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# Somali Oral Poetry as a Vehicle for Understanding Disequilibrium and Conflicts in a Pastoral Society

*Mohamed Abdillahi Rirash*

Somali oral poetry is a vital aspect of Somali pastoral society and the medium through which the Somalis depict their history and express their feelings towards both friends and foes. This paper aims to explain how Somali oral poetry is transmitted from one generation to another and highlights the pastoralists' reaction to and rationalization of challenges and conflicts, internal and external.

Said S. Samatar wrote in reference to Somali oral poetry:

"Because it is the language and the vehicle of politics, the verse which Somali poets produce is an important source of Somali history, just as the printed and televised word performs a similar function in the West" (Samatar, 1982).

Oral traditions and oral poetry are the major sources of historical record for the many societies whose languages have only relatively recently (as is the case with the Somali language), or not yet, been transcribed into script.

Somali oral poetry functions as a vehicle for everything that concerns their lives, and it is their history;

"It is the duty, for example, of the Somali pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize in verse, the dominant issues of the age—in short, to record and immortalize in verse, the history of his people in verse. And since the poets' talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts and actions of his age." (*ibid.*).

Now, more than at any time in the past, there is a pressing need to recount the present conflicts through the medium of poetry, and in the light of past events of disequilibrium which have always culminated in conflicts and disaster.

Throughout its long history the Horn of Africa which is home to the Somali pastoralists, has been a focus of both inter-

nal and external conflicts. From the earliest time, frankincense and myrrh attracted man's attention to the region. These were very important commodities, both within and outside the region, venerated and sought after by all nations for their religious temples, churches and synagogues. For their acquisition transactions were made and battles were fought (Markakis, 1990).

The historical presence in the region of ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Arab Muslims is largely due to these commodities and other similar products for which they competed as long ago as during the biblical times. It may be that many of the stories and events recorded in the Old Testament took place here; certainly many of the societies in the area had very strong ties with the Middle East where these events are believed to have occurred.

Christianity and later Islam with their respective followers competed for resources and control of the trade routes and slaves, and were instrumental in the creation of conflicts along religious lines which became a most common feature of the region's history. These wars continued over centuries and culminated in the 16th century *jihad*; the most devastating and the most destructive of all the conflicts the region had ever experienced (*ibid.*).

The intervention of the Portuguese on the side of the Christians and the Ottoman Turks

on the side of the Muslims aggravated the situation in such a way that its catastrophic effects on the whole region were to persist for a long time. Neither side could confidently wage war against the other (*ibid.*:12-15) and as a result, these religious conflicts were left dormant until the 19th century when they were reactivated by the European powers. The arrival of the Europeans disturbed the social, political and economic balance that had thus existed in the region. In effect, today's problems in the Horn of Africa are quite closely linked to the aftermath of their coming to the region.

Somali oral traditions of the events that predate the 19th century refer to these events either vaguely and in prose only, or not at all. However, from that period onwards, almost all the events that took place here were not simply retold but have been vividly recorded for posterity in the masterpieces of the rich Somali oral poetry. This was the vehicle for the stories that depict Somali pastoralist conflicts over pasturelands and waterholes and it provides insights into the economic, social and political history of Somali pastoralism in its most traditional form and in its encounters with external challenges, from which new institutions evolved.

An important question in this context is how this type of poetry survived so long and spread so far and wide within the Somali pastoral region and beyond, attracting the attention of foreign travellers and scholars in their earliest encounters with Somali pastoral society. It has been stored in memory and transmitted verbatim from generation to generation since time immemorial (Burton, 1987).

The Somalis begin to be familiarized with the art of Somali oral poetry at infancy. All the everyday tasks of the child's mother, sisters or the womenfolk collectively, such as weaving nomadic mats (*kebed*), shaking milk for the production of butter, packing pack camel and donkeys, pounding grain in the mortar with the pestle (*mooye iyo tib*), are accompanied by songs in different po-

etic genres, especially set for the different tasks.

This familiarization process continues when the child joins his age group, in playing children's games, listening to stories, caring for the young sheep and in the exchange of puzzles (*googgaa*); all are done in songs and verses of diverse genres.

As he approaches manhood, every pastoralist male child is familiarized with men's work songs: for watering animals, for ploughing fields, for riding horses and above all for the different folkloric dances. He will begin to sit with his seniors to listen to their recitals of the more sophisticated and longer poems and his appreciation for this sort of poetry is developed and sharpened as he memorizes some verses and recites them to his age group. In this way, the young pastoralist accumulates a huge vocabulary including idioms, proverbs, poetic sentences and sentences which give effect, and he masters a large number of poetic genres based on different vowel lengths and arrangements. The miniature genres, which are mostly concentrated in children's poetry constitute the bases for all the longer and more complex ones.

It is therefore not possible to compose a poem in the *Gabay*, the most important Somali poetic genre, without being well acquainted with many other poetic genres. All are interrelated and should be considered as a set.

Every pastoralist learns, memorizes and consolidates a formidable collection of materials through these verses in the children's stories and games, fables, myths, astronomy and astrology. These materials include the names of the different pasture lands and watering places, the different fauna and flora, the geographical regions frequented by the Somali pastoralists, together with the names of the clans, their oral traditions and oral history. They are stored in memory and constitute poetic "mental archives" or "poetic raw materials" essential for the composition and comprehension of any poem of quality. The poetry is the whole of the Somali pastoral way of life

contained, preserved and transmitted orally. Somali oral poetry owes its vivid poetic images and its highly expressive figurative language to these poetic raw materials, and its ethical codes and intellectual references to the Islamic faith.

Since by listening to oral poetry every Somali pastoralist is taught most of the poetic rules for the different genres and for the alliterations, and since the poetry plays such an important part in the general learning process, in terms of technical and material preparation every Somali pastoralist is potentially a poet.

However, before becoming a composer, one has to become very good at memorizing poems. Every poet is a memorizer, and memorizing is an important part of composition.

In line with this, for a poem to be memorisable; the genre used must be correctly set, the poetic sentences must be imaginatively arranged, the poem must be universal in its approach, very vivid in its poetic imagery and powerful in its figurative language. The alliterating letters must be correctly set and well distributed.

At the same time, the reciter must have the text clear in his memory, must be very articulate in his recitals and must have a beautiful and rich voice; a factor very important for Somali oral poetry to attract an audience and to make the poem easily memorizable and therefore enable it to be passed on with ease. When a would-be poet feels that his poems are acceptable he will, when he has completed a new composition, go to the watering places where there are the greatest concentration of pastoralists and recite there. His attentive and receptive audience will always memorize at least some of the most important sections, on the spot. They, in their turn, will recite to a new audience and thus the verses travel far and wide. In this respect, the way Somali oral poetry is propagated could be likened to a "nuclear chain reaction".

At all recitals the name of the poet must be mentioned. Each poem has a clear story and purpose behind it and in the medium of

these poems Somali pastoralists have preserved and propagated their culture and maintained their collective memory for thousands of years.

Clan systems based on lineage segmentations are the most important unit on which Somali pastoralists' social, political and economical relations have traditionally operated and still operate today (Samatar, *ibid.*).

Though many people believe that clan unity depends on the conviction that its members have descended from a common ancestor, this unity can only be maintained in their search of water and pasture, by respecting equality among the clan members in all aspects of their lives and by having equal access to the means of livelihood.

If that cardinal principle on which the whole system operates is disregarded, the conflicts that may result between the clan members are capable of bringing about a complete disintegration of the unit. A brother is only a brother when he is convinced, and behaves accordingly, of the fact that brotherhood and fraternity can only be validated by sharing all available resources justly and equally, as the following verse expresses:

*Hadday muraqa geeduhu go'aan  
Milayga jiilaalka  
Mahwi ceel haddii loo kacoo  
Maalku ku arcooro  
Mattaaan waa ka qaybsada tolkii  
Midha wadaagaaye  
Magaabana haddaan layga siin  
Maax la dhuranaayo  
Muska ina Affay dego naflaha  
Kama miciin moodo  
(Excerpt/Sahid Qamman)*

If the best of pastures withers away  
During the dry season of the *jiilaal*  
And the herds, for their watering, if they are taken  
To a watering well of reliability that is shared by  
clansmen  
Who are of the same origin  
Even a mouthful of it, if I am not given  
From an early morning water, being taken by all  
To the encampment, where the son of Afay resides,  
of all the creatures  
For a favour, I will never go

Watering wells are a central feature of the Somali pastoral life; no clan or person has exclusive rights to a well even if that clan or person were its original diggers or discoverers. If a clan or an individual claims to be the first to dig or discover, others, in a gentleman's agreement, will allow them priority in having the first early morning water (*maax*), and their name will be given to the waterhole (*magac*). After this, all the clans in the neighborhood will have their watering days in turns (*kal*). However, when the water table sinks to its lowest level and cannot support everyone, customary law has it that those "who first sweated over it, should remain there" (*kii u dhididay hadhurto*) while the rest have to move to another place where there is water and pasture in abundance.

Conflicts over watering wells and pasturelands are as frequent as the pastoralists movement into new territory, since this may often be held by an adversary who will not allow the clan in without a showdown. If the latter succeeds in forcing out the former from the contested territory, they have every reason to be jubilant and such an event would deserve to be eternalized in a verse that will be memorised by all the members of the victorious clan who will recite to their successive generations to remind them of their moments of glory.

A Isaq poet, Xassan Tarabi, addressing a man of God (*Wadaad Aw*, a *sheekhaash*, a priestly clan) tells him that the Isaqs won their victory over the Ogaden, and now "they were holding the whole valley of the 'Oonyood' with all its waterholes and he, the *wadaad*, should acknowledge this very important victory, otherwise his access to the watering wells will be reconsidered":

*Nin waliba ka socoy, Awgayow*  
*Sabadan oonyoode*  
*Aduun baa kittaabada sitee*  
*Samir ogaadeen e*  
*So'adan garanna eegoo waxaa*  
*Simani waa dhiig e*  
*Ma sakhraansantahay reer Garaad*  
*Kama sarraysaan e*  
 (Excerpt/Xassan Tarabi)

Everybody else walked away. Oh! man of God!  
 From this valley of the Oonyood  
 It is only because of your religious books, you are here  
 But the Ogaden have given up  
 At this valley coloured in red; look at it! all that,  
 You see is nothing, but blood  
 Are you drunk! Of the Garaads  
 You are not stronger

Interclan treaties of friendship, which guide cooperation, grouping and integration, depend on the conviction that all clans should have equal access to watering wells and pasturelands, by which justice and equality are measured. If any aspect of this is violated, disequilibrium will result and a conflict will precipitate:

*Intaan maleb rag kale loo shushubi*  
*Wax uga meeleeoyo*  
*Oo aanan fartana muudsanayn*  
*Meeshana an jogo*  
*Oon weliba mood iyo salaam*  
*Ulla maleegnaado*  
*Seddex magac Allee, xaajadaa*  
*Layma maransiyo*  
 (Excerpt/Sahid Qamman)

As long, a honey to others being served  
 And I am a party to that  
 And even the finger, to lick it, I am not allowed  
 And on that spot, my presence, I have  
 And yet, I am expected of a full obedience  
 And with all its manifestations  
 By Allah, in His holy Names a thing like that  
 I will never have

In the same way, for a pastoralist anything that may compromise his principles of liberty or his sense of justice and equality in action or in thought is abhorrent and therefore should be opposed by all possible means. Any association not based on these principles is unacceptable:

*Rag waxaan ku maamuli aqaan*  
*Amma ku maamuusi*  
*Masse inaanu nahay ooy tolnimo*  
*Meerta noo tahaye*  
*Oon weliba kaga meel caddahay*  
*Miidh se diidaniye!*  
*Massalaha ninkaan ii dhigayn*  
*Midig ma saaraayo*  
*Ninkii aniga iga maarmi kara*  
*Uma muraad yeesho*  
 (Excerpt/Sahid Qamman)

With men to have an intercourse, I accept  
Or will have my respect to them accorded  
That we are equal, and kinship  
Reciprocal, if it stands  
Though, I consider myself superior to all  
And yet to behave in arrogance, I refuse  
A prayer mat for me, he who is not ready to spread  
My right hand, for him to shake, I will not stretch  
He who can, with me dispense,  
Without him I will do

This is a Somali pastoralists view of himself,  
never to accept to be below others or sub-  
servient to anybody, except to the Almighty,  
to whom alone he submits as a Muslim. As  
a result, even on pain of death, he will never  
stoop to be enslaved by his enemies:

*Muslim kuma cabiidsamo "Walloon"*  
*Madaxa kaa goyn e!*  
(Excerpt/Sahid Qamman)

A Muslim should never be reduced to enslavement  
by the threat  
"Your head, I will have it chopped"

At least, in principle, if he were to choose  
between death and submission into hu-  
miliation, he will opt for the former:

*Haddaad dhimato geeridu, mar bay*  
*Nolosha dhaantaay e*  
*Dhaqashiyo mar bay kaa yihiin*  
*Dhereggu xaaraan e*  
*Nin dhirbaaxo quudheed dugsaday*  
*Dhaqayadeed maal ye*  
*Dhashaaday sugtaa xaajadaad*  
*Dhawrataa abid e*  
(Excerpt/Salaan Garrabay)

If one gets killed, there are instances where death  
To life is preferable  
Accumulating wealth, sometimes,  
And, as well as taking your fill of food are forbidden.  
He who, to a humiliating treatment submits  
Its bitter end, he will milk.  
For your descendents, a thing like this waits  
If you leave it unavenged and for ever

The number of male members of a clan is of  
great significance and mostly a closely-  
guarded secret since the smaller the number  
of a male membership in a clan, the lower  
their respectability in the eyes of other clans.  
A clan with a sufficient number of male

members or "shield holders" can defend  
themselves and impose their will on lesser  
groups. But even given their deficiency in  
numbers, a smaller clan will never accept a  
humiliatingly secondary position in relation  
to a larger group.

*Mitid fara yar midihii battaa*  
*Kama macaashaan e*  
*Kol hadday mishiinnadu qarxaan*  
*Mawdka loo siman e!*  
*Is maroorintaa reer Wacays*  
*Mahadin maayaan e*  
(Excerpt/Aw Jaamac Gacanlow)

A determined, but smaller in numbers if confronted  
with a bigger number  
They will not win against them  
If machines of death are set to explode  
To death, all have an equal chance!  
By this arrogance, the clansmen of Wais  
They will not be rewarded

At the same time, no clan can claim noble  
status (*gobonimo*) unless they hold claim to  
a territory of waterholes and pasturelands  
recognised by all as theirs. Without such a  
claim, even if their numbers are sufficiently  
great, they will not be considered as equal  
in status to the rest of the clans.

*Jeer oo uu feleg meero oo*  
*Dhulka fuudhka la saaro oo*  
*Arab meel ka fadhiisto*  
*Maxay faanka duleed iyo*  
*Faruhu ii tarayaan!*  
(Excerpt/Faarax Nuur)

Unless a horoscope changes tract  
And for distribution, the land is resurveyed  
And the Arabs have a place of their own  
Of what use the empty boasting and  
My great numbers serve!

An unbalanced alliance which is not based  
on equality between clans in a shared claim  
to territory, will evoke conflict and a sub-  
sequent break up of the alliance:

*Daan iyo qadhiidh baannu nahay*  
*Qaranka Daa'uude*  
*Jeer iyo qiyaamaha halkaa*  
*Qodaxi way taalle!*  
(Excerpt/Faarax Nuur)



It goes further, a cattle herder has to be a hard man to survive the difficult times that are typical of his part of the world:

*Hadday murugtaba*  
*Maleeya Alliyó*  
*Maroorsana wiil*  
*Yaw malayn jiray*  
(Excerpt/Anonymous)

If the worst comes to the worst  
Allah, the rightful guide and  
A gallent young men  
Its survival, always made it ensured

But when he knows that territory where it  
has rained belonged to relatives and in-laws,  
he is very much relaxed:

*Qaraabiyo Xidid*  
*Ayaa kuu maqan*  
*Ood u gayshani*  
(Excerpt/Anonymous)

Relatives and in-laws  
For you are in the reserve  
And in time of need, will be called in

It is in this respect a true friend is distinguished from a false one:

*Nin dharaar xun kaa tegay adoon*  
*Dhiman wax kuu sheegye*  
(Excerpt/Salaan Garrabay)

He who abandoned you in time of need  
Before the grave; showed you the truth of his nature

It is in this wider context that a Somali pastoralist has always reacted to the challenges, natural or otherwise, that may endanger his pastoral life or disturb its equilibrium.

However, the coming of the European powers and the subsequent establishment of the colonial states, which were later handed back to the indigenous people as nation states took the hitherto controllable interclan conflicts to new heights, by producing disequilibrium that could not be corrected in any way Somali pastoralists knew of.

## Notes on the poets

**Sahid Qamman:** an Ogaadeen clansman and a poet of great talent, whose surviving poems have highly penetrating and everlasting effects on those who are familiar with them. The poem from which the excerpts are taken is one of Somali oral poetry's masterpieces, very often referred to for different occasions and situations. Sahid Qamman, together with five other poets, Faarax Nadiif, Gabay Shinni, Cabdi Xirsi, Dubad and Oamaan Bulxan, were entrusted with the responsibility of dethroning Ugass Xaashi, who tried to establish a tyrannical rule over his pastoral clansmen. They told him in very strongly expressed poetry that he had to give up, and he did. Sahid may have died in the late 1940s.

**Xassan Tarabi:** a poet of great talent whose poems mostly relate feuds between different pastoral clans. He travelled to Kenya in the mid-1950s where he remained thereafter until he died in 1980.

**Salaan Garrabay:** an Isaq clansman, a great poet, a seaman and also a traveller; one of the participants of the famous Guba "the fire kindler", a poetic combat which continued in a chain for 25 years and brought together 13 of the greatest poetic talents Somali oral poetry has ever had. He died, possibly, in the 1940s.

**Aw Jaamac Gacanlow:** at 80 years of age he still composes, though his name is not as widely known as his poem from which I took the excerpts, which is one of the best-known pieces and memorized by almost every Somali.

**Faarax Nuur:** an Isaq clansman and probably one of the most conscientious poets of his age. He led his clansmen, the Arab (not to be confused with the Arabs), against the hegemony of the Ciidagale chiefly family. In the course of the conflict in his many masterful poems he composed showed great moral superiority to his adversaries. He died in the late 1930s.

**Sayid Mohamed Abdallah Hassan:** a poet, a man well versed in Islamic religious knowledge, a warrior who led his Dervish movement against the colonial powers of the British, Ethiopians and Italians (1900-1921) and was defeated when the British launched an aerial bombardment of his strongholds. The movement died with the death of its originator and leader, Mohamed Abdallah Hassan, in 1922, but his poems were more effective than the bullets he employed against his enemies, and 125 poems survived and are his greatest achievements. He was an innovator in his use of the Somali poetic genres, setting new standards for Somali poetry in general.

## Notes on the Oral Sources

The text of the poems of Sahid Qamman, Aw Jaamac Gacanlow and Salaan Garrabay were obtained from Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed, Lannunbe, in Djibouti in 1991, who memorized a huge number of Somali oral poems. More than anybody else, he contributed to the propagation of Somali oral poetry by pioneering its recording on cassettes that reached distant places. The urban Somalis became familiar with the poetry via cassettes.

The text of the poem of Xassan Tarabi, was obtained from Sheikh Abdillahi Hussein in Djibouti, 1990, a man well versed in Somali oral poetry, particularly that from the Ogaden region. In addition, he memorized a good number of religious chants in Arabic by Somali religious composers (*Musannifin*).

The text of the poems of Faarax Nuur were obtained from Ahmed Sheikh Abdurahman in Hargeysa in 1975.

The text of the anonymous verse were obtained from Idle Roobleh, an Issa clansman and a cattle herder, in 1986, and Ismail Mohamed Dugsiye, a great oralist and memoriser of a great number of Somali traditional poetry, work songs and verses.

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