

**The Genre of the Poetical Proverb *maahmaah* within
the Somali Oral Poetry
or
"Somalis tell lies, but they do not lie in proverbs"**

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Introduction

Whether there is a general definition for proverbs or not, it has not yet been found a satisfying one, although all the proverbs share common features: They are simple, usually concrete sayings that express practical wisdom. These short expressions are full of wit, condensing the wisdom of past generations, and they are often combined with an alliteration. Proverbs are mostly easy to remember and pleasing to hear. Furthermore proverbs are usually recognized as proverbs by users and listeners, followers of a common cultural heritage, sharing more or less the same system of truths and beliefs. Proverbs often change their original meaning over the generations, but they win new fields of validity and usage, or they get lost.

Maybe it is easier to let the proverbs speak for themselves. They emphasize their power, their long-proved truth, and by this the duty to take them serious. They can probably be found in very different languages and places (Schipper 1991: 1): "A hundred proverbs - a hundred truths" (Spain), "An old proverb will never break" (Russia), "A proverb is the ornament of speech" (Iran), "Proverbs are the cream of language" (Afar, Djibouti), "A speech without proverb is food without salt" (Amharic, Ethiopia), "Proverbs are the horses of speech" (Yoruba, Nigeria), or as the proverb used in the title indicates:

Soomaalidu been waa sheegtaa, beense ma maahmaahdo.
Somalis tell lies, but they do not lie in proverbs.

The Somali proverbs cover a large field of topics, but they are always connected to the field of human experience. So they are to some extent a logic product of it. The themes used in proverbs are: the love of the parents for their children, the love in general, the problems of courtship, the wisdom of the elders, the adventures of the traveller, the destruction by wars, the personal freedom, the dangers of the nomad's life, the stupidity of the donkey, the danger of the snake, the luck of the fool, the importance of religion, and so on.

The translation of proverbs from one language into another bears a number of difficulties. In order to avoid them, the authors only give literal transcriptions throughout the article.

Oral literature

"One cannot adequately summarize ... the function of oral literature or poetry in the society, because it affects the daily lives of most Somalis wherever they are. Poetry, proverbs, riddles, and other genres are used as acts of communication and as a form of education (elders to the young). They play a significant role in the traditional courts and in tribal and political affairs" (Zainab Mohamed Jama 1994: 185).

It seems that poetry and stories are the very core of the Somali cultural field, since, compared with other peoples in East-Africa, there are only a few arts or crafts among Somalis.

The Somali people, often labelled as "nation of poets", have a special consideration of the oral poetry, which is "the most important medium of artistic expressions" (Johnson 1996: 13). A lot of Somalis know how to sing or to recite poems of the different genres, although they are not composers themselves:

"In the evenings, around the camp-fires, the men sing and tell stories far into the night. And in the 'magala' or town, they gather in the tea shops, and often several 'gabei'-poets will spend hours chanting their own poetry, listened to by a large audience. There are many professional as well as amateur poets, and each has his own style ..." (Laurence 1993: 23).

Although since Laurence's travels to Somalia a lot of changes have taken place, this romantic description from the 1950's still bears some truth: The knowledge of poems and literature is expected to be a part of the personal knowledge of every Somali. The roots of the oral poetry lie in the nomadic culture of most of Somalia's inhabitants. The modern poetry is dominated by the intellectual elite. Nevertheless, Somali oral expression went on to reflect issues of public concern and historical actuality, or personal interests. The oral poetry is a vehicle for everything which concerns their lives. We want to show this on the basis of several examples.

The idea that knowledge is the key to development, and that the Somalis ought to take note of this, was stressed by many poets. Abdillahi Qarshi composed this piece in 1961:

*Aqoon la'aani waa iftiin la'aane
Waa aqal iyo ilays la'aane
Ogaada ogaada dugsiyada ogaada
Oo gaada oo ogaada
Walaalayaal oo aada !*

Lack of knowledge is lack of enlightenment
Homelessness and no light
Be aware, be aware of schools, be aware
Be aware, be aware,
Brothers, be aware !
(Afrax 1994: 245).

The first line of this verse, became to be known as the keyword for the education-campaign by the government of Jalle Mahamed Siyad Barre during the years 1973/74, after the introduction of the modified latin script for writing the Somali language, and has reached the status of one of the best known proverbs. Today, most Somalis would not identify this proverb with the poem of Abdillahi Qarshi, but rather more bring it in contact with the above mentioned literacy-campaign:

Aqoon la'aan waa iftiin la'aan.
Without knowledge no light.

The following proverb speaks about the relation between Somalia and Ethiopia. It expresses the Somali feelings towards the Christian Amharic, with whom they have been fighting since the 16th century about the fruitful lands of the Haud and the Ogaden.

Amxaaro madax gumac galay leedahaye, madax hadal galo ma laha.
Amharic people have bullets to penetrate the heads, but no speech to penetrate the heads.

Abdulqadir Hersi Yamyam, one of the most famous contemporary Somali poets, wrote a poem, commenting on the English government's intention, to stop the BBC World Service Somali Section's daily half hour:

Shabeelkii wax is baacsha ugu booddo caddaa, ma dhabbaa ilka beel?
The leopard [who] knew best [how to] attack, did it loose its teeth?

This year, Mohamed Hashi Gariye was asked by the meeting of the elders of Somaliland in Hargeisa, to express his ideas about the civil war and the present development perspectives of the country. He answered this way:

Dal waxaan ku noolahay, seddexdii dalaqood lagu furay dadnimadi.
I live in a country where ethic was divorced all the three times.

The genre of the Somali proverbs

The Somali oral poetry has two different categories of proverbs, the prosaic proverbs and the poetic proverbs. From the two genres of proverbs we have to clearly differentiate the genre of the popular sayings. Even if fulfilling all the formal criteria for proverbs, there is a big difference. For popular sayings are often used to mock about some social groups, e.g. the women:

Naago waa carruur raadweyn.
Women are children with big footprints.

Kal caano galeen kas ma galo.
A heart entered by milk, does not [anymore] accept intelligence. [Milk is here associated with women]

Or to discriminate a clan:

Qaan maarexaan waa qaaxo kugu maqan.
Debts to a [member of the] Marehan are like a tuberculosis hidden inside you.

In the light of seeing the growing importance of the Somali women in Somali society as the moral leaders of the peace-building process, and of seeing women more and more emancipating - to use a western term to describe the raised male awareness of female activities - this way of using language reflects unequal relations between women and men. We do not want to regard them as proverbs, for proverbs have to be more serious, and are meant to embody metaphysical and empirical accounts of the particular truth. The third example is talking about the hard-times someone can be given, owing money to a member of the *Maarexaan*-clan. Nowadays, such speech is regarded far away from any political correctness, and is furthermore banned from the general wisdom of the modern Somalis. But we can still take a neutral look at it as a popular saying if previous times.

The prosaic proverb, called *odhaah*, has only one difference in comparison to the *maahmaah*: it is not alliterated. The following *odhaah* consists of a simple interrogative sentence, without any alliteration.

Haabiil, ma nebi baa ?
Is Haabiil [male name] a prophet ?

A man stressed his surprise that someone else was such a truly devoted follower of a man named *Haabiil* that he asked, whether or not that man was a prophet in the Quran.

Turning to the topic of the article, the *maahmaah*, we want to state, that they seem to share the same criteria like all the other proverbs in different languages (see introduction).

The *maahmaah* can be divided into two major categories, a semantic division which was already proposed by Schipper (1992: 7):

A) The proverbs with *metaphorical expression* and so the demand of further, broader interpretation.

Agoonka kori, markuu weynaadana, u dhaaro inaad adigu aabbihis dilin.
Raise the orphan, and when he is grown up, swear that you did not kill his father.

Caqli gaalo iyo indho quraanjo midna lama arko.
The thoughts of the non-muslims and the eyes of the ant, both can not be seen.

Dad iyo duurba waxaad filayn baa lagu arkaa.
People and the desert can be seen in ways you were not thinking of before.

Dagaal gondahaagu ka dhashaa.
War can be born under your legs.

B) The proverbs with a *straightforward meaning*.

Far keliya fool ma dhaqdo.
Only one finger does not wash the whole face.

Gacmo wadajir bay wax ku gooyaan.
Two hands [taken] together [can] cut something.

Nabad baa caano macaan.
Peace is sweet milk.

This, however, does not mean, that proverbs here classified under B can not become metaphorical, when applied.

Imagery

Andrzejewski (1968: 74) explained the function of the imagery in this way: "It is considered to be a sign of refinement and wisdom not to come directly to the point but to present the audience one's statements or proposals by means of allegorical images, veiled expressions and cryptic allusions, which are subsumed under the term *guudmar* [italics by the authors] which literally means 'moving over (or above) the surface'".

How is the imagery presented in the Somali oral poetry? The late Farah Hussein Sharmarke was asked why he stopped to compose poems. He gave the questioners a catalogue of sixteen points, one of them is presented here.

*Shimbiir duulis badan, oo dhulkii
degi aqoon weeyey, mar unbuu
libaax labadi daan, dalaq yiraahdaaye
in edebi shey door ah tahay
baan iskaga daayey*

The bird which is always flying around
Refusing to stay somewhere
Once will land in the mouth of the lion.
For that good behaviour is something important
I have stopped to compose.

To explain how imagery works in Somali oral expression, an example is added here. It is one verse out of a poem by Habiba H. Aden. Those who are able to see what is behind the literal meaning, will understand that it describes some of the heavy crimes committed during the civil war, while the others just recognise a text of Habiba, where she is talking about animals. In the verse chosen the bloodthirsty hyena is featured:

Dhurwaagii dhaylo cune,

*illayn dhiig uu cabiyo
baruur uu dhuuqsadiyo,
dhallaanyo cun buu bartee
dhabtii buu daahayaa,
haddana dhabar muuqda iyo
dhirbiicaa la arkayaa,
kuyee waa dhabannohays.*

The hyena which eats the lambs
Is used to drinking blood
And grasping its rump
For it is used to eating young goats
It hides the truth
But the evidence can be seen.
It is ironic, they said
(Zainab Mohamed Jama 1994: 194).

Somalis start to become familiarized with the art of oral poetry at the stage of infancy. Everyday work is accompanied by songs of the different poetic genres, some are especially selected for a certain work. How is it possible that people can agree on a certain style of imagery? We think, that this early training of children and the practise in everyday life, lead to this skills.

When a child joins his age group, the process of familiarization continues; listening to stories, playing children games, listening to old men, and especially in wrestling with oral puzzles. Riddles commonly have a nomadic origin. The aim is to test and sharpen each other's knowledge and intelligence by turning easy facts into complicated oral puzzles, like the *googaaleysi*. In *halxiraale* more complex ideas are hidden by flowery language.

Googaaleysi is a game often played in the bush. It is a combat between nomadic children, dealing with words and imagery. These riddles seem to be very near to ones we know in Europe.

Example 1:

A: *Googaa?*

Are you ready [to answer my *googaaleysi*-question]?

B: *Cadalle!*

Ask me!

A: *Xeradeenna waa wado ul, oo ul la qaado ma leh.*

In the shed are a lot of sticks, which you can not collect.

B: *Waa geesaha adhiga.*

The horns of the goats.

Example 2:

A: *Googaa?*

B: *Cadalle!*

A: *Libaax ku laq oo ku soo laba celi.*

A lion who swallows you, but spits you out again.

B: *Waa gurigaaga.*

It is your house.

While the *googaaleysi* relates to the near environment - the world of children - and deals with rather simple topics, the following kind of riddles, the *halxiraale* speaks about complicated matters from the world of the adult people, like culture, religion, politics and so on.

The *halxiraale* is a kind of poetical combat, which does not lead from one long poem to another, but represents a question-answer-game in alliterated sentences. The following points are highly significant for the *halxiraale*: the combattants must have a good knowledge of the imagery used in poems, but also be flexible

enough to understand newly invented imagery. Moreover, they have to be able to invent new imagery themselves. Like the question, the answer should be alliterated too; Sayid Mahamed 'Abdille Hassan, the most famous poet of Somalia and leader of the independence-movement in the early nineteenth century, was presenting this question:

Wax cad oo madow baan arkaye. Car, yaa sheega ?

I have seen something white, which is black. Who dares to respond ?

Haaji Gooni, another very famous poet of that time, answered:

Wax cad oo madow sow indhaha ina Carrow ma aha ?

Something white which is black is the eyes, isn't it, son of Carro ?

Imagery in proverbs, finally, is presented the same way, like in all the other poetic genres.

The function of proverbs

Proverbs and popular sayings are mainly used in discussions, either to pronounce the speakers capacity of the language (as a decoration of style or as a gesture of speech), to update and strengthen the topic in question, or to have the audience's readiness: proverbs have rhetorical and stylistic functions. Instead of function we could also use the term 'pragmatic aspect'. There are two aspects to differentiate (Möhlig, 1994: 247):

A) The concrete message which the proverbs impart according to the intention of their users. The user will interpretate the proverb for a comment on the current state of affairs.

Ragna jabkiisa ayuu ka sheekeyaa naagana baraarhooda ayey ka sheekeyaan
Men always talk about hard times, women about good times

Sagaaro biyo wey cabtaa iyo ma cabto

The gazelle drinks water and does not drink water.

B) Communicative aims, at which the user by means of citation aims.

1. An appeal to the listener.

You should not behave like this.

Ninka aan tukan, soorta ha la cunin oo ha la fadhiisan oo ha salaamin.

Do not eat with, do not sit with, and do not greet the man who does not pray.

Rag iska riix iyo rabbi ka cabso meel ma wada galaan.

To attack someone and to fear God they do not enter the same place.

Do the good thing, God will not punish you.

Geesi Allah ma ciilo.

God does not put shame on a brave man.

Be selfconfident.

Nin fadhi kugu arka, loo ma sarakaco.

There is no standing up for a man who sees you sitting.

2. An expression of the relationship between speaker and his addressee.

We do not have the ties of blood, but the ties of common interest, what is much stronger.

Jir walaal ma aha, jidiin baa walaal ah.

It is not [your] flesh [and blood] who is [your] brother - it is [your] gullet.

Do not betray your brother:

Ninkii walaalkii hog u qoda, isagaa ku dhaca.

The man who digs a pit for his brother, falls into it himself.

3. A manifestation of the speaker's actual mood.

We may imagine an elder answering the repeated criticism by young people:

Hadal oday been ma aha.

The speech of an elder is no lie.

So we can finalize that the idea is to reach a more indirect and more subtle way of expression, in order to be more appreciated by the audience, to gain more support for one's own aims. The listeners do not only evaluate the message of the speaker, but also the brain-puzzle associated with the reading between the lines of the speech

The beauty of proverbs

Do Somalis differentiate proverbs according to beauty? What are then the criteria for beauty? We want to analyse this question according to a concept first presented by the Somali scholar Ahmed Farah Ali 'Idaajaa' in an interview on BBC World Service Somali Section. The three criteria presented here do not represent a fixed system of categories, but it can give us some hints why Somalis prefer proverb A, instead of proverb B.

1) The message of the forefathers

The importance that is attributed to the elders' and forefathers' speech,

Ragna waa raggii hore, hadalna waa intuu yiri.

[Real] men are the old men, and [real] speech is what they said.

Oday been ma sheego, kumana maahmaaho.

Elders do not lie, and they do not lie in proverbs.

and to the moral and practical values set up generations ago, is very high.

Waran lahow, weedh lahow, oo waxtar ahow.

Be a man of the spear, a man of words, and a man of generosity.

So, the more information of past generations is put in a proverb, the more a feeling of social tie to the culture is build up.

2) The ideas we get out of it

To get ideas out of a proverb is strongly connected with its topic, its historicity and its complexity.

Harag sagaaro iiga kac ma ahee iga durug ma leh.

[To say] give me space on your gazelle fur is not possible, [to say] go away [is possible].

This is a good example, because its topic is the origin of the fighting. It may lead us to think in a new way about the present situation of Somalia.

3) The pictures presented in the proverbs

Both of the following proverbs have a common theme: the lack of knowledge. They are synonyms, but while the first is a very short expression, with straightforward meaning, the second is much more beautiful because it shows more pictures, and by this it produces more questions to solve.

Aqoon la'aan waa iftiin la'aan.

Without knowledge [there is] no light.

Mugdi habeen ma aha ee waa meel aadan aqoonin.

The darkness is not the night, but the place you can not find.

The same explanation is valid for the next example, where both proverbs are talking about the destructive force of the war.

Dagaal waa ka dare.

War is worse.

Dagaal wiil ku ma dhasho ee wiil baa ku dhinto.

War does not produce sons, but kills sons.

The following proverbs features a very famous topic: the lie. The lie is shown here in the context of its short-livedness, what is morally attributed to it in maybe most languages and cultures. We gave now several indications of what is considered to be a beautiful proverb. May the reader now himself choose his favourite out of the examples shown here:

Beeni raad ma leh.

Lies do not have footprints.

Ninkii been badani isagaa u dhinta.

The man who often lies, dies of this.

Beentaada hore waa runtaada dambe u darantahay.

Your last lie damages your next truth.

Run sheeg waa ceeb sheeg.

To tell the truth means to speak about unliked things.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the oral poetry is the preferred way of artistic expression by the Somalis even in daily life. We have shown that the proverbs, or oral literature in general, are historical and ethnographic documents of high scientific value, even more when considering it in the Somali context of generations of oral tradition. We did not show how these sources could be exploited, but we tried to give some hints and to define a small concept, on which further research and publications will base.

The most basic fact on proverbs is that they only can be understood in the context of telling them. Much work on identifying the different kinds of contexts was done by Möhlig (1994). Talking about the proverbs, we did not want to analyse the ways of how to understand them, but to characterize them and see their role in the field of usage. Studying the few publications on Somali proverbs, we thought, that this exploration of the topic may be at this stage the most fruitful contribution to the research on Somali proverbs.

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