Chapter 5

Of Poets and Sheikhs: Somali Literature

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In traditional Somali society, forums are part of the structure through which a wronged individual can get redress. The members of the community assemble under one large tree to witness and participate in the procedure of dispensing justice, carried out by a council of men. The council, which is the judge and juror in one body, is appointed only after the consent of the litigants involved in a case is secured. Once before the council, the plaintiff is first heard; then the accused is given a chance to refute or accept the charge. No council reaches its verdict without following such a procedure as the validity of a *caveat* is taken to heart by the elders of the community. The "tree" referred to above is the *geedka xeerka* (the tree of customary law). The council entrusted to dispense such justice consists of *heerbeegti*, men well-versed in customary laws. The Somali poet is more often than not a revered member of that council. But there is another "tree" that dispenses justice. This is called *geedka haqqa iyo hukumka*, the tree of truth and (by implication) Islamic jurisprudence (Samatar 1982, 28).[1] The chief dispenser of this form of justice is the *sheikh qadi* (Islamic jurist). By virtue of their status, the sheikh and the poet belong to the indigenous intelligentsia of Somalia. It was this recognition of their powers that prompted the second president of the First Republic, the late Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, to remark that Somali culture was firmly based on a dual structure: Islam and Somali poetry (Samatar 1982, 8). For the president to equate the two indicates the value the Somalis attach to their poetry.

Islam is a unifying force in Somali society. Like poetry, it cuts across clan lines. But the peaceful co-existence of the two forces within Somali culture also attests to the power of syncretism in African traditions. The synthesis that results is not that of a victor and a vanquished foe. The two, sheikh and poet, wield tremendous power and influence in Somali society. As members of the elite, they share among other things a desire to consolidate their power vis-a-vis the non-elite majority. Thus their interests sometimes converge.

At other points, however, their interests diverge. As each works to carve his own sphere of influence, he seeks to destroy the credibility of the other. In the pages that follow, we will delineate where their interests converge, where they collide, and what each one of them does to lure the public to his side.

Islam is a way of life, an all-encompassing system that pervades the social, economic, and political structures of its believers. For centuries, Islam has been one of the two pillars of Somali tradition, the other pillar being poetry. Somalia has been called a "nation of bards" (Burton 1984; Laurence 1964; Andrzejewski 1964). Somali poetry contains a significant body of cultural knowledge. In order that this knowledge be conserved and passed on to posterity, poems make great use of alliteration, which is known for its mnemonic quality. This is a quality which is pivotal for Somali tradition, since a great deal of their experience is kept in the bardic memory. This storing of experience rests upon the existence of a pool of memorizers, and a constant repetition of "the word" for its survival.

The Our'an, Islam's holy book, also presupposes memorization and recitation for its survival. The Qur'an has its own mnemonic quality which thrives on poetic and rhetorical devices, such as end rhyme, metaphor, and simile. In fact the word *qur'an* itself is a derivative of "the consonant root cluster QR', which conveys the sense of reciting" (Nelson 1985, 3).[2] The reasons for reciting the Qur'an at the embryonic stage of the Islamic movement included the shortage of literate persons, and the scarcity and impermanence of written materials.

The Qur'an and Somali poetry depend on rote memorization and recitation for preservation and dissemination across time and space. It is therefore obvious that the close affinity between performer/reciter and audience is lost when written forms come into use. The sheikhs and especially the Somali poets capitalized upon this loss in

their effort to ward off literacy campaigns. Their fears could also be interpreted as the deep fear embedded in some members of the indigenous intelligentsia that with literacy comes death; their prominent roles in society would become obsolete, for "literacy short-circuits seniority as the way to wisdom" (Maxwell 1982, 2). Yet the reactions of these people are couched in terms that, at a surface level, reflect the concerns, anxiety, and consternation of other members of the community. The guardians of tradition are not without subterfuge in dissuading people from becoming literate. The famous Somali oralist, Mohamed Haji Hussein, "Sheeko Hariir," succinctly summarizes traditional reluctance to resort to writing: "Haashi dowr, haafid ma noqdo" (Samatar 1982, 33). [He who looks at a paper never becomes a memorizer.] The implication is that the literate person becomes too dependent upon paper, i.e., the written word. Such a dependency is to be feared since written items can get stolen, lost, or burned, while the oral word is engraved in a person's memory. (That the memorizer himself could die is ignored by them). The reasoning becomes meaningful when one considers the historical instances in which books were either thrown into a river or burned completely. The burning of books was not only a symbolic act of defeat, but one way of ensuring the final demise of a society. To early Muslims, this threat was real.

The prominent role of rote memorization and its recitation in Somalia could also be explained by the ecology of the Somalis. In Somalia, the nomadic way of living necessitates the orality of Somali poetry. The poet wanting to be heard in places far away from his homestead craves a spatial extension that allows his poems to travel to places he never dreamed of. He finds justification in the Somali proverb, "dhagax meel dhow ayuu ku dhacaa, dhawaqna meel fog." [Sound travels further than a stone (when it is thrown).]

In the riverine areas of Somalia where life is relatively sedentary, Sheikh Uways Mohamed wrote poetry in Arabic script, but it is not certain if his use of script really increased his readership among his peasant audience. Most Somalis, peasants or pastoralists, are sent to Qur'anic schools to learn to memorize the Qur'an, but the Somalis are not native speakers of Arabic, although they revere the language of the Holy Book. Nonetheless, there are Somali sheikhs who had composed original poetry in Arabic, including Sheikh Uways, Sheikh Mohammed Abdulle Hassan, Sheikh Abdulrahman, Sheikh Omar, and Sheikh Mohamed Hassan. Their poetry, overtly didactic, was memorized by disciples who continue to recite it on treasured oc-

casions. The survival of these poems in a land where Arabic is not the mother tongue could be attributed to what Ibrahim Noor Shariff, elsewhere in this volume, calls "*thawab*, heavenly credit." Muslims believe that the repetition of a good word which propagates the faith results in rewards from Allah. Such rewards are mostly enjoyed in the life hereafter.

The oral culture of the Somalis could not preclude the coexistence of the two genres, for orality and literacy can live contiguously with each other, as had been the case for centuries. In Somali oral literature, the poetry is replete with Arabic words indicating a close affinity between the two cultures and the two genres. The existence of a people who haven't heard of literacy is unlikely and as Jack Goody explains:

> At least during the past 2000 years, the vast majority of the peoples of the world (most of Eurasia and much of Africa) have lived . . . in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups or individuals who could read or write . . . . It is clear that even if one's attention is centered only upon village life, there are large areas of the world where the fact of writing and existence of the book has to be taken into account even in discussing traditional societies. (Finnegan 1977, 161)

No place attests to the truth of that statement more than Somalia, where the people have been Muslims for centuries. It is therefore hard to imagine that there is a Somali who has not seen or heard of the Holy Book of Islam. Yet the Somalis have remained illiterate over the centuries. While most Somali sheikhs can read and write in Arabic, with the exception of a few who transcribed their poetry in Arabic script, no sheikh has ever endeavored to create a writing system for transcribing Somali oral literature. The reluctance of the Sheikhs to devise a script for Somali lies not only in the orality of the people of the area, as suggested by John Johnson in his *Heelooy* (12), but in the relationship of the sheikhs toward the laity. The sheikh in Somali tradition is a keeper of "the word," and as such has a tendency to monopolize his possession. In short, he does not want to expand the base of those with access to the tree of knowledge. This is not unique to Somali peripatetic religious men, but it is characteristic of men in robes spanning time and space.

The poet has also built a fortress to avert any incursion onto the sacrosanct terrain of his field. A rigid form of alliteration, coupled with the use of archaic language, discourages most from attempting

to become a poet. Many Somali scholars have written numerous articles decrying the rigidity of the form. They all called for a change of rules so that future poets could compose in free verse. Unfortunately, none of these scholars came forward with any plausible way of combining theory with practice, and the lack of any meaningful praxis has put an end to the discussion.[3] A similar crusade to prosify Somali plays has suffered a similar fate. Both sheikh and poet have been unwilling to educate the people in their different domains, lest their control slip away.

Their stance against the emergence of a new genre of love poetry, *balwo*, after World War II is a case in point. The *balwo* genre is a miniature form of the classical poem *gabay*. The *gabay* can run to hundreds of lines, each line broken into two hemistiches; each hemistich contains one alliterative sound, which is equally distributed in the poem. The new genre was supposedly started by one Cabdi Deeqsi, whose truck broke down somewhere near the ancient Somali town of Zeila (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 50). He called this poetry *balwo*, a corruption of the Arabic word for catastrophe. The new form appealed to townspeople because it was brief, and because it interpreted reality from their standpoint. To townspeople who found themselves in similarly catastrophic situations in the burgeoning towns of Northern Somalia, the song was a source of solace. The new emigrés to towns, with no one to turn to for help, found themselves in a desolate place, both spiritually and materially. As a meeting ground for different subgroups from the interior, the town had to be a place for all. This meant that no single code of reference prevailed, and a new code of reference had to be created. It was easy for the formerly nomadic townwellers to identify with the imagery of the *balwo*, which espoused themes relevant to and depictive of the *modus vivendi* of the urban dweller. Songs of this genre made their debut with the establishment of radio transmissions.

Popular poets despised the short form of the *balwo* and viewed the new genre as nothing more than doggerel. The sheikh objected to the new love poetry for a different reason. To the religious man, *balwo* was a subtle form employed by Christian missionaries in their effort to proselytize Somalis. *Balwo* is sung to a tune and not chanted like classical poetry, and thus the cleric's objections to it evoke the perennial controversy on the status of music in Islam.

The Art of Reciting the Qur'an demonstrates that Muslims shy away from music because of its original association with the *qaynah*, "a slave or freed woman trained in the art of singing" who performed

for the wealthy and the elite (Nelson 1985, 34).[4] The *qaynah*'s position was coupled with the *muxannat*, the effeminate male singer. The role of the effeminate male singer was brought closer to home by male actors playing the role of women in the nascent Somali theater of the time. Just as musicians and singers worldwide are viewed with both envy and hatred, there is no love lost between the orthodox Muslim, including the rulers, and the singer in Muslim societies. Caliph al-Ma'mun is said to have shied away from appointing Ishaq Ibrahim al-Mawsili (767–850), a famous singer, to the position of a *qadi* (Islamic jurist) (Nelson 1985, 35). Yet the Qur'an clearly warns the believers to beware the evil influences of the poet and not the musician. The Somali sheikh, like his counterpart in early Islamic history, could not completely tarnish the image of the poet.

The Somali religious man is feared for his powers to cast a curse referred to as *asmo* on his enemies. This curse is the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of the religious man and is to be used only under strict conditions as when the sheikh's existence or that of his clan is at stake. The curse, like any ultimate weapon, can bring untold misery to both its user and the one it is directed against. Because of its potential to boomerang, it is used with prudence. The availability of such a potent weapon at the fingertips of the sheikh gives the religious man power to command awe among the Somalis. The heavens purportedly take up the sheikh's case swiftly and Allah punishes transgressors.

Similar powers are associated with poets who can cast another form of curse, *yu'asho*, on every mortal who troubles them. Yet none of their powers emanates from the usual source of power—the sword. The source of their strength lies in "the power of the spoken word [which] can effect reality in the consciousness of oral people" (Maxwell 1983, 2). It is because of this direct association between the spoken word and the result it can occasion in its hearer that Somalis avoid vituperative persons at *cir-gadiid*, the time of dusk or before dawn.

The poet and sheikh also have constructive roles to play in society, as they can mediate between warring factions. Their conciliatory words carry considerable weight, as they are deemed repositories of clan or national history. The sheikh's encouragement can lead warriors among clans to engage in internecine feuds, but for a clan his restraining voice can mean "a war without blessing." The magical power of poetry to exhort clan warfare abounds in Somali history.[5] The Prophet's words to Hassan Ibn Tabit, a poet of great stature

during the early periods of Islam, epitomize the magical efficacy of poetry:

> Pour out [an incitement to] the raid against the
> Bani 'Abd. Manāf, for by Allah your poetry is
> more potent than falling arrows in the darkness of dawn.
> (Nelson 1985, 38)

The poet is aware of his status in society and utilizes it to the utmost; at times he too begins to believe in the extraordinary powers of poetry. Indeed, one Somali poet, Qamaan Bulxan, attributes the swift dissemination of poetry to supernatural powers when he claims:

> Caliyow dabuub taada gabay, daayinkaa wadaye
> Dabaylaha xagaagii bafliyo, daafigaa sidaye
> [O Cali, the Everlasting One has driven on the words of your poem
> the rustling wind of the warm breeze has carried them].
> (Andrzejewski 1985, 356)[6]

Qamaan's words bring out the whole irony. True Muslims believe it is the powers of the *jinn* and not Allah [the Everlasting One] that are the driving force behind the dissemination of poetry. Hussein A. Bulhan in his essay, "The Captive Intelligentsia of Somalia," interprets a contemporary poet's words, which do not sound any different from Qamaan's in the early part of the twentieth century. Hussein's poet claims:

> The clouds await my lyrics
> Never raining a drop without my song. (1980a, 28)

This reveals one of the sources of intense rivalry between the sheikh and the poet: their competition for intercessionary powers.

The allusion to the poet's control of "the clouds"—in effect calling himself a rain-maker—is not lost on Somalis living in a region where rain or its lack can cause prosperity or famine. During droughts, it is the sheikh's succor that is sought. Both the sheikh and the majority of the populace believe that droughts are brought on by sin. To cleanse the community of evil deeds, the sheikh leads a procession of *roob-doon*, a prayer for rains. Such a prayer acknowledges the sheikh's eminence within the society. He is tacitly given intercessionary powers by his compatriots.[7]

The poet's assertion, "the clouds await my lyrics," suggests *shirk* (idolatry) in two ways. First, it refers to a tradition in pre-Islamic

history, commonly referred to as *casril jahiliya* (the era of ignorance), whereby propitiatory acts were made to appease deities. The implication that Allah can be cajoled with lilting lyrics into delivering rain lowers the divine power of the Creator to a human level. Secondly, with his boasts, the poet abrogates for himself a divine status.

In the poet's claims can also be seen an intention to de-fetishize the sheikh's rain-seeking processions. The poet evidently does not agree with the sheikh's thesis that environmental catastrophes such as droughts are a manifestation of the human contravention of divine laws, or with the conventional wisdom of the Somali proverb "caado la burriyaa Caro Allay leedahay" (an abandoned custom brings forth the wrath of Allah). With a few lines then, the poet can fulfill several aims, yet leave much unsaid, ambiguous.

The ambiguity of the poet's words is deliberate. It gives him a maneuvering ground with which he can utilize the malleability of "the word." The elliptic form of poetry is what makes the word a double-edged scimitar. The Somalis equate this elastic quality of the word to sinews with all their flexibility, but:

> Malleability is one half of the dual nature of language—the half that permits us to use language the way a sculptor uses wet clay, making of it whatever we wish. (Norrman & Haarberg 1980, 6)

And herein lies the sheikh's suspicion of the poet's words. The Qur'an warns Muslims to beware of the deceiving words of the poets:

> Poets are followed by none save erring them. Behold how aimlessly they rove in every valley, preaching what they never practice. (Qur'an 26:227)

The insincerity alluded to in the last line reveals that truth and poetry are not necessarily viewed as compatible. It is against this proclivity of the poet to "wander about without any set purpose, and seek the depth (valleys) of human folly rather than the height of divine light" (Nelson 1985, 208) that Muslims react so negatively. The sheikh, like any true believer, must either utter the truth or keep silence.

More often than not, the sheikh is viewed as being understanding and forgiving. The poet, on the other hand, is considered vindictive and temperamental. This difference in disposition comes to the forefront when one examines the voluminous body of political poetry in

Somalia. Many poets have engaged in diatribes against their opponents. Ali Jaamac' Haabiil's poem against Sheikh Hassan reminds one of this type of conflict:

> But he [Mohamed Abdulle Hassan] wantonly lacerates the tendons of weary
> travellers and engorges their dates.
> He's battened on the weak and the orphan,
> Call ye this Italian-infidel a Mahdi?
> How puzzling the thought! (Samatar 1979, 290)

In the post-independence era, many poets had to appease different interests simultaneously.

But the dichotomy doesn't preclude the emergence of a poet who is also a sheikh, and vice versa. In the annals of Somali historiography one comes across a number of sheikhs who were great poets. These sheikhs were mostly known for their leadership of religious sects and/or for their patriotic role in the fight against colonial occupation. Sheikhs such as Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, his chief rival in the south, Sheikh Uways H. Mohamed, and Sheikh Ahmed Gabyow are among many whose poetic achievements are highly valued. For the sheikh-poet, the combination meant the consolidation of dual powers emanating from two different sources. It was to be expected that such an amalgam of powers was the sum total of diverse characteristics such as understanding, forgiveness, vindictiveness, and temperament. The diatribes that Sheikh Mohammed A. Hassan and Sheikh Uways Mohamed hurled at each other not only show that there was no love lost between the two, but that the sheikhly attitudes at times gave way to the pursuit of power and glory.[8] The unity of the usually separate powers in the hands of one man, some critics contended, was cause for worry. In the case of Mohammed Abdulle Hassan, Said Samatar writes, "The contradictory demands, it is argued, of these 'inner obligations' were responsible for the stormy, at times erratic, behavior that was to mark the later phase of his career" (1979, 6). That might be the case, if one could conceivably discern the existence of halcyon years in the lives of ambitious sheikhs who were bent on leaving their mark on history.

Notes

1. I have made slight changes in the nomenclature while sticking to the basic concept.

2. In fact, the first order to the Prophet was to "recite!" "Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of blood" (Qur'an 96:1).
3. In the Arabic monthly, *Al-Hikma*, published in Sana', North Yemen, Somali novelist and critic Mohamed Dahir Afrah discusses the endeavors of one of the best Somali poets of the century to compose free verse. See Afrah 1987.
4. One Sheikh Mohamed Hassan composed "The Evils of the Balwo" in Arabic. The poem starts with "Oh my God, my God, have/ mercy on us and save us from the balwo" *Somali Poetry* (151). See Andrzejewski & Lewis 1964.
5. For a sample of this type of poetry, *geeraar* was employed for battle pledges (Finnegan 1978, 101).
6. Percy B. Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry" argues on similar grounds when he states that "Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and the circumference of knowledge ..." (Forman 1880, 136).
7. Sheikh Aqib Abdullahi Jama is one of the best-known sheikhs who uses this type of prayer for rain. He composes his prayers in poetry form:
   Accepter of penance, who are wealthy, o God
   Gather water in rivers whose beds have run dry
   (quoted in Finnegan, 113).
8. Samatar records two poems (one by each sheikh) that epitomize the diatribe between the two (Samatar 1979, 184f).

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