats) and who, owing to a lack of water in the country were forced to become nomads, had an authentic oral tradition that found its voice in a rich oral literature. This was well and truly oral in that it was composed, memorized, and passed on without having to resort to any type of writing or other means of communication or recording. Many of these genres are typical of any oral tradition: various dance or work songs, fairy stories and other tales, riddles, sayings, proverbs, and so on.

The most highly evolved and highly considered form of the oral arts in Somali society is poetry. It is made up of several genres (*gabay*, *geeraar*, *jiifto*, *guurow*, *buraanbur*, and so on), which differ from each other according to the meter of the lines and the *luuq* or "melody" to which they are sung, in addition to the particular topics they address.

The essential characteristic of a poem is its metrical structure, based upon the length or the number of vowels. A syllable composed of a short vowel equals one unit, while a syllable with a long vowel or a diphthong equals two units, and there are rules that determine the number of units in each genre. There are also positions in which there is only a short vowel and those in which there is only a long vowel. Let us take the *gabay* – the most common form – as an example. It is made up of lines that total twenty or twenty-one units. The line is also divided into two halves, each with a caesura. The first half line is twelve or thirteen units long and the second is eight with two fixed positions for the short vowels in each half line.

In the following lines the position of the short vowels is indicated by the number in brackets:

Sidi geel harraadoo wax badan
1 1 2 (1) 2 2 (1) 1 1

hawdka miranaayo
2 (1) 1 1 2 (1)

oo haro la soo joojiyoo
2 1 1 (1) 2 2 (1) 2

kuraygu heegaayo
1 1 (1) 2 2 (1)

These metrical rules, which vary from genre to genre, were discovered by two Somali researchers (Cabdullaahi Diiriye Guuleed and Moxamed Xaashi Dhamac) after the introduction of a writing system, although poets wrote, and still write, poetry according to intuitively perceived meter.

Apart from this fixed metrical framework, there also exists another technique that is an indispensable component of poetry. This is *alliteration* (see example below). Regardless of genre, every poem is characterized by the alliteration of a certain sound, meaning that every line in it contains one or two words that begin with the same consonant or vowel; it is held that all vowels alliterate with each other, creating one sound. The alliterative sound must be maintained throughout the entire poem. For example, the following *gabay* poem, written by Boodheri in the 1940s, is based on the alliteration of “h.” The poet relates how he dreamed of his beloved (*Hodan*) and his disappointment when he awoke:

Sidii geel harraadoo wax badan
Oo haro la soo joojiyoo
Oo hoobay loo qaaday iyo
Kolkaad Hodan tidhaahdaamba waan
Hadday hawl yaraan idinla tahay
Hammada been ah mar baan is idhi
Jin uun bay hadoodilay mid ay
Hareertayda oo madhan is idhi
Hoggaansigeedii dambaan
Goortaan hubsaday meel cidla’ ah
U haylhaylay gogoshii sidii
Siday iga halleeyeen maryihii

hawdka miranaayay
kuraygu heegaayo
hadal walwaaleedka
soo hinganayaaye
aniga way hooge
waad la huruddaaye
habar wadaagaane
haabo gacanteeda
soo hambaabiraye
inaan ku howshooday
halablihii aare
hiifayoo tumaye

<i>Haabhaabtay labadii go' oo</i>	<i>shaardhkii maan heline</i>
<i>U hammiyay sidii wiil la dhacay</i>	<i>kadin ay haysteene</i>
<i>U hagoogtay sidii geesi ay</i>	<i>niman ka hiisheene</i>
<i>U hiqleeyey sida naag la yidhi</i>	<i>huray dalaagdaaye</i>
<i>Waxaanad haynin ood ku hammidaa</i>	<i>habartii weeyaane</i>
<i>Hoohey iyo hooheey maxaa</i>	<i>hadimo lay geystey?</i>

Like a thirsty camel which had grazed for a long time in the *Hawd*
 And has stopped in front of a pond watched over by a boy
 And to whom the drinking songs are sung
 I too start at once when you speak the name of *Hodan*
 If it is nothing for you, for me it is a tragedy
 Until I sink into the tomb I will not cease wanting her
 Once, in an illusion I thought that I was sleeping with her
 A *jinn* showed me a woman that seemed to be her
 And said to me "Take her hand!," although there was nobody
 near me

At the end of this mirage I awoke and
 I realized that it was only a shadowy form
 I scratched the mat like a full-manned lion
 I shouted and beat the sheets as if they had deceived me
 I grabbed my clothes but did not find my shirt
 I was wounded like a boy who has been robbed of more than a
 hundred camels

I was as desolate as a man who has been found guilty at trial
 I wept like a woman who has been told "Oh! I'm divorcing you!"
 To long for what you do not have is a disaster
 Alas! Alas! How many misfortunes have I had to bear?

Nomadic pastoral poetry is a living art that is, on the whole, concerned with every aspect of nomadic life. It has various functions, involving not only artistic issues, but also social ones. It has cultural, social, and historical significance, and encompasses a variety of subjects: social and political issues, moral and religious exhortations, complaints about misfortunes that have struck the poet or his community, and so on. Traditionally, the poet's role was that of the spokesman for his clan, putting forward their arguments in poetical form. Through his poetical abilities, the poet has a

strong influence on the life of the clan. His poetic gifts allowed him to play an important part in making war or reconciling two warring clans. Somali poetry, which in the past had no written form, not only bears the name of the writer, but it is also known when and why it was written and to which clan the poet belonged. Thanks to the poets' memories or to those who specialized in memorizing and reciting others' verse, poetry, circulated from mouth to mouth, is the main means of mass communication, having a role equivalent to that of the press or television in Western society.

The Second World War and the years that followed brought social change to Somalia. Cities, previously inhabited by few people, grew rapidly. With the emergence of new social classes (clerks, interpreters, teachers, soldiers, tradesmen, and so on) the need grew for a literature that was suitable to urban life. Therefore a new poetical genre arose: miniature love poetry. Poets took on traditional poetic forms, but the content, the melody, and the musical instruments that accompanied them were completely new. This encouraged the emergence of Somali theatre, where sung poetry is of central importance. In this way, theatre is a blend of the Somali oral tradition and foreign techniques, representing real life on the stage.

It should be noted that apart from Somali, which is spoken throughout the country, Arabic was for many centuries the only written language, mainly used for religious purposes. With the expansion of colonialism, Somalia acquired two more written languages: Italian and English, which were adopted respectively in the previous Italian and British colonies. From the middle of the century onwards they became the languages of education and administration. This was true even after independence and up until 1972. They had such prestige among intellectuals that the local language and the art of the oral tradition declined in importance, though these were kept alive, as before, by nomadic and rural speakers. Thanks to urbanized nomads, hybrid literary genres are still produced in towns, transmitted in new ways (by radio and tapes) entertaining audiences and provoking thought.

Various attempts were made between the 1920s and the 1940s to write Somali using Arab or Latin script or Osmania (a completely different system). It was only in 1972, however, that Latin script was established as the national system. Somali thus became

the official state language. The introduction of Somali in schools as the language of education and the launch of a literacy campaign throughout the country finally allowed the entire population to take possession of its national and cultural heritage, with the use of its own native language at all levels of society.

To express new concepts that were foreign to the local culture, Somali has had to acquire a vast amount of technical terms on the basis of neologisms.

Many terms that were strictly connected with traditional culture, and which had fallen into disuse, were revived to form new meanings which were, however, still linked in some way to the original ones. Let us consider some of these as an example. The original meaning is given in brackets. Some samples include:

<i>xagal</i>	= corner (curve of the elbow or knee)
<i>xawaare</i>	= speed (horse race)
<i>gole</i>	= parliament (a community's meeting place)
<i>abwaan</i>	= encyclopedia (an erudite and wise person)
<i>unug</i>	= cell (the beginning of a fiber container during its fabrication)
<i>qalinjebin</i>	= to graduate (to break the pen at the end of learning the Koran)
<i>dhig</i>	= meridian (branches that form the framework of a nomad's dome-shaped hut)
<i>raadraac</i>	= bibliography (to follow the trail of an animal or wanted person)
<i>hakad</i>	= comma (pause or rest for a short time)
<i>layli</i>	= exercise (a young animal that is being tamed)
<i>bil</i>	= brackets (half moon)
<i>bed</i>	= area, surface (the space that a house occupies)

New Somali compound terms have been created, made up of two or more existing words, to form different meanings. For example:

<i>hiddoside</i>	= gene (from <i>hiddo</i> = origin + <i>side</i> = carrier)
<i>ilaysraac</i>	= phototropism (to follow light)
<i>kaadisokorow</i>	= diabetes (sugared urine)
<i>iidheh</i>	= advertising (to say for me)

<i>kulbeeg</i>	= thermometer (hot measurement)
<i>hantidhowr</i>	= finance court (control of wealth)
<i>ilmaqabato</i>	= microscope (not seen by the eye)
<i>dayaxgacmeed</i>	= man-made satellite (hand-size moon)
<i>xeerilaaliye</i>	= state prosecutor (guardian of the law)

Other neologisms, which were not possible to form from Somali, are made up of words borrowed from the three foreign languages that are widespread in the country (Italian, English, and Arabic). As an example, here are some of Italian origin:

<i>koronto</i>	= corrente elettrica (electric current)
<i>kiimika</i>	= chimica (chemistry)
<i>isbitaal</i>	= ospedale (hospital)
<i>idolojiyo</i>	= ideologia (ideology)
<i>kontrobaan</i>	= contrabbando (contraband)
<i>shineemo</i>	= cinema (cinema)
<i>muusiko</i>	= musica (music)
<i>raadiyo</i>	= radio (radio)
<i>boorso</i>	= borsa (bag)
<i>iskafaale</i>	= scaffale (shelf)
<i>kintaal</i>	= quintale (hundred kilograms, quintal)
<i>farmashiya</i>	= farmacia (pharmacy)
<i>idroojen</i>	= idrogeno (hydrogen)
<i>tuubo</i>	= tubo (tube, pipe)
<i>motoor</i>	= motore (engine)
<i>baasto</i>	= pasta (pasta)
<i>suugo</i>	= sugo (sauce)
<i>okiyaale</i>	= occhiale (glasses)
<i>kashawiito</i>	= cacciavite (screwdriver)
<i>fuusto</i>	= fusto, bidone (drum, bin)
<i>blukeeti</i>	= blocchetto di costruzione (cement blocks)
<i>akadeemiyo</i>	= accademia (academy)
<i>fitamiin</i>	= vitamina (vitamin)

Somali vocabulary has been enormously enriched in this way, allowing the publication of many books in Somali for all schools, from primary to higher education.

Because the Somali language must have recourse mainly to itself in the coining of scientific or technical terms (contrary to Western languages which usually use Greek and Latin) is due to make this terminology, which is totally new in traditional Somali culture, accessible to the less educated people.

Another element that has influenced the language is the nationalist spirit, which cannot be born or grow without the support of a national language, which in turn will accompany it along its entire development.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, a Somali nationalist leader, gave life to a strong movement within the northern party of the country, declaring war on British, Italian, and Ethiopian forces. For twenty years he fought to free his country from foreign, especially British, domination.

Thanks to Islam and poetry, Sayid managed to mobilize numerous Somalis from different clans still in conflict. Taking advantage of his great religious authority and extraordinary poetic agility – Somalis are traditionally very sensitive to poetry – he communicated and converted partisans.

Immediately following the war, an independence movement was born from this effort (the Somali Youth League) that sought to nationally reunite Somalia towards independence along the following lines:

1. Reunification under one flag of all Somalis spread out throughout territory under colonial domination (Italian Somalia, British Somalia, French Somalia, Ethiopian Ogadeen, and the Kenyan provinces with a Somali majority);
2. Abolition of traditional tribal divisions;
3. Adoption of the written Somali language as the official language of the nation.

A number of poets – the “intellectuals” of the traditional culture – will join these young independents, and their poetry will play a determining role in the formation of the national spirit, a completely novel notion for that era. The concept of nation did not in fact exist;

even though all were part of the same ethnicity with a unique language, the Somalis had always been divided into numerous clans, always in conflict over wells, pastures, and stolen animals.

The following two verses from the national hymn serve as an example:

Tulud geeloo dhacan baa toban toban u dhintaane
Ma dhulkan tagay baan dhagaxna loo tuuraynee?

For the love of a stolen camel ten of your compatriots you murder
But for this pillaged country why does no one even throw a stone?

Somalia's long-standing ethno-cultural homogeneity, unusual in the African context, turned out to be of great importance to stimulate and uphold the anticolonialist fight.

Once independence was obtained (1960), northern Somalia¹ and southern Somalia² did unite, but the two colonial powers (Britain and Italy) had left the traces of their very different judicial, bureaucratic, administrative, and academic traditions. Needless to say, this enormously complicated the integration and communication between the two societies. Even though the Somali language was perfectly understood in the north as in the south, the lack of a unified code forced the administrators of the south to write in Italian and those of the north in English, and all communication between the two parties necessitated an often hard to find interpreter. After fourteen years, the adoption of an official Somali writing system finally put an end to this situation.

Therefore, the Somali language, which for many years has been the cement of the nationalistic aggregation, did not go unnoticed in what its rich oral tradition offers, in a time historically so important, in which the Somali language embraces (or receives) its proper orthography.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that in reviving many words from traditional culture and basing the creation of the written literature on the indigenous cultural tradition, the innovation of writing has created a bridge between nomadic and urban cultures. The first intellectuals who wrote in Somali transposed a portion of oral literature into writing, thereby creating a collection of stories, poems, and traditional proverbs. Later, the same thing was done in

prose, creating and developing a new narrative mode. Many tales, novels, and short stories, with a distinctly modern structure, are often published in episodes in newspapers or in books dealing with social issues and the various problems of urban living.

ARTICLE SYNOPSIS IN SOMALI

Af tiraab oo isu rogay af qoraal

1972 ka hor af soomaaligu wuxuu ahaa af lagu hadlo oo keli ah oo aan qornayn. Wuxuuna lahaa suugaan aad u ballaaran oo si murti leh uga hadasha nolosha reer miyiga iyada oo ulajeeddo badan leh, sida: waano, xigmad, ammaan, wargelin, dagaal (kicintiisa ama dejintiisa), kaftan, madaddaalo iwm.

Markii lagu soo qulqulay magaalada waxaa dhacday in halkii suugaanta ay gashay aqoon iyo maamul cusub oo loo adeegsado afaf shisheeye, afki hooyana wuxuu noqfay mid laysku wargeliyo oo kiliya. Sidaas awgeed ayaa afki qiimihiisa iyo ereyadiisa badnaa ay yaraadeen.

Kaddib markii af soomaaliga loo yeeley far gaar ah, waxaa khasab noqotay in la sameeyo ereybixiin badan oo ka kooban ereyadii hore ee reer miyiga oo dib loo soo nooleeyey iyo kuwo shisheeye. Sidaasaana u suuragashay in afkii lagu gudbiyo xitaa fikradaha cusub ee la socda aqoonta iyo dhaqanka magaalada. Waxaa markiiba la soo saaray wargeysyo iyo buugaag fara badan oo nooc walba leh, ilaa maantana way socdaan. Sidaas ayuu afkii ku noqday mid qoran.

Bibliography

- Andrzejewski B. W. *The Literary Culture of the Somali People*, in Loughran K. S., Loughran J. L., *Somalia in Word and Image* (Washington, Foundation for Cross Cultural Understanding, 1968), pp. 35-66.
- Antinucci F. and Axmed F. C. "Idaajaa." *Poesia orale somala: storia di una nazione*, Studi Somali 7 (Roma, Min. AA.EE. e Comitato Tecnico Linguistico per l'Università Nazionale Somala, 1986).
- Banti G. *Letteratura*, in Puglielli, A. (a cura di), *Aspetti dell'espressione artistica in Somalia* (Roma, Università di Roma "La Sapienza," 1988), pp. 31-71.
- Said Sh. Samatar. *Somali Verbal and Material Arts*, in Loughran K. S., Loughran J. L., *Somalia in Word and Image*, (Washington, Foundation for Cross Cultural Understanding, 1986), pp. 35-66.

Notes

1. The previous British colonies
2. The previous Italian colonies