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

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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 internal 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 poetic 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 (googgan); 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 pasturelands 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 muraga geeduhi go'aan
Milayga fillaalka
Muhi'i ca'lli haddii loo kacoo
Muulku ku warro
Mintaan wax ka qaybada tolkii
Midiis wadaaggii
Magadana haddii laaga siin
Mux pro dhuramanayo
Musku ina Affay dego maafihi
Kama micil iyo moodo
(Excerpt/Sahid Qamman)

If the best of pastures withers away During the dry season of the fillaal 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” (kiitu dhiddle day 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 memorized 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 Isaqas 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 waliiba ka socoy, Atugayow
Sabadan oonyoode
Adum baan kithabada sitee
Samir ogandeent e
Saidan garamnu eego wuxna
Simani waa dhig e
Ma sahawkansantahay reer Garanad
Kama sarraysaan e
(Excerpt/Xassan Tarabi)

Everybody else walked away. Oh! man of God!
From this valley of the Oonyoode
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 ugu meeleeyo
Oo saanartana waansanayn
Meeshana an jogo
Oon weliba mood iyo salaan
Ulla maleegnaado
Seddex magac Allee, xoojadaa
Layna 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 wuxaan ku maamul aqaan
Amma ku maamuuusii
Masse inaanu nahay ooy tolnimo
Meerta too talaye
Oon weliba kaga meel cadhaay
Miidh se didiiniyo
Mussalaha ninkaan ii dhigayo
Midig ku saaraayo
Ninkii aniga igu maarini kara
Uuma muurada yeeshee
(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, who he 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 cabiiidiso "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 humiliation, he will opt for the former:

Haddaad dhimaato geeridu, mar bay
Nolosha dhaamtaay e
Dhaqashiy wuxuu kaa yihlin
Dhereeggu waxa ahaa
Nin dhirrarko wuxuu hagaan dugsaday
Dhaqayyadaa maal yee
Dhashaadu waxa ahaan xaqiijadaas
Dhawratay abid ee
(Excerpt/Salaaq 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 responsibility 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 bittaa
Kama macaanashaa e
Kol hadday mishisimadu garxaan
Mawda loo siiman ee
Is maroqintaa 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 (gobontiso) 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 meeko oo
Dhiulka fuudheka la saro oo
Arab meel ka fadhiisto
Maxay faanka duleed iyo
Farruuf ii turayaam!
(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 subsequent break up of the alliance:

Daan iyo qadihiikh hanaanu nahay
Qaranka Dao’uude
Jeer iyo qiyaamaha halkaa
Qodaxi waa 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
Maleya Aliyo
Maroorsana will.
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:

Qaraabigo Xidid
Aya kuu maqan
Ood u guysheeni
(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 dhararr wax ka tegay aadon
Dhini 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 equilibriun.

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, Farax Nadiif, Gabay Shimm, Capdi Kuir, Dubad and Ooqan Bulaxan, 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 Isaaq 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 Isaaq clansman and probably one of the most conscientious poets of his age. He lead his clansmen, the Arab (not to be confused with the Arabs), against the hegemony of the Ciicagalechel 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 lead 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, AwJaamac Gacanlow and Salaan Garabey 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 (Musunfin).

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 Ismaal Mohamed Dugsiye, a great oralist and memoriser of a great number of Somali traditional poetry, work songs and verses.

References

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Mohamed Abdillahi Rirash, a historian, who has had several academic papers published internationally, works for Djibouti Radio and Television where he has produced many cultural and historical programmes.