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**Musico-Moro-Syllabic Relationships
in the Scansion of Somali Oral Poetry**

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About fifteen years ago a breakthrough occurred in the study of Somali poetry when Cabdillaahi Diiriye Guuleed found vowel length to be one of the key elements in the prosody of Somali poems. With this information revealed, I was able to uncover a myriad of scansion rules which guided Somali poets as they created poetry very complex in linguistic structure. Prodding from the Polish scholar Andrzej Zaborski lead to another discovery when he insisted that syllables must be taken into analysis along with vowel lengths, the latter of which appeared to be the sole means of recurrent pattern in Somali poetry. The collaboration between Cabdillaahi and myself which followed did indeed lead to a further breakthrough when we found that syllables and moras [vowel lengths] interacted in three ways, depending on the genre of the poetry in question. We named these phenomena *moro-syllabic relationships*. Such scansion studies lead to further implications concerning the debate between the verbatim memorization of Somali poetry as opposed to its possible formulaic composition [not the topic of this paper, but one with which I have dealt with elsewhere in detail].

The publication of an article by Francesco Gennatasio in the papers of the Third Congress of Somali Studies inspired me to include an analysis of music in the actual scansion process of Somali poetry, and I undertook such a study two years ago, beginning with a year of study in the music school at Indiana University on a leave of absence from my department and a grant from the Lilly Foundation, a division of the Lilly pill company in Indiana and a great benefactor of education and research in that state. Discoveries made that year [1991-92] with my tutor and colleague Alain Barker in the music school have lead to yet another breakthrough in the on-going study of Somali prosody. I should like to summarize our discoveries to date in this paper, beginning with a review of the three moro-syllabic relationships, because the complexity of these relationships is complicated exponentially by a further three-patterned set of *moro-musical relationships*.

As the discovery of a set of relationships between vowel lengths and syllables lead to a number of theoretical implications beyond the mere structures in study, so it has happened again that a further set of theoretical implications are born out of the set of relationships between note durations and vowel lengths. Questions concerning verbatim memorization were foremost in the implications of the latter, and now numerous questions concerning polyrhythmic structures arise with the present study. Indeed it becomes more and more clear that Somalis, like scores of sub-Saharan African traditions, made no difference between music and poetry until fairly recent times when the influence of other world musics, principally Indian and Western, filter into the Horn of Africa. I will have more to say about these implications at the end of my paper.

Innovation of Somali Musico-Poetic Forms

The recent history of oral art in Somalia reflects substantial innovation. From the early 1940s on the Horn of Africa, many artistic innovations brought about important changes in verbal performance of the nation. Scholars have often described older forms of music and poetry in Somalia as "traditional" and newer forms as "modern," but to view the entire process of musical and poetic tradition in Somalia as continuous, with a multiplicity of aspects, may be more useful: some pieces are older, and some newer; some indigenous, and some of foreign origin; some conservative, and some more open to change. Perceiving older forms as "traditional" gives a false sense of cultural stagnation, and tends to deny that they too were innovations. Some of

them may reflect the influence of foreign modes of expression, just like the newer forms in Somalia. Some aspects of Somali musical behavior have more widespread representation among other Cushitic nations in East Africa. An alternative view is to call the older forms "nonprofessional" and the newer ones "professional." Nonprofessional Somali genres were (and are) still composed and performed by men and women who, though skilled musicians and poets, do not make their living principally by applying their performance skills. People who received both government support (through the bureaucratic organization of agencies such as the National Theater) and public support (through the sale of admission tickets to privately produced performances and mass produced cassette tapes) created professional forms.

Until the 1950s, Somalis made no dynamic distinction between music and poetry in their oral expressions. All forms of poetry can be sung, and some modes are always sung. The domestic classification of the forms of Somali oral performance rests on a combination of structures only one of which relates to music. To differentiate one genre from another, four criteria act in concert: scansion, melody, topic, and function. If any these traits change, another genre may result. For example, two forms may have the same scansion, the same melody, or the same subject matter, but be different in function. Most of the time, more than one criterion actually differentiates genres. Somalis group genres into larger categories, determined mainly by their functions and contexts, reflected in the topics they cover. Three of these categories are most prominent, and scholars have labeled them from two points of view: students of literature call them "classical poetry," "work poetry," and "recreational poetry." Students of music refer to them as "poetry," "songs," and "dances." Somalis themselves call them *gabay*, *hees*, and *cayaar* (or *ciyaar*). These terms are easy to translate linguistically ("poetry," "song," "play"), but foreigners have difficulty understanding how Somalis view the concepts they convey. To Somalis, each class is both poetic and musical. However, the newer, professional form is not viewed quite the same, and the duality of names Somalis give to it bears witness to their own problem of integrating it into their poetic-musical tradition. By naming it "*heello*," they emphasize its poetic origins. *Heello*, *heellooy* and *heelleellooy* are words used in an introductory formula, the main function of which is to set the scansion pattern of a poem. Sometimes, however, the same genre is simply called *hees*, "song," which emphasizes its musical characteristics. Let us now turn to a description of the prosody of Somali musico-poetic forms.

Linguistic traits of Somali prosody

The prosody of Somali poetry takes a patterned configuration of long and short vowels. The temporal duration of a short vowel, called *mora* by linguists, occupies an amount of time called *seme* by students of prosody. In any given poem, monosemes contain short vowels of one mora only, while disemes hold two moras. Three principles characterize the relationship between moras and syllables. First, a closed-set moro-syllabic relationship allows only long vowels to fill disemes, resulting in an identical number of syllables and vowels (long or short) of each line, together with a set number of morae. Second, an open-set moro-syllabic relationship allows either one long or two short vowels to fill disemes. Since there are always two moras in a diseme, the number of syllables may vary randomly, depending on how many vowels are used. Finally, in a semi-open-set moro-syllabic relationship, there is a specified number of disemes and a specified number of syllables, but there are always more disemes than long-vowel requirements, so some disemes must be filled with two short vowels while others must be filled with long vowels. Poetic license allows the composer to choose which disemes to fill with long vowels and which to fill with short

Jaanhooy adaan qaban markuu, jiitay gacalkaa ye,
 Raggaan gaalo jeefaafin waa, ehel jaxiimaade.

*You did not abandon me when, he ignorant ones fled in fear.
 You did not go to the [Abyssinian] Emperor when, your relatives did.
 Any man who does not kill infidels, is a kinsman of hell.*

Somali rhyme always involves alliteration. The *geeraar* above alliterates in 'C,' the Somali spelling convention for the phoneme "cayn" (IPA ʦ), while the *jiifto* alliterates in "D." The alliteration of the *gabay* is "J."

Musical traits of Somali prosody

Somali music, both the older, nonprofessional and the newer, post-World War II professional, is composed on a pentatonic scale, that is five pitches in the scale (not 13 as in the Western scale). Pitches are not standardized; thus, there is a larger window of frequencies in which notes are "on pitch" than in Western music. The resulting intervals are also unstandardized, but are more predictable relative to the pitches on either side of them. The "gap" between notes 2 and 3 characteristic of pentatonic scales is even absent in some poems where all intervals are relatively equal.

Melody also helps differentiate Somali genres. Indigenous Somali music is subservient to linguistic constraints in a manner termed *language internal constraints* by Bird (1976), where musical traits are predictable from the scansion of the poetry. Actually, a small number of melodies is assigned to each genre, any one of which can be utilized to sing any poem in that genre; but, each of these melodies is subservient to the prosody of the genre. Hearing a Somali whistling, one might guess the genre but not the specific poem. Conversely, Somali professional poetry (the *heello*) may be classified under Bird's category of *language external constraints*. Each poem within the genre has its own melody, which sets up the rhythm of the poem superseding linguistic prosody. Bird also points out that "the movement of speech through poetry to song is in fact a continuum" of ever increasing constraints.

The interaction between music and words represents a polyrhythmic relationship in Somali scansion. Because linguistic scansion is quantitative, its perception through short and long duration of vowels (annotated by scholars with macrons and microns) is rhythmic. Duration in music is also quantitative and its perception through short and long, sung vowels (annotated by scholars with musical notes) is the very element that gives music its rhythm. Audience and poet alike are able to follow these two rhythms performed at the same time, and, more importantly, the *relationship between them*. Polyrhythm in Somali poetry-music is unique on the African continent because two parallel rhythm systems are recited at the same time *in the same stream of speech*. There are three characteristic relationships between music and words (termed "moro-musical"), which parallel the relationships between vowel lengths and syllables, the moro-syllabic relationships discussed above.

In closed-set moro-musical relationships, long notes occur in music when long vowels occur in the scansion; similarly, short notes occur with short vowels, whether in monosemes or when two short vowels occur in disemes. In the excerpt from the following *heello* (composed by Caweys Geedow in 1965) long vowels are represented with quarter notes (or their equivalent: two eighth notes) or notes of longer duration, while short vowels are represented with eighth notes. Microns and macrons annotate

scansion.

t. A ni - laa bai - la - mee bar - baa
reey, bi - yo waa la he - lee,

[Translation: Let me give you some advice, O ye youths,
For Water has been found.]

Since this poem exemplifies Bird's category of language external constraints, there is no regular scansion in the poem apart from the rhythm generated by the music, which is a recurrent pulse of short-short-long. At the end of the second and fourth measures, where long vowels are held longer than quarter-note duration, the rhythm of short-short-long continues to be carried by the musical accompaniment. In short, this poem is mono-rhythmic, as it appears to be with all language-externally constrained, professional poetry.

In open-set moro-musical relationships, short notes occur in music no matter what scansion occurs in the poem. There is no relationship between note duration and vowel length. This relationship might be characterized as "free verse," and exemplifies Bird's category of language internal constraints, like all Somali nonprofessional poetry. The following excerpt from a *gabay*, by the Sayyid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan (Mohamed Abdulla Hassan), will illustrate this relationship. Microns and macrons are again included to indicate scansion.

Xu - seen-ow jik-raar la - ma haab-lee, jaal-kay baad ta - hay e,
A - daan i - ga ja - deer wa - cin mar - ku, jaa - hiil - kii di - day e,
Jaan - hooy a - daan qa - ban mar - kuu, jii - tay ga - cal - kaa ye.

[Translation: O Hussein, do not speak obstinately; you are my friend.
You did not abandon me when the ignorant ones fled in fear.
You did not go to the [Abyssinian] emperor when your relatives did.]

In semi-open-set moro-musical relationships, long notes occur in music when long vowels occur in the scansion and, short notes occur with short vowels, but this pattern is occasionally reversed. The resulting *polyrhythmic juxtaposition* produces a syncopation of rhythms. The following three lines from a *hees maqasha*, baby caprine (lamb-and-kid) watering song, sung by Cibaado Jaamac Faarax in 1987, will illustrate this phenomenon. *Triangular note heads* are used when short vowels are sung to long notes; *square note heads* are used when long vowels are sung to short notes; and regular *oval note heads* indicate the use of short notes with short vowels and long notes with long vowels. Reproduced here are the first two lines of the poem--the first line sets the scansion with a nonsense formula of varying vowel lengths--and line 15. Microns and macrons once more annotate scansion, but note that a rest of one diseme's length completes the second foot in the line.

Ho-bey ho - beey, hoo-beey ho-beey

Ho-bey ho - beey, saw-laā-la-cosy,

Heey ho - beey, ma lays - ka qu-bo!?

[Translation: Hobey hobeey, hobeey hobeey,
Hobey hobeey, O you who scamper about,
...
Heey hobeey, why are they [not] cast out!?

In the last line the morpheme *ma*, (question marker), requires a short vowel in Somali grammar, but Somali colleagues insisted that they heard a long vowel here. When I argued that the vowel had to be short or it would be misspelled, they continued to insist that it was long, even though they could not understand the reason for this anomaly. The note duration of this prosodic slot was also short, which would make a short-voweled morpheme appropriate here, but what the listener expected to hear in this place was the syncopated reversal of vowel length and note duration conditioned from previous lines. Further investigation with a computer program (MacSpeech Lab II) which digitizes speech and prints it in wide-band spectrograms indeed indicated the duration of this prosodic slot to be short. Somali listeners had, therefore, *perceived the vowel to be prosodically long* while in reality it was both grammatically and phonologically short. This line is truly the exception that proves the rule.

Conclusions

Study of the performance of Somali music and poetry in everyday social

interaction--old or new, professional or nonprofessional, accompanied by musical instruments or merely by hand clapping--adds to the academic understanding of Somali social systems. Future study of Somali verbal art is necessary, as the musico-mono-syllabic relationships of many genres remain to be investigated. The empty slots on the following pair of charts, classifying the genres discussed today, graphically indicate how this research has only just begun.

MONORHYTHMIC SETS

	Closed Set Moro-Musical Relationship	Open-Set Moro-Musical Relationship	Semi-Open-Set Moro-Musical Relationship
Language Externally Constrained Sets	<i>HEELLO</i>		

POLYRHYTHMIC SETS

	Closed Set Moro-Musical Relationship	Open-Set Moro-Musical Relationship	Semi-Open-Set Moro-Musical Relationship
L A C N O G N U S A T G R E A I N E T D E R N S A E L T L S Y	Closed-Set Moro-Syl- labic Rel- tionship		
	Open-Set Moro-Syl- labic Rel- tionship	<i>GABAY</i> (1st hemistich)	<i>GABAY</i> (2nd hemistich)
	Semi-Open- Set Moro- Syllabic Relation- ship	<i>HEESTA</i> <i>MAQASHA</i>	

Furthermore, study of these structures can potentially help unravel of some of the knottiest issues of human artistic behavior in such schools as performance theory. Somalia is an ideal site for the study of the relationship of memory and formula to the composition and diffusion of oral poetry, and to the relationship between music and poetic scansion. Research suggests that Somali classical poetry (*gabay*) consists of texts composed in private and memorized verbatim for public performance. Work songs (*hees*) seem highly formulaic, though some of them are probably composed during performance, as the rhythms of work and poetry join. Finally, poetry in the

dance songs (*cayaar*) is composed and recited simultaneously but not within the formulaic method. At different times in life, the same Somali poet may participate in all three of these traditions. A young man may grow up around parents singing formulaic work songs and learn to compose this form while laboring among his livestock all his life. As a youth he may learn to compose dance songs during their performance at festivals. When he becomes an elder, he may refuse to compose dance songs because of the lowliness of their social prestige, and may spend his time composing classical poems. In one lifetime, the same person may be skilled in the composition methods of all these traditions. The Somali tradition thus suggests that our understanding of cognitive abilities in the composition of oral poetry may be more unified in all these forms than previously suspected, ranging from formulaic through spontaneous composition to complex forms that are memorized verbatim. In my view, a more unified and all encompassing theory of oral composition than has so far been proposed and which will embrace the oral-formulaic thesis, spontaneous composition and verbatim memorization, is called for. The study of the Somali tradition can potentially lead us to that theory.

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