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ASPECTS  
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DEVELOPMENT

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NOTIONS OF CROP FERTILITY AMONG DRY-FARMERS OF  
THE BAY REGION

This paper attempts to outline notions of crop fertility among the dry-farming agro-pastoralists in the Bay Region in southern Somalia.

Many of the farming communities in Bay have, as elsewhere in southern Somalia, taken up agriculture relatively recently. It is possible to find villagers whose families were almost exclusively pastoralists only a few generations ago. This transition - although somewhat rarer today - is of very long standing in Somalia and has over the years been documented and analysed by several ethnographers (Colucci 1924:45-48; Cerulli 1959; Lewis 1969; Cassanelli 1982: 78-82).

Bearing this historical framework in mind, it is hardly surprising that agriculture practices appear simple compared to animal husbandry. Technologically there is very little that distinguishes the full-time farmer from the pastoralist with small scale farming as a side activity. Neither of them, for instance, practices crop rotation or fallowing. Similar observations can be made regarding the relatively sparse amount of traditional agricultural knowledge, compared to the amount of knowledge connected to pastoral production. Some recently settled pastoralists we met stated that they had learned agriculture by watching others.

Soil is generally not classified beyond the major distinctions between red (laterite) and grey soils, the latter being considered the best for agriculture. Some farmers do nonetheless have fields on red soil. A less common further subdivision

into the categories bariya (unplanted), duur (full of weeds) and salaax (excellent), is known only to a few and seems to have very little significance.<sup>I</sup> On the whole most farmers attribute more importance to rain than to the quality of the soil. Rain and water are regarded as synonymous with prosperity in general (cf. Galaal 1968). The reasons for this are obvious. In an environment where - despite average annual rainfall of up to six hundred millimeters - rains may fail completely some seasons, grass cover and cultivated crops will probably appear more directly related to rainfall than to soil type (cf. Luling 1971:102). The same seems true also of the beliefs about the growth of the single grain. It is said that the "swelling" or "fermentation" (tarān) of the grain in the ground, is due to the presence of water in the same fashion as the volume of rice increases when boiled in water.

When moving from this level of explicit statements of cultural common sense, to the more subtle domains of symbolic and religious practices related to agriculture, one discerns a vast field of semantic relations that adds another dimension to the traditional knowledge. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to penetrate and discuss some of these relations. More specifically, we will look at how some practices connect the growth of crops to human fertility. We hold that this model of fertility is consistent with a culturally standardized view of agricultural production that emphasizes the importance of labour and produce, but attaches very little significance to immobile means of production (i.e. land). We will start by giving a brief sketch of how land, labour and produce are measured in the inter-river area, assuming the systems of measurement to be symptomatic of deeper attitudes. Then one of the particular measurement systems will be analysed, since it is illuminating for how notions of crop fertility link to human re-

production. Finally, these findings will be compared to a particular ritual that further connects crop fertility to human fertility.

Systems of measuring fields in southern Somalia have recently been described by several authors (e.g. Haakonsen 1982; Lewis 1981; Luling 1971). It is interesting to note that although some standardized units are in use, the actual size they designate varies considerably from region to region, between districts and, sometimes, between neighbouring villages. In the Lower Shabelle Region for instance, the standard unit employed is the pace (tilaab), two times two of which make up a moos. A row of forty moos is called cul and twelve such rows side by side are called one darab (Luling 1971:91-92). As the basis of this system is the pace, a darab when rendered into meters, has been found to vary between 2.015 and 3.374 square meters (cf. Haakonsen 1982: 28). It should further be noted that the number of moos per cul also is subject to variation. Luling (1971:91-92) registered as many as 60 moos per cul in some places along the Shabelle river.

Although the term darab is vague, it is the most widespread unit of measurements in the inter-river area. The units cul and moos appear to be restricted to the riverine population and are not familiar to the inhabitants in the west and centre of the Bay Region. In the latter area a darab is measured solely by double paces, thirty times twelve of which constitutes the unit. Further west, the word darab is known to some farmers but almost never used. Although the unit they use (for instance in deciding wages for hired labour) approximates the darab, or ten times thirty double paces, it is simply referred to as this number of paces (tilaabo).

In this latter area another kind of "system of measurement" can be found in the villages where the size of a field is talked about as being a certain number of Yasiin and Tabaarak. These terms are not primarily to be conceived of as units of measurement, but must instead be viewed in relation to the religious practices of which they form an integral part. We will return to an analysis of these practices below.

However, it should first be noted that the fluidity of land measurements contrasts to the fixed standards by which agricultural labour and produce are measured. When, for instance, setting the wages for hired labour the farmer and the worker may discuss at length the various variables that will affect the wages. It is decided according to the precise tasks to be carried out, combined with an estimate of the time needed and the size of the field. For clearing, weeding and harvesting, some farmers use an area measure that is ten times thirty double paces.

A labour intensive task is the annual or seasonal reexcavation of the rainwater reservoirs (sing. war, pl. waro). When this is to be done the dried out bottom of the war is divided into as many squares or rectangles as there are member households. The division is done by using sticks with fixed lengths of between two and four underarms (depending on the size of the war). After the division has been approved of, representatives from each household dig out the indicated areas and when they have finished, the man in charge controls the depth of the shafts with the measuring-stick.

The grains (i.e. mainly sorghum and maize) have also traditionally been measured with great exactitude. The standard measure is called suus and is said to be equal between one and a half kilogram, formerly the suus corresponded to a wooden bowl in use throughout southern Somalia (Ferrandi

1903:347), but it is nowadays replaced by empty tin cans. Although one author has claimed that the actual weight of the suus is below that stated, we were led to believe that it, at least nowadays, is a fairly accurate measurement. When for instance local ADC (Agricultural Development Corporation) agents collect the harvest from individual producers, they use the suus to measure the content of sacks. This is rarely done without having a balance available in the vicinity to check the actual weight of the full tin can. Even granted that this may be a relatively recent standardization due to the increasing presence of ADC, the different units for quantity measurement do not possess the same flexibility in relation to one another as the units for area measure do. Thus twelve suus are invariably equivalent to one tanag equal one sack or juuni.<sup>2</sup>

On the whole then, it seems justified to conclude that more significance is attributed to quantities of labour and produce than to sizes of fields. The importance of this for the present analysis will be discussed more thoroughly below. It is sufficient here to mention that we take these differing standards of measurement to reflect deeper attitudes to labour, land and produce.

Let us now return to the "measurement system" in which the size of a field is given by the terms Yasiin and Tabaarak. Yasiin and Tabaarak are two chapters of the Koran, number thirty-six and fifty-seven. In English translations the latter is more generally known as Al-Mulk (The Sovereignty), but the word Tabaarak ('blessed') is the first word in the first verse and is the name employed in the areas where this research was conducted. The meaning of the word Yasiin was not known to any of our informants. It is derived from the two letters of the Arabic alphabet which stand in

the beginning of the first verse.

The reason for giving the size of a field by these two names is that following the clearing of a new field and thereafter before every new period of sowing, the two suras are read while walking slowly across the field. The man doing this (it may be a sheikh or just the man who owns the field) starts with Yasiin and when it is finished, continues by reading Tabaarak then switches to Yasiin again, and so on until he reaches the other end of the field. Thus a field may be said to be "two Yasiin and two Tabaarak". It should be emphasized that this is not an area measure, according to most informants it is only done lengthwise and hence the width of the field remains unmeasured. It does not, however, remain completely unknown; most of the fields are roughly squareformed, and farmers would when requested estimate the distance in the other direction in Yasiin and Tabaarak. Yasiin and Tabaarak have a variety of different uses in many different contexts. By examining some of these other uses and their connotations, we hope to be able to shed some light on the cognitive background of their use on the fields.

However, it is necessary first to say a few general words about the explicit beliefs connected to these two suras. Yasiin is said to be the "heart" and the strongest part of the Koran. We found that most people, even if they did not know the whole of the Koran, would at least be able to recite large parts or the whole of this chapter. The number of verses - eighty-three - is said to be the same as the number of days in the ripening period of the coconut. Tabaarak is said to be almost as strong as Yasiin. It has thirty verses which is equal to the number of days in a month. Both of these suras are also believed to be good to use for protection in general and also to achieve short-term aims such as restoring health and acquiring wealth. Apart from these more general conceptions of the two suras,

it is particularly instructive to examine some of the specific uses that they have. Yasiin is said to make a man indefeatable if he reads it before the battle. Another, and one of its most important uses, is for the curing of male genital disorders and impotence or sterility in particular. When used for this purpose, Yasiin is read a certain number of times by a sheikh over a bowl containing holy water (maa'ul ward). While reading, the sheikh spits into the bowl and then gives it to the patient who drinks the water and regains his strength. Another context where Yasiin is used is during the construction of a mundul (hut). When the building is completed, a sheikh will be asked to read Yasiin seven times. Finally, following male or female circumcision, Yasiin is read into water that is given to the boy or girl in order to heal the wounds.

Tabaarak in turn, has perhaps its most important use in the practices connected to the curing of female infertility. If, for instance, a menstruating woman drinks water into which Tabaarak has been read, she will become pregnant immediately. Furthermore, if a boy is in love with a girl but she refuses to allow him to approach her, he may secretly read Tabaarak into water that he knows she will drink. When she does, she will fall in love with him at once. A husband whose wife refuses him in the same way, may by the same procedure regain her confidence. Tabaarak may also be read for a cow that refuses to give milk to her calf (see figure I).

A complete enumeration of all the different uses of Yasiin and Tabaarak is impossible and unnecessary for the present purpose. The most important ones are those that are not restricted to the knowledge of sheikhs, but knowledge common also among laymen. It is possible to enlarge the list with the more uncommon practices of different sheikhs, but we are here trying to find the associations made by ordinary people and not only by specialists.

Figure I. The different contexts in which Yasiin and Tabaarak are used.

Yasiin	Tabaarak
To make a man indefeatable in combat	
During <u>mundul</u> construction	
To heal wounds after circumcision	
Read on fields before sowing	Read on fields before sowing
To restore male fertility	To restore femal fertility
	To make a woman allow approach
	To make a cow give milk to her calf

From this list of the different contexts in which Yasiin and Tabaarak occur, it is possible to discern some general characteristics that are attributed to the two suras. Yasiin appears to have male association as it is connected to male fertility. In addition, warfare and mundul construction are typical male pursuits. Tabaarak on the other hand, seems to carry a female connotation through its link with female fertility and its power to alter the feelings of women. It can further be noted that the only similar context - apart from the procedures on the fields - in which both of them are used, is precisely to restore the fertility of men and women respectively. We believe therefore that the custom of reading Yasiin and Tabaarak on the fields, reflects a conception of fertility based on the complementarity of the

sexes. By reading the chapters of the Koran that are used to engender male and female fertility respectively, human fertility is transferred to the crops. There are a number of other indications that support this interpretation. The most striking example is perhaps the legend of a Sufi saint, Sheikh Muumin of the Salihiya Order. He died some twenty years ago, but the ceremonies (roobdoon, 'rain-seeker') he used to conduct in times of drought are still remembered with veneration. It is said that if the rains failed after the period of sowing, Sheikh Muumin went out of the village to the fields where he erected a hut (hoori) and stayed for seven days. He was accompanied by a man from the village who cooked for him. He only ate at nights and devoted the days to praying and reading from the Koran (we were not told which parts). During this seven-day period he remained in complete celibacy and on the last day the villagers came out to the field and a big feast was held. The rains then started and the grain began to grow.

To comprehend the way in which the roobdoon of Sheikh Mumin is connected to human fertility, it is necessary to introduce a few further facts and compare them to the basic structure of the series of events in the ceremony. First, the sheikh went out of the village and to the fields that are always located outside the village in the bush. The bush/village distinction is one of the most basic spatial demarcations in this area. It is also a social distinction but as such a relative one; most families have sons that have spent or will spend some years with the family herd in the bush and hence by definition become "bush people" (reer badiye). This designation is commonly applied as a pejorative to herdsmen visiting larger villages to barter or trade their products. It is also quite often jokingly used between friends, and contrasted to the "village people" (reer

tuuledo). What is important to note is that the "bush" and the "village" exist as explicit cognitive categories. Secondly, Sheikh Muumin stayed on the field in celibacy, for a period of seven days together with another man. When the period was over the people from the village gathered on the field for a feast. When this series is viewed in relation to other occasions at which ritual seclusion of any kind occurs, and especially other contexts in which large portions of the village population is gathered, it becomes quite evident that Sheikh Muumin's ceremony was structured as an inversion of the marriage ceremony. A marriage is always held in the village. It starts with communal feasting after which the married couple withdraws their mundul for seven days. During this time they must both abstain from praying since sexual contacts make a man (and woman) impure (see figure 2).

Figure 2. The roobdoon of Sheikh Muumin as ritual inversion of the marriage ceremony.

	The roobdoon	Marriage
Location	the bush	the village
Period of seclusion	seven days	seven days
Participants	male/male	male/female
Communal feasting	at the end of the ceremony	at the beginning of the ceremony
Prohibitions	sexual intercourse	prayers (religion)
Main activity	prayers (religion)	sexual intercourse

Some of the opposition in figure 2 may deserve our further attention. The bush/village contrast should appear fairly

established by now, and beginning/end of ceremony is also uncomplicated. However, it is by no means self-evident that male/female is an opposition to male/male. Our reason for depicting this as a crucial contrast is based on the scheme  $A : B :: a_1 : a_2$ . Theoretical support for this scheme in the context of gender symbolism in the Muslim world, has recently been advanced by Bourdieu (1977:44,208). One may also say that male/female is to male/male as complementarity is to non-complementarity. Regarding the last opposition in which sexual intercourse appears as opposed to religion (diin), it may be added that the two are opposed only in so far as the exercise of the former inhibits the exercise of the latter and vice versa.

Hence, the scheme as a whole depicts some structural properties of the marriage ceremony in relation to the roobdoon that Sheikh Muumin held. When these two ceremonies are regarded in this abstracted way the one appears as an inversion of the other. This inversion consists of the reversal of the model of the marriage ceremony and the replacement of the single elements by their cultural opposites. We have attempted to demonstrate this in order to show that underlying the ceremony by which Sheikh Muumin brought rain and growth to the crops, was a basic pattern for the marriage ceremony and, by extension, human reproduction. On a high level of abstraction then, it would seem that in this world view, (agricultural) production and (human) reproduction are regarded as essentially the same or at least very closely linked.

There is one further point of support for this interpretation. Haakonsen (1982:27) observed that in the Lower Shabelle "clearing of new land is described by the verb furasho, to open, and it is vividly compared to the 'opening' of an infibulated virgin girl, while the scratches one invariably

gets from clearing away thorny plants and underbush are compared to the scratches which may be incurred during the sexual act".

To sum up, we have tried to analyse the use of Yasiin and Tabaarak on the fields in terms of the different contexts in which these two suras are used. We have suggested that since Yasiin has male connotations and Tabaarak female, reading both of them on the fields could be seen as a means by which complementarity of the sexes and human fertility is transferred to the germination of the grain. We found further support for this by analysing the roobdoon of Sheikh Muumin. We showed how this ceremony in fact rested on an inverted model of the marriage ceremony, i.e. the epitome of sexual complementarity. The sexual metaphors for work on the fields, are additional indications that grain production and human reproduction are regarded as very closely related phenomena.

In the introduction it was suggested that many ideas and practices linked to the traditional dry-farming in southern Somalia, become more intelligible if viewed in the framework of agro-pastoral transition. The points made in this paper could on one level be seen as referring to an essentially pastoral knowledge system adapted to a new type of production. This might provide an economic background for the different attitudes to labour, land and produce. As we have tried to demonstrate, the agricultural ideology emphasizes precise quantities of labour and produce, but provides vague concepts of soil quality and field size. This is, furthermore, consistent with our findings regarding the representations of crop fertility; there is nothing in the religious and symbolic practices that we have examined that suggests a link

between any kind of concept of fertility and soil. Indeed it may be more than a coincidence that a knowledge system that so emphasizes the labourer and the grain, also regards the fertility of the former as a model for the fertility of the latter.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- I Naturally other names exist that are applied to the land. Most of them, however, are jural terms rather than classifications of soils. Many of the early authors who discussed the jural terms for land, encountered problems in the analysis of traditional forms of ownership (see Colucci 1924:204-222; cf. Guadagni 1981:59-87). Perhaps some of these problems could be resolved by also looking at what land is to the farmers, and not only how it is owned.
- 2 The juuni is more commonly known as "quintal".



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