

"The Working Hypotheses of Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal"

The decision of the organizers of the First International Congress of Somali Studies to dedicate its published proceedings to the memory of Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal,¹ who died only a few months after the Congress, will certainly have met with the wholehearted approval of all the participants. Muuse Galaal made an enduring contribution to Somali studies and played a pivotal role in the movement to establish a national orthography. Its introduction in 1972 was not only of vital importance to Somalia but accelerated the development of Somali studies abroad to a degree which would have never been attainable if Somali remained an unwritten language.

Some information concerning his life and work is available in published form² and in taperecordings of radio broadcasts.³ A man of his stature, however, deserves an extensive biography and I am confident that in the years to come a dedicated biographer will emerge who will do justice to his noble and fruitful life. Meanwhile I shall endeavor here to give some account of the aspects of his work which are immediately relevant to current research and development in Somali studies, namely the working hypotheses which guided him in his treatment of the Somali oral poetry and traditional culture.

Muuse Galaal seldom made any programmatic statements on theoretical issues and when he did they were in the form casual observations in the context of writing, lecturing or broadcasting on specific subjects concerned with the Somali oral heritage.⁴ Information about his working hypotheses has thus to be inferred from the procedures he adopted in his work, from the assumptions which are implicit in his descriptive statements and from the attitudes he took in public and private discussion and debates. It is from such sources that I have tentatively pieced together the outlines provided in this paper. My qualifications to

undertake such a task arise from a long association with him which began in 1950 when we worked together as a linguistic research team at the Department of Education at Sheikh and then continued at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1952-54. We kept in close contact between 1954 and 1980 both through correspondence and in meeting during his visits to West Germany, France and Great Britain and my visits to Somalia. I had the opportunity not only to attend his lectures and seminars and to listen to his broadcasts but also to discuss many matters informally and frequently to seek his help and advice, which he gave very generously to all his friends, associates and visitors both Somali and foreign.

The first of Muuse Galaal's working hypotheses which I propose to discuss here concerns the transmission and preservation of Somali oral poetry. He assumed that many of the older oral poems which were preserved through oral transmission long after their authors' death had a form which was very close to the versions originally composed. The grounds for this assumption arose from his experience. He spent his youth as a pastoralist in the traditional Somali environment and kept in touch with it throughout his life, so that he had the opportunity to discover at first hand how extraordinary were the powers of memory among poetry reciters. He also was fully familiar with the Somali unwritten copyright law applied to the classical genres of poetry which demands that the reciter of a poem which is not of his own composition must endeavor to reproduce the oral text as accurately as is humanly possible and must give the name of the oral author at each recital. He knew from observation how severe was the disgrace of anyone who wilfully made changes to the version he learnt or added his own improvisations.

The test of his conviction that the older poems preserved through oral transmission were close to their original versions came when

disputes arose as a result of textual divergences in what was thought to be the same poem and of differences in the attribution of authorship.

The procedures advocated in such cases by Muuse Galaal were sound and illuminating. He put great stress on the reliability of the reciter from whom the text was obtained. It counted in the reciter's favor if he had a reputation for the accuracy of his memory, a wide repertoire and personal integrity. So did age, since Muuse Galaal's experience led him to believe that it was the old men who were the best poetry reciters, unless they were already afflicted by senility. He thought, no doubt correctly, that long experience in memorizing and reciting produced a high sensitivity and discernment. A good reciter would memorize poems only from the poets themselves, or if they were dead or lived far away, from other reciters whom he regarded as dependable and respected. Muuse Galaal himself was very careful in the selection of people from whom he collected poetic texts and always noted their names and the area of their origin so as to make their identification possible. In addition to the quality of the human channels of transmission he also took into account the internal evidence when this was available, which involved comparison of the divergent versions from the point of view of the style characteristic of the particular oral author. Since leading poets seldom made mistakes in scansion or alliteration, the degree of deviation from the unwritten canons of poetry was another test enabling the researcher to decide the authenticity of a particular version. ⁵

Muuse Galaal also offered apt and highly productive suggestions of how to deal with another important problem facing researchers and translators of Somali poetry, namely the difficulties arising for lexical obscurity. As a result of his vast experience of Somali classical poetry as collector, reciter and poet ⁵ he was convinced that absolute lexical obscurity was extremely rare in Somali poetry, if it existed at all. His working hypothesis could be summarized in the form of five

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simple rules.

- (a) Never assume that a word which is obscure is meaningless.
- (b) If the word is new to you but has a root which occurs in other Somali words it is likely to have been coined by the poet and its meaning can be inferred through comparison with them.
- (c) When the word bears no similarity in its root to any known Somali word it is possible that it is a borrowing from another language, phonologically disguised. Try to learn as much as possible about the biography of the poet. Information about his travels and contacts might lead you to scan for its etymon the vocabularies of languages with which he became familiar.
- (d) When the application of rules (b) and (c) does not give positive results scan as many other poems as possible in search of the word since the comparison of contexts in which the word occurs can usually provide a clue to the meaning.
- (e) If the results of the application of rules (b), (c) and (d) are negative try to infer the meaning of the word from the context of the sentence and the trend of the whole poem, but do not exclude the possibility that further search will eventually lead to positive results.

The need for these wholesome recommendations will be obvious to anyone familiar with the classical genres of Somali poetry. Muuse Galaal himself once admitted during a discussion of the problem of lexical obscurity that he came across some older poems in which as much as ten per cent of the lexical items was of the type to which rule (e) had to be applied.

Yet another of Muuse Galaal's working hypotheses concerns what might be described as the Somali world view. He maintained that Somalis had a system of thought with its own way of perceiving reality, its own

rules for problem solving and successful conduct of life and its own scientific outlook applied to such pursuits as animal husbandry, agriculture, the healing of humans and animals, weather forecasting and the preservation of the ecological environment. Though he fully recognized the role of Islam in some of the most crucial aspects of this world view he claimed that it also had strong specifically Somali characteristics.

An outline of his ideas on the subject is found in his paper "Some Observations on Somali Culture" (1968). It is highly imaginative and original, and contains a great wealth of information in spite of its modest size. Its culminating point is found on page 42, where he constructs a visual model in the form of a tree which shows how the various aspects of Somali culture are integrated. The particular importance of this paper lies in its methodology. In addition to direct observation he uses excerpts from oral poetry and proverbs as primary sources of information and not merely as illustrations. Muuse Galaal's reverence for oral texts stemmed, no doubt, from his conviction that most of them were accurately preserved in oral transmission as I have mentioned earlier. Since early documentation of the traditional Somali culture is very scanty indeed and since the culture itself has suffered some degree of erosion, Muuse Galaal's use of oral texts originating from earlier periods is a very sound procedure.

The working hypothesis about the Somali world view is also implicit in Muuse Galaal's work Stars, Seasons and Weather in Somali Pastoral Traditions and was evident in his lectures at the Department of Somali Language and Literature of the National University ^{and} at the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as in his radio broadcasts.

Such extensive use of oral texts as primary sources would not have been possible if Muuse Galaal had not had at his disposal a large collection of transcripts and tapes of oral literature. He was an

indefatigable collector of poetry, proverbs and narrative prose, and he used his own meagre financial resources unsparingly to obtain them whenever he could, 'He cultivated poetry reciters and narrators and wrote down or taperecorded their repertoires, inducing them to cooperate with him by offering them entertainment, gifts and flattery or appealing to their patriotism or local loyalties.

The idea that Somali traditional culture represented a coherent system of thought was combined in Muuse Galaal's mind with his concern for the future of his country. He was convinced that this system had much to offer to the younger generation who were already losing touch with it in the rapidly growing towns. In his Seeska Hiddaha Soomaalida: The Basic Traditional Education in Somalia (1969), which in spite of its subtitle is written only in Somali, he provides a collection of excerpts from oral literature which give guidance to young people for the virtuous and effective conduct of their lives as well as some items of miscellaneous information about traditional Somali culture.

Although Muuse Galaal's working hypotheses may require further elaboration and refinement, and perhaps some modifications, they provide very useful bearings for anyone who launches upon the yet largely uncharted seas of Somali oral literature. His influence is clearly recognizable in many of the B.A. dissertations at the National University where he lectured and in works published or awaiting publication at the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences of which he was a member. It is also discernible in the approach of those foreign scholars who had the privilege of working or coming into contact with him as a colleague and adviser.

Alongside his achievements as a pioneer of written Somali, collector of oral texts and poet, his contribution to methodology which I have endeavored to describe here, secures for him a prominent and lasting position in the cultural history of Somalia.

Appendix I

Publications of Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal ⁶

1954a "Arabic Script for Somali." Islamic Quarterly, 1, pp.114-118.

1954b "Reflections on Somali Oral Literature." War Somali Sidihi,
28 August, pp.13-14.

1956a "Somali Stories." War Somali Sidihi, 78, p.5; 79, p.6; 81,
p.11 and 82, pp.5-8. ⁷

1956b Hikmad Soomaali. London: Oxford University Press.

1961 Linguistic Report. Mogadishu: The Somali Language Committee,
Ministry of Education.

[1964a] A Collection of Somali Literature, Mainly from Sayid Mohamed
Abdille Hassan. ⁸ Mogadishu. ⁹

1964b "Folk Literature." The National Review: Somalia Calling the
World, 2, p.19.

1965 "From the Somali Story Teller's Anthology." The National Review:
Somalia Calling the World, pp.35-36.

1966 "Somali Poetry." Africa: German Review of Economic and Political
Affairs in Africa and Madagascar, VII, 2, pp.43-46.

1968a "Some Observations on Somali Culture,"/ Perspectives on Somalia:
Orientation Course for Foreign Experts Working in Somalia. Moga-
dishu: Somali Institute of Public Administration, pp.39-55.

1968b "Somali Pastoral Weather Lore System," in Perspectives on Somalia:
Orientation Course for Foreign Experts Working in Somalia.
Mogadishu: Somali Institute of Public Administration, pp.56-73.

1968c "Some Aspects of Somali Pastoral Medicine," in Perspectives on
Somalia: Orientation Course for Foreign Experts Working in
Somalia. Mogadishu: Somali Institute of Public Administration,
pp.74-79.

1968d The Terminology and Practice of Somali Weather Lore, Astronomy
and Astrology. Mogadishu.

- 1969a Principi e caratteristiche generali della poesia somala. Mogadishu: L'Istituto Italiano di Cultura. [Text of a lecture.]
- 1969b Seeska Hiddaha Soomaalida: The Basic Traditional Education in Somalia. Somali Version Only. Mogadishu.
- [1969c] Traditional Somali Attitude towards Foreigners. Mogadishu: U.S.A. Peace Corps. [Text of a lecture.]
1970. Stars, Seasons and Weather in Somali Pastoral Traditions. Mogadishu.
- 1977 "Somalie," in Alfâ Ibrâhîm Sow (ed.) Langues et Politiques de langues en Afrique Noire: L'Experience de l'UNESCO. Paris: Nubia /UNESCO, MCMLXXVII, pp.335-339.

Appendix II

Joint Publications of Muuse Galaal and Other Authors

- 1963a [with B.W.Andrzejewski:] "A Somali Poetic Combat." Journal of African Languages, II, 1 pp.15-28, II,2, pp.93-100 and II,3, pp.190-205,
- 1963b A Somali Poetic Combat. East Lansing: Michigan State University, [1963a, published in book form.] , and
- 1966 "The Art of the Verbal Message in Somali Society," in Johannes Lukas (ed.) Neue Afrikanistische Studien. Hamburg: Hamburger Beiträge zur Afrika-Kunde, 5, pp.29-39.
- 1974 [with Artan Akhmed Khange and Omar Au Nukh:] "Folklor v Zhizni Somaliitsev," translated by E.S.Sherr, in Uchenuie Zapiski Sovetsko-Somaliiskoi Ekspeditsii. Moscow: Institut Afriki, Akademiya Nauk S.S.S.R., Izdatel'stvo Nauka pp.296-306.

Appendix III

Translations from Muuse Galaal's Hikmad Soomaali

- 1964 Whiteley, W.H. (ed.) A Selection of African Prose: I. Traditional Oral Texts. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.136-139, 140, 142-147. and 149-163.

- 1966 Zaborski, Andrzej. "Opowieści i Bajki Somalijskie", Przegląd Orientalistyczny, 3, (59), pp.218-224.
- 1976 Zhukov, A.A. and Kqtlyar, E.S. (eds.) Skazki Narodov Afriki. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Nauka, pp.465-467, 488-489, 504, 522-537 and 542.

Appendix IV

Unpublished Official Research Report

- 1952 [with B.W.Andrzejewski:] Recommendations for a Somali Orthography. Hargeisa: Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme R.366 and R.366A, Linguistic Research, Somaliland Protectorate.

NOTES

1. Note that before the introduction of the national Somali orthography his name appeared in a variety of forms: M.H.I.Galaal, Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, Musa H.I.Galaal and Muusa H.I.Galaal.
2. See the following publications: D.R.Dudley and M.D.Lang (eds) The Penguin Companion to Literature: 4. Classical and Byzantine, Oriental and African (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), Hussein M.Adam (with an Introduction by Charles L.Gesheker) The Revolutionary Development of the Somali Language (Los Angeles: African Studies Center, University of California, 1980), John William Johnson "Research in Somali Folklore," Research in African Literature, 4, 1 (1973), pp.51-61, David D.Laitin, Politics, Language and Thought: The Somali Experience (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) and my articles "The Rise of Written Somali Literature," African Research and Documentation, 8/9 (1975) pp.39-45, "The Development of a National Orthography in Somalia and the Modernization of the Somali Language," Horn of Africa, 1, 3 (1978), pp.39-45 and "Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal (1914-1980): A Founding-Father of Written Somali," Horn of Africa, 4, 2 (1981), pp.22-25.
3. Available in the sound archives of Radio Mogadishu and the Somali Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation in London.
4. For a bibliography of his works see Appendices I, II and IV. It is possible that some bibliographical items have escaped my attention since Muuse Galaal, as far as I could ascertain, left no list of his publications and his numerous manuscripts, type-scripts and tapes have not yet been catalogued.
5. Only three of his poems have been published. They are found on pp.53, 56-57 and 59-60 of his Hikmad Soomaali (1956). Tape recordings of some of his poems are available in the archives of

Radio Mogadishu and the Somali Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

6. See Note 1 as this may be important when consulting library catalogues.
7. Issues of this journal are sometimes not numbered and sometimes bear no dates.
8. When the year of publication is placed between brackets this indicates that it is not provided in the book itself but is derived from other sources of information.
9. When the publisher is not given it is to be understood that the book was published by the author.