DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF SOMALI POETRY, 1981-1986

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Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Somali poetry has been attracting the attention of academic researchers and amateur observers, and a sizable volume of publications has resulted. Surveys of relevant research and documentation are now available, but they do not extend to the most recent period, and the aim of this article is to fill the gap by providing a brief account of developments from 1981-1986. I am encouraged to undertake this task by the fact that during this period some highly significant advances were made which augur well for further sustained progress.

THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD

Somali oral poetry of the precolonial period is much less well documented than that of later times, and thus the collected poems of Axmed Mahdi “Ginshish” (1818-1905), written down from oral sources by Cali Sh. Axmed “Mudiir” and Caalid Cusmaan Sheekh, is of special interest. Their book bears a somewhat unusual title, Baarir ka fog shiixsadd (Research far removed from politics), which can be interpreted as reflecting a conviction, held by many Somalis, that their national poetic heritage should transcend the tensions and divisions of modern times.

The texts of the poems have been collected by the two researchers from oral sources with great care, and each poem is accompanied by extensive explanations of its social and historical background as well as its poetic message so that it is fully intelligible to the modern reader. The book also contains a biography of the poet, who still enjoys a high reputation among the people of the Galgudud region and adjoining areas. The poems are mainly concerned with the affairs of the poet’s family circle and local clan politics, but there are some references to the events he witnessed in the latter part of his life, when the Italian colonization of Somalia began to be established.

Axmed Mahdi “Ginshish,” who was a peacemaker at a time of great lawlessness and violence, exhorts his listeners to follow the Muslim virtues and warns against the supernatural sanctions wrongdoers would incur. Apart from their undoubted aesthetic appeal, the poems in this collection provide valuable insights into the social history of Somalia and show how poetry was used in the

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precolonial period as a means of exhortation and polemics in the public forum of Somali clans.

THE DERVISH WAR PERIOD AND SOMALI POETICS

In the years under discussion, two books concerned with the documentation and interpretation of the oral poetry of the Dervish War were published, and both contribute to our knowledge of Somali poetics and the role of poetry in Somali society. The first is Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Muhammad ‘Abdillah Hasan, by Said S. Samatar. It focuses on Somali history between 1900 and 1921, concentrating on the formidable figure of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan, the leader of the Dervish movement and one of the most renowned Somali poets. The book also makes a major contribution to the study of Somali poetry by giving a detailed account of the Sayid's poetry and that of some of his supporters and opponents, and by explaining in depth the characteristics of Somali oral poetry of the public forum and its social and political functions.

In his account of the Dervish War, Samatar shows how the Sayid used his poetry as highly effective propaganda to attack his enemies, seek support from potential allies, and expound his doctrinal justification for waging a holy war. The author's description of events is interspersed with complete texts, or extracts, of poems of the Sayid and of his supporters and opponents, and he treats them not merely as local color but as authentic oral sources that document attitudes and motivations as well as, in some cases, illuminate events inadequately covered in European materials.

Most of the texts are given in English translation only, but Samatar takes care to indicate where the Somali originals can be found, a matter of importance to literary scholars. The translations combine accuracy with a style which does justice to the high aesthetic standards of the originals.

In the introductory chapters dealing with Somali poetics, Samatar explains how poetry forms an integral part of the public oratory employed in the traditional procedures of collective decision-making and the conduct and settlement of disputes. As he points out, because of a very demanding system of alliteration and scansion, the circle of influential poets is limited to exceptionally gifted people who are greatly admired by the general public, and he explains how poetry reciters aim at accurate verbatim memorization of the oral texts, which they learn from the poet or from one another. They are prohibited by custom from making substantial deliberate changes in the original, and at each recital the name of the poet must be announced, in observance of an unwritten copyright. This method makes Somali poetry a suitable medium for disseminating at great speed and over a wide area a poetic "open letter" in oral form which leaves its listeners in no doubt as to the sender.

A diagrammatic model explaining the routes of dissemination is given in the book. Any willful breach of copyright disgraces its perpetrator, and Samatar describes a case of oral plagiarism and its punishment in the region where he lived in his youth.

The influence of the poets on the public can be explained not only by the great love of poetry in Somali society but also by the popular beliefs that highly gifted poets have contact with supernatural forces, so that their curses are feared, their blessings are received with gratitude, and their predictions of future events are treated very seriously. From the sections of the book describing the nature of Somali poetry, it becomes very clear how the Sayid, a poet of outstanding talent, could draw to himself, and hold many supporters and undermine the morale of his adversaries.

In its scope, detail, and depth of interpretation, Samatar's volume substantially advances our knowledge of the subject.

The other book concerned with the poetry of the Dervish War is Ina Cabdulle Xasan e sua attività letteraria (Ina Cabdulle Xasan and his literary activity), by Yaasii H. Xasan Cihan. To a large extent it overlaps with Samatar's work since both are concerned mainly with the life, deeds, and poetry of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan, but the two books differ considerably in their approach and emphasis. While Samatar provides an overall historical description and in-depth interpretation of the dynamics operating in Somali society at that time and of the Sayid's role as poet and war leader, Yaasii H. Xasan Cihan focuses principally on the poems composed by the Sayid and his supporters and opponents. Each text, given in both the original and Italian, is accompanied by an introduction and very extensive notes, which sometimes amount to short essays on Somali history, customs, and traditional beliefs and practices. In this respect the book is a model for the presentation of the older Somali poems in scholarly editions; since the author is an eminent lexicographer and collector of oral literature, and since his family has played an important role in Somali history, this is perhaps not surprising. All the poems were collected by the author from oral sources. Some have been published previously by other collectors, but in slightly different versions, and the divergences are of great interest to scholars studying the extent to which verbatim memorization is achieved despite the limitations of the human memory.

The book has two introductory chapters. The first, which gives an account of Somali history of the period and a biography of the Sayid, contains a great deal of detailed information, some of which is not available in any published sources. This chapter and the texts of the poems and accompanying notes confirm and amplify Samatar's findings on the crucial role of oral poetry in the Dervish War. The second introductory chapter describes the main
characteristics of Somali poetry, concentrating on some of its themes and social functions, and is very amply illustrated by poetic texts accompanied by Italian translations and annotations. Most of these examples are not concerned with the Dervish War, but they add significantly to the documentation of Somali oral poetry in general.\[11\]

POETRY SINCE THE DERVISH WAR

In the period covered by this article, poetry since the Dervish War received attention in two books, one published in 1983 and the other in 1986. Manasadal Timacadde (The poetry of Timacadde), by Boobe Yusuf Ducaale, is a collection of oral poetry by Cabi'llalih Sultaan “Timcadde” (1920-1973), together with introductory and textual notes on each poem and a biography of the poet. The notes describe the circumstances under which the poems were composed, explain all the allusions to persons and events perhaps now forgotten, and provide glosses on neologisms, archaisms, and obscure words. Also included are elegiac poems in Timcadde’s praise by four leading poets who admired his work, Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac, Celi Ciliimi Aseyare, Celi Ibraahim Fidale, and Xuseen Aw Faarax.

During research undertaken between 1975 and 1978, Boobe Yusuf Ducaale transcribed most of the poems in this collection under dictation from people who knew them by heart or took them from tape recordings made during the life of the poet. Some texts, however, he obtained from transcripts made by other collectors of oral poetry. Cabi'llalih Sultaan was a very prolific poet, and the collection is not exhaustive, but it does contain some of his most famous works and is a very important contribution to the documentation of Somali oral poetry. Although Timcadde’s poems are much appreciated for their aesthetic qualities, his popularity largely derives from his passionate commitment to the cause of independence during the colonial period and his fierce condemnation of the evils of corruption and tribalism in independent Somalia. The poems span the period from 1936 to the beginning of Timcadde’s terminal illness in 1971, and because of his deep involvement in political questions they are of considerable value, together with Ducaale’s notes, for the study of Somali political and social history.

Cabi’llalih Sultaan was not alone, of course, in being deeply involved in the public life of his time; Somali poets comment on current affairs and frequently influence events by swaying public opinion, which is not unusual in a country where poetry is immensely popular in all walks of life. With the passage of time, however, poems once concerned with contemporary affairs acquire a new function. Preserved and transmitted verbatim by poetry reciters, and now also through writing and sound recording, they become valuable historical sources, for the local written documentation is scanty and very recent, and there is no epic poetry to chronicle the past. The historical value of the poems is enhanced by the custom among the reciters of providing commentaries in prose on the older poems, describing the circumstances under which they were composed, giving oral glosses on obscure passages, and explaining allusions to persons, events, and customs perhaps no longer known to their audience.

This documenting function of Somali poetry made it possible for an Italian linguist, Francesco Antiucci, and a Somali creative writer and literary scholar, Xaamed Faarax Cali “Idaajaa,” to achieve their aim in presenting Somali political and social history from 1920 to the present in their 1986 book, Poesia orale somala: Storia di una nazione (Somali oral poetry: The history of a nation). Twenty-six poems composed during that period are presented in the original, accompanied by Italian translations and by introductory and textual notes, and preceded by an introductory chapter which places the poetry in its social and political setting. The book is a very welcome addition to works on Somali history since it provides a view of events from the Somali perspective and offers insights which could not be gained from a plain, straightforward description.

The poems were composed by two dozen poets, several of whom achieved nationwide fame through public recitals, broadcasts, and cassette recordings of their works. The introductory chapter includes a brief account of Somali poetics, and its treatment of the system of scansion, although based on previous discoveries, is innovative in its very economical and lucid presentation and prosodic notation. Attention is given to the general characteristics of Somali oral poetry which distinguish it from that of many other societies, and the account provided corroborates the findings of Samatar. It has been assumed by some scholars that all oral poetry is composed in the same way as that of southern Slavs, who did not memorize verbatim but instead re-created the poems by improvising on the same themes, using different wording at each performance. In improvisation they could draw on a repertoire of fixed poetic formulas of verbatim memorized lines which, because of their general character, could fit into a poem at any point, and thus they could maintain a continuous flow of verse even when there were momentary breaks in their inspiration. This mode of composition is conspicuously absent in Somalia, and the authors make the following observation: “Per chi ha familiarità con la classica tradizione di studi sulla poesia orale dovuta alla scuola di Parry e Lord, è evidente che la poesia somala, pur essendo poesia del tutto orale, presenta caratteri diametralmente opposti a quelli che, secondo la scuola formulaica, caratterizzano la poesia orale.” (To people who are familiar with the classical tradition of oral poetry studies of the school of Parry and Lord, we shall say that Somali poetry, even though it is poetry which is entirely oral, exhibits features diametrically opposite to those which, according to the formulaic school, characterize oral poetry.)
WORK-SONGS AND PRAISE-SONGS

In contrast with the works discussed so far, all of which deal with the poetry of the public forum, two contributions were made in the period under review to the documentation and interpretation of poetic texts of work-songs and praise-songs. Such texts belong to what John W. Johnson calls the family of miniature genres, which usually have no known authorship and are not covered by Somali unwritten copyright. Most of the texts are short and haiku-like in the compactness of their poetic message, and if they achieve any length they are composed of sequences of thematically autonomous units, joined together by the “string of pearls” principle.

The first of the two works, *Hoobaanta afka hooyo* (The ripe fruit of the mother tongue), by Said Ahmed Warsame, is written in Somali and accompanied by a French translation by Aidid Aden. It contains a collection of poems used in the songs of the pastoralists of the Djibouti area, most of them concerned with cattle-herding and watering. Each poem is provided with an explanatory note, in many cases very extensive, and this is essential for a full understanding of the texts since most of them use a figurative and symbolic discourse in which the deeper, inner message is encoded. When the meaning is concealed, under the surface of apparently simple or even trivial words there often appears a depth of reflective thought and acute observation of the realities of life. Somali pastoralists believe that by singing to their animals they enhance their well-being and sense of security. The words of their songs, however, are expected to be heard by their fellow herdsmen for their entertainment and instruction.

In the Introduction, Said Ahmed Warsame describes the social and natural environment in which the poems were created and gives a glossary of rare and specialized words occurring in the texts. He has added to the so far very scanty documentation of the miniature genres of Somali poetry, and through his notes he draws our attention to the highly sophisticated nature of seemingly simple, improvised compositions. The texts tell us a great deal about the life of Somali pastoralists, their outlook on life, and their emotional attitudes toward the animals in their care.

The second book to discuss work-songs and praise-songs is *Daalkii weyn: The Land of Spices*, by a well-known Somali scholar and writer, Ahmed Catan Xaange. Its Somali title means “The Fragrant Land,” a reference to Somalia’s reputation, believed to go back to the times of ancient Egypt as an exporter of incense. Despite the English words in the title, the book is written in Somali only.

The author’s main concern is Somali traditional material culture, covering a wide range of subjects; he describes, for example, the collection and use of aromatic gums and resins, and he gives well-annotated lists of plants used for food and for medicinal and hygienic purposes. We learn how portable huts are constructed, mats woven, and vessels for milk and water are made, and about traditional clothes and cosmetics. There is information also about fishing, pearl diving, ship-building, methods of navigation, and the use of the trade winds of the region.

To some of this detailed technical material the author gives an additional literary dimension by providing the poetic texts of work-songs, which enliven the various practical tasks and relieve their tedium, and of praise-songs, which enhance the significance of the artifacts or the materials from which they are made. As there is only very limited documentation of this kind of poetry, the book is a welcome new source of material, and the author’s approach demonstrates the correctness of the view that in Somali traditional culture the practical and the artistic components are inextricably interwoven.

SOMALI SYSTEM OF SCANSON AND ALLITERATION

In the 1970s the rules of quantitative scansion in Somali poetry were formulated for the first time, although they had been applied intuitively by poets from time immemorial. Two Somali scholars finally determined the rules and published their discovery in a series of articles in the national daily newspaper, *Xiddiga Oktuubar*. Their formulations showed that the traditional classification of poetic genres under such labels as *gaaban*, *geeraar*, *jiifro*, *buraanbur*, and so on, was based on a fixed number of *mora* in the lines of each genre. Syllables with short vowels or short diphthongs were found to have one *mora* each, and those with long vowels or long diphthongs two *mora* each.

The discovery was brought to the notice of scholars outside Somalia by John W. Johnson in his article, “Somali Prosodic Systems,” in which he summarized the original formulations, added some new theoretical refinements of his own, and presented the system in a manner readily understandable by scholars familiar with the scanion system of classical Greek and Latin. This article was published in 1978, and Johnson has undertaken further research in this field, during some of which he has collaborated with Cabdillaahi Diriye Guuleed, one of the two scholars mentioned above; in 1983 he published the results in his paper, “Recent Researches into the Scansion of Somali Poetry.” The paper demonstrates that the scansion patterns not only have fixed numbers of *mora* allocated to the lines of each genre but also contain ordered sequences of *senes,* that is, prosodic spaces (slots) which determine the distribution of short and long syllables fitted into them. The rules governing these ordered sequences are...
described in detail, and a very sophisticated system of graphic representation is used for the purpose. The description of this mora-syllabic relationship within Somali scansion given in the paper shows that its rules are even more complex than was previously thought.

The second area of Somali scansion dealt with in Johnson's paper concerns words with syllables of variable length. In one group of words, the membership of which is restricted to the definite articles kii and dhi, preverbal pronouns, and certain particles and conjunctions, one of the syllables, or the only syllable, may vary in length according to the style of speech and speed of pronunciation. There are also variations in length, independent of grammatical categories, which occur in syllables containing diphthongs not immediately followed by a consonant within the same word. The paper draws attention to the fact that poets struggling with the constraints imposed on them by the complex rules of scansion make ample use of the choices offered by these variations, and this practice has to be taken into account when dealing with published transcripts of oral poems written in the official Somali orthography. Editors of such transcripts often follow the orthographic rules, which standardize the spelling of words with varying syllabic length in favor of the longer variants, without making appropriate adjustments to represent the shorter variants required by the scansion patterns. This makes it imperative that any researchers working on Somali scansion not depend on written texts without reference to their vocal realizations.

The connection between the intricacies of the scansion and alliteration rules, on the one hand, and the goal of verbatim memorization, on the other, is explored in "Alliteration and Scansion in Somali Oral Poetry and Their Cultural Correlates," an article by the present writer, and in "Recent Researches into the Scansion of Somali Poetry," by John W. Johnson. Both put forward the view that the formidable formal constraints of Somali oral poetics act not only as a mnemonic device but also to protect the text against distortion in memory storage and in transmission from one reciter to another. These constraints also can account for the relative brevity of Somali poems as compared with oral literary cultures which have epic poetry.

Although the scansion of Somali poetry exhibits a high degree of rigidity, it does leave a certain number of free choices to the poets. An analysis of the transcript of a famous poem of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan, Darraar (Last will), by Ahmed Adan Axmed suggests that certain variations in rhythmic patterns can be used by talented poets to heighten the relevance of selected words and passages. In his paper, "Maanso Structure to the Meaning of 'Darraar,'" Ahmed Adan Axmed explores the scansion patterns of the poem and relates its acoustic expressiveness to the meaning and the emotional appeal of the text, using his intuition as a born speaker of Somali as the basis of his descriptive statements. His paper also contains a very useful account of the Somali terminology of poetics and draws attention to Cabdillaahi Dirriye Guuleed's seminal work in this field.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The scope of this article is limited to published works only. It should be noted, however, that a large body of research exists in typescript at the Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Literature in Mogadishu, and a number of books, although evaluated and ready for print, still remain unpublished for economic reasons. Among them are the results of research and documentation conducted by members of the academy and scholars sponsored by it.

Also among the large number of B.A. dissertations at the National University are some concerned with the study of Somali poetry or which use poetic texts when dealing with traditional customs or local history. Some are of considerable interest; they are based on research into oral poetry undertaken by students during long vacations spent in their home regions, where they are assured of cooperation from poets and poetry reciters among their kinfolk and friends.

Most of the unpublished materials are in Somali only, but some are accompanied by translations into English, Italian, or French. No survey of these materials has as yet been published, and this applies both to the period between 1981 and 1986 and earlier ones. They are catalogued, however, in the archives of the academy and in the libraries of the National University. Access may be obtained by arrangement with these two centers of learning and the respective authors, who are usually very cooperative and well disposed toward any research into the poetic heritage of the Somali nation.

NOTES

1 A bibliography of surveys of Somali literature, including poetry, is found in Andrzejewski (1984), to which the survey provided in Andrzejewski (1985) (not extending beyond 1980) should be added.

The most recent general bibliography of Somali literature is that of Lamber (1986).

2 I am indebted to Hamish Wilson for bringing this book to my attention; it appeared in a very small printing. For the use of quotation marks in the Somali naming system, see Appendix A.

3 Translations given in parentheses are provided for the convenience of readers; they do not appear on the title pages of the works concerned.

4 For the method of transcription used by Said S. Samatar (Said Sheikh Samatar), which diverges from the official Somali orthography, see Appendix B. See also Appendix A for an account of other divergences in the spelling of the same names.

5 A list of these texts is given in Appendix B. It also includes texts by some poets who flourished before or after the Dervish War. These texts are used as examples in the discussion of Somali poetics.


7 On p. 65 of his book.

8 In means "son of." Ina Cabdulle Xasan is a variant form of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan; see Appendix A.

9 A list of these texts is given in Appendix C.
REFERENCES

The names of Somali authors are given in their customary order and are not inverted. For information about the other collectors, see Andrezewski (1985).

For a list of the texts is given in Appendix C. A list of their texts is given in Appendix D. For an account of the role of radio broadcasts and tape recordings in modern Somali poetry, see Andrezewski (1985, 1986).

For an account of Southern Slav poetry, see Lord (1964).

Page 29 of their book.

Johnson (1972).

Most of the information in this book is not available in any other published sources. The volume also contains a large number of specialized Somali terms relating to traditional technologies and is thus of interest to lexicographers.

This view is forcefully put forward in Said S. Samatar (1986).

A bibliography of these articles is found in Johnson (1978).

The first name of this author is also spelled Cabdullaahi. In its anglicized form, his name is Abdilahi Deria Guled.

Johnson uses the term *same* in its specialized prosodic sense. It has no direct connection with the same as used in semantics.

APPENDIX A

Somali Proper Names

In Somali studies it is common to encounter divergences in the spelling of the same proper names. Some are written in the Somali official orthography, or some are adapted to the orthographic conventions of European languages or Arabic, and some are given in various kinds of phonological transcription. Similar divergences occur in the spelling of honorific titles which precede similar names, such as *Sayid* ("master", "lord"), *Xaaji* ("a person who has performed the Muslim Pilgrimage"), and *Sheekh* ("a learned Muslim cleric").

In this article Somali proper names are spelled according to the rules of the Somali official orthography except for divergent forms on the title pages of other publications where reference is made. These orthographic divergences are given in the list below, and each is followed by an orthographic equivalent in parentheses: Ahmed Adan Ahmed (Axmed Aadan Axmed); Aidid Aden (Cayiid Aadan); Said Ahmed Warsame (Sacidi Axmed Warsame); Said S. Samatar / Said Sheikh Samatar (Sacidi Sh. Samatar / Sacidi Sheikh Samatar); and Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdillah Hasan (Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan). Irrespective of the divergences arising from the use of different systems of spelling, some names have optional variants, such as Maxamed / Maxamad / Maxamad (orthographic) or Mohamed / Muhammid / Muhammad (nonorthographic).

In the References and appendices B, C, and D, where alphabetized lists are given, the Somali names follow the order customary in Somalia and are not inverted. This is done since family names are not used there, and a person is
identified by his given name followed by those of his father and grandfather, for example, Cali Xuseen Cilmii, "Cali, son of Xuseen, grandson of Cilmii." In accordance with Somali practice, quotation marks are used for nicknames to distinguish them from other names, for example, Aadan Axmed "Afgalooce." In these, they are given after the other names, and if they are composite, they are divided from them by a comma, for example, Cismaan Yusuf Cali, "Cismaan Keenaadii.

Honorary titles, which refer to the bearer of the given name and which normally immediately precede that name, are given at the end of the entry and are placed between oblique strokes, for example, Maxamed Cabdille Xasan, /Sayid/. Other honorary titles in the name sequences refer to the father or grandfather of the person concerned.

Further information about divergences in spelling and the Somali naming system can be found in Andrzejewski (1982).

Divergences in the spelling of the same proper names and the absence of family names are also encountered in other countries of northeastern Africa. As the volume of publications relating to these countries increases, this creates a serious problem for anyone concerned with the compilation and retrieval of bibliographical and biographical information. It would be useful to develop a generally accepted code of practice among scholars working in this field, and it might be appropriate to give attention to this matter at some international meeting. It is interesting to note that in the bibliography provided in a recent article by Berhanu Abegaz, published in Northeast African Studies 7, 3 (1985), Ethiopian names are not inverted but are given in their customary order, which resembles that used in Somalia.

APPENDIX B


The names of the poets are given in their orthographic form. It should be noted that Said S. Samatar's transcription uses the symbols d, h, and ' instead of the orthographic dh, x, and c, respectively. Figures are page references. For the use of oblique strokes and quotation marks, see Appendix A.


Qamaan Bulxan: 77-78; Raage Ugaas: 68; Salaan Carrabey: 68, 87; Xasan Shii: 178; Xuseen Dhique: 172.

APPENDIX C


For explanatory notes see appendices A and B.


APPENDIX D

Poets Whose Texts Are Found in Antiunucc and Axmed Faarax Cali "Iddaafuu" (1986)

For explanatory notes, see appendices A and B.