

# CAMEL HERDING AND ITS EFFECTS ON SOMALI LITERATURE

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*La Nation (Djibouti)*

## CAMELS: GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS

In an arid region, like the one inhabited by the Somalis and the Afars on the Horn of Africa, camels are the dominant livestock since they are best suited to the environment. Both water (*biyo*) and pasture (*baad*) are scanty. On the average, temperatures are high throughout the year, especially along the coast.

Camels are herded in three geographical regions in this area: the *oogo*, or high plateau, the mountainous region, and the *guban*, the burnt region of the coastal strip. The first region, the *oogo*, includes a great part of the Ogaden; the other two regions are confined to the most arid parts of northern Somalia and the Republic of Djibouti.

The *oogo* region receives a relatively high rainfall during the rainy season of the *gu*. During that period, it provides the best pasture for all categories of livestock, but since it does not have permanent water wells, only camels can remain there during the dry season, *jiilaal*. Sheep, goats, and cattle are taken to areas where water is more readily available during that time.

The type of camel which dwells in the *oogo* region is known as *caroog*. It is heavily built and has relatively thick hair (*gaameelo*) which protects it from the *oogo* chill that occurs during some stages of the *jiilaal*. The *caroog* type gives a relatively good supply of milk, but its endurance for hunger is low. For this reason *caroog* camels are kept in the waterless but pasture-rich *oogo* during the dry season. According to my informant, the *caroog* type moves slowly; thus, when it comes to raiding an enemy, they are very difficult to escape with.

During the dry season in the *oogo* region, the camels are left with camel herders, the *geeljire*. These young, unmarried men make up the *geelxir*, the group that moves with the camels in isolation from the rest of the clan or the hamlet. Sometimes they do not even have a fixed settlement; they must move on, spending the night wherever they are at the end of the grazing day.

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Camel herders carry few things with them; therefore, they, like their camels, have to dispense with water. They must depend on milk for both food and drinks.

From the pastureland of the *oogo*, camels are taken for watering to wells in the north. The journey to and from the wells may take several days. The *caroog* camels drink large amounts of water, not to satisfy their immediate thirst, but to store it for the three or four weeks that separate watering periods.

For the camel herders, taking the camels for watering is both a tiring and trying business. They must endure a long walk with only a little food and camels' milk. The tiring business of taking camels to and from the watering wells has been well expressed in the following song:

*Geelu galabtii  
galoof iyo rimay*

*gaaniyo irmaan  
isku kala gure  
anna galabtii  
gaajiyo harraad  
isku kala guray*

Camels in the evening,  
those which are pregnant and  
those which are not,  
those lactating and those which are not,  
they sort themselves out accordingly.  
And for my part, in the evening,  
in hunger and thirst,  
I slow up.

Camels have a permanent settlement in the *oogo*, but they travel into the watering region for water supplies; this is called *laba xeroole*, "having two homes." In general, the *jiilaal* season is a period of instability for both the herds and the herders.

The herders who are entrusted with the task of caring for camels in this remote area must be well instructed in their profession. They must know where to get the *dareemo*, a grass (*Chrosopogon Aucheri*) that suits their camels best. Since the *caroog* type of camel does not feed on acacia trees, in contrast to other types of camels, it must always be kept in pastureland; at the same time, however, the windy plains must be avoided. Wind, according to my informants, causes great discomfort for the camels; therefore, the best place to keep them is where trees form a protective shield against the winds. Herders sing the following song to educate the young herders about the problems of keeping camels in windy places:

*Maaru mayeybaan ku nacay*

I hate the Maaro mountain because of the early morning heavy rains,

*geel dabaylood baan ku nacay*

I hate having camels in a windy place,

*giirre jiilaalbaan ku nacay*

and I hate cattle when it comes to "jiilaal," the dry season.

An expert herder should know when to take his herds for watering, for if camels get watered before the right time, diarrhoea may result; this is especially true when the camels are feeding on green grass. He should choose

the healthiest ground for the camels in order to avoid the bites of harmful insects; the ground of his choice must be both hard and dry. He should know when to milk and when not to; in the relatively hotter areas, camels are milked only in the early morning and in the evening, but in the cooler regions, the camels are milked anytime during the day.

The camel herder should know when the camel is ready to be milked (*xigsin*). He should also know how many of its breasts he should tie (*maraq*), and when he should tie them, so they will not be suckled by the baby camels that accompany their mothers for grazing.

The camel herder can tie up the breasts of his she-camels in several ways. One way is to tie up either the two breasts on the lefthand side or the two breasts on the righthand side; this system is known as *xagmar*, "tying one side." The second system is known as *gayaxamar*; it consists of tying two breasts, one at the front and one at the back, but on different sides. The third method, *seddexmar*, is to tie three breasts, two in the back and one in the front.

Before feeding on grass, the breast-fed baby camel is kept in the settlement and is known as *ka reeb*, "being left behind." After a certain period of time, the baby camels (*nirig*: male; *nirig*: female) go out for grazing with their mothers and the rest of the camels; when they start to feed on grass they are known as *abab*. In the first year of life, baby camels (both *nirig* and *nirig*) are also known as *baal cas*, "red sided," or *ilweyn*, "big eyed." A popular song among herders makes reference to that:

*Bisha Deyreed  
bisha dabataal  
nirig boodhliyo  
baal cas wadatoy*

In the month of Deyr  
and the month that follows it,  
you are accompanied by a brown she-camel  
of the red sided.

Names of camels are given according to age or state. A baby camel, as mentioned above, is known as *nirig* or *nirig* depending on its sex. Around two or three years of age they are known as *qaalin* and *qaalin* respectively. Before the first calving, a she-camel is known as *ugub*; afterwards it is known as *curad*. A she-camel that is not impregnated though it has reached the right age is known as *abeer*. If it is neither pregnant (*rimay*) nor milking (*irman*), it is known as *galoof* and collectively as *horweyn*. A newly calved she-camel is called *ramad*, but when it is about to stop milking it is called *gabbaan*.

A male camel, before it is trained as a pack animal, is known as *layli*; after it gets used to the task, it is called *raray*. A camel may be exempted from training to be kept as a stallion (*baarqab*). A *baarqab* is selected according to certain physical qualities. Judging these, the camel herder can decide whether its female offspring will be *eyro*, a giver of a great amount of milk.

It is on the basis of a vast knowledge of the camel and its environment that Somali camel herders cared for the camel, bred it, and prided themselves in

overcoming most of the natural difficulties that are typical of the world's arid regions. A camel herder is respected for both his endurance and bravery; he is the vanguard of the Somali pastoralist society. As the saying goes:

*Geeri nimaanad aqoon iyo geel jiray ku waansantahay.*

Death is tolerable only when it comes to an unknown person or to a camel herder.

The following expresses how a camel herder sees his responsibility and how nobody can take it lightly:

*Habarbaa tidhi  
geelu hawl maleh  
oo hal gudhan maleh  
oo hadhaa maleh  
anna waxan idhi  
hashu waxay tahay  
waanad horinoo  
waanad hoos gelin*

An old woman stated that  
there is no hard work involved in camel herding:  
Look here, no she-camel which isn't giving milk!  
And there is no slow-moving one within its ranks.  
And I replied,  
"You know nothing about a she-camel.  
You have never taken it for watering,  
and you never went under it to milk it."

Returning to the remaining camel regions, the second is the mountainous area where a type of camel called *ayun* or *cayun* is herded. This type feeds on varieties of acacia trees; they stretch out for the tall trees, *geedsare laac*.

According to my informant, the *ayun* type has a slighter build than the *caroog* type of camel. It is better suited to the rugged and more arid lands of the mountainous parts of northern Somalia and the Republic of Djibouti, but at the same time it produces less milk and is a poorer meat animal than other types.

The third camel dwelling region is the coastal strip of both northern Somalia and the Republic of Djibouti. In this region water is available but neither *oogo* pasture nor the mountain acacia grow. Therefore, the camels feed on the *xundhuun* (*Suaeda Friuticosa*) and *caday* (*Salvadora Persica*) trees which grow there in abundance. Unlike the camels in the other two regions, the coastal type does take water every day. Though it has a lean body, it produces a greater amount of milk than the mountain camel. It seems that the coastal type is better adjusted to its environment, but the owners of the other two types despise it as worthless. The reason for this may be the small size of the herds in the coastal region.

I discussed the environmental background to camel rearing; now let us discuss how the people concerned value it, and what effects it has on their culture and literature.

## THE VALUE OF CAMELS

To a Somali, in general, camels mean everything. The camel is the basic unit for measuring everything he values:

*Geel waa wixii gooyaana waa geel.*

Everything equal in value to a camel can be considered as a camel.

An adult she-camel is approximately equal in value to two cows or twelve sheep. Of all the animals, only the horse has a higher value than the camel. In the western area of northern Somalia or in the Republic of Djibouti, horses are rarely used, but I am told that in certain periods, especially before the introduction of firearms, a horse could be exchanged for twelve camels.

The *xeer ciisa*, the customary law of the Issa, specifies that for the murder of a man, one hundred camels must be paid to the dia-paying group of the deceased; however, only seventy-seven she-camels are actually paid from one Issa clan to the other. The camels are ceremonially presented in different stages. Each and every camel must be acceptable to those who lost their clansman. The first seventeen she-camels, which are usually the best and giving milk, are presented to the relatives of the deceased; the remaining camels are evenly distributed among the dia-paying group. This privilege is restricted to the Issa clans; in other clans the camels paid as blood money are not the best ones. In fact, in some cases each member of the dia-paying group who is to pay the blood money presents the poorest of his she-camels; hence the expression *geel mag*, blood camels, is used to say that something is of a poor quality.

A woman's dia, which among the Issa is half that of a man, is paid in livestock other than camels; however, the number of cows or sheep should be equal in value to the number of fifty camels specified by the *xeer*. One of my informants told me that since dowry, *dhaban* (literally "cheeks") or *yarad*, is paid either in actual camels or their equivalence in other categories of livestock, a woman's dia is not paid in actual camels. Blood money for other physical injuries, for both men and women, is not paid in actual she-camels, but the value is stated in she-camels.

In modern times, especially in cities, blood money is paid in cash (*mood*), not in livestock (*nool*). But the unit for measuring is still the value of a camel; therefore the expression *geel waa geel wixii gooyaana waa geel*, stated earlier, is valid for the present.

For Somali pastoralists, camels are still the basis of their wealth; a man's amount of capital is equal to the number of camels he owns. The owner of one hundred camels is considered very rich. The verse *gabay* expresses the pastoralist's attitude:

*Nin labaatan wiil liyo nimaan weli lamaani  
lixdan nimay ufooftiyo niman layli raranaynin  
marhadduu ninaba laasaneyn waxa u laacaaya  
maxan kaga lulmoodaa adduun lumaya weeyaane*

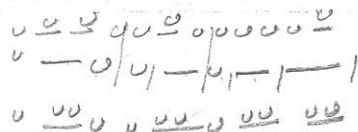
He who fathered twenty sons, and one who is still alone,  
He who owns sixty camels, and one who doesn't even have a pack camel,

Since none of them will satisfy his ambition,  
There is no point in worrying about a vanishing world.

Even in modern poetry or songs referring to the national independence of both Somalia and Djibouti, camels are used as a reference:

*Magawdoo candhadii gollaha marisee  
an maallo hasheenna maandeeq*

Its udder is bursting with milk—  
let us milk our she-camel, *Maandeeq*.



The she-camel *maandeeq* (the one that satisfies the mind) that the poet is referring to is the national flag or national independence.

Many of the city people still own camels in the *miyi baadiye* for they believe that life in the cities is both uncertain and artificial. Anyone who lived in Djibouti during the blockade in the early forties remembers how many people suffered from the effects of starvation. Because of this, many people in the cities still keep one foot in the *miyi*.

The following poetic duel between Soodaan Idris and Cismaan Hande, one defending life in the city and the other defending the life of camel owners, expresses the psychological conflict between the two modes of living.

Soodaan Idris:

*Drajada adduun waa ninkii  
dahab sameeyaaye  
dadnna waxa lammaatya  
ninkii daara hoos galae  
dibaddaa markaad gaadha buu  
dacas ku fuulaaye  
awr dabar la boodiyo intaad  
adhi dabbaaleysid  
ayuunbaad Allaa daayinee  
daayac noqotaaye  
dogonniimo waa waxa tolkay  
dooxadaa dhigaye  
magaalada hadduu degelaha  
dalaw ma gaadheen  
waxaad i gula doodayid waa  
laguma daalaane*

Sudan Idris:

To be the best in the world  
is to accumulate gold;  
the ultimate success of a man  
is when he owns stone houses.  
When you go out of the city,  
all unpleasant things happen to you.  
As long as you are keeping camels  
and sheep,  
by Allah the Eternal,  
you will be at a loss.  
It is because of their foolishness  
that my clansmen are in the remote valleys.  
If they could settle in the cities,  
they could be in safety.  
What you are arguing for  
is not worth the effort.

Cismaan Hande:

*dirirtii talyaaniga markii  
dayrka laga yaacay  
ee daarihii laga tegiyo  
dahabki hoos yeellay  
adiguba dadkiibaad ahayd  
diiq ka soo baxaye*

Isman Hande:

During the Italian war  
when people escaped from the walls of the town,  
when stone houses and their contents  
of gold were left behind,  
you were one of those who  
escaped in difficulty.

*daaduun waxaa loolissaa  
deero iyo cawle  
duco nabiyadiibuu qabaa  
Dabac maxaw geeyey*

For destitute refugees  
the she-camels are milked.  
It has been blessed by the prophets.  
He shouldn't have said anything against the she-camel,  
*dabac*.

## THE CAMEL'S EFFECT ON SOMALI CULTURE AND LITERATURE

One can confidently conclude that Somali culture is, in large, a camel culture, and, in particular, that Somali literature is based on the camel-rearing and breeding mode of life.

The Somali counting numbers are qualified with the word *hal*, she-camel. For example, "two things" in Somali is *laba hal*; the word *hal* will go with any number for qualification. In the same way the names of the days are based on milking times for livestock, of which camels are the most important. Two milking times (*laba caana maal*) make a day (*maalin*) since livestock, for the most part, are milked twice a day, early in the morning and early in the evening.

One could argue to an even greater extent that the Somali language itself has been shaped by the influence of the camel culture. A colleague of mine who is planning to compile a new Somali dictionary told me that he discovered that the words starting with the letter 'G' are the most numerous. Then it came to my mind, since the word *geel* starts with the letter 'G' and since alliteration played a great role in preserving all forms of Somali literature, many 'G' words may have been coined for that end. Through this is only a hypothesis, there may be a grain of truth in it. References are made to *geel* in every form of Somali literature, whether it is proverbs, quotations, or different types of poetry. However, the influence of the camel culture is most evident in basic Somali literature.

By basic literature I mean the literature based on camel or other livestock rearing such as i) the *shubaal*, watering song, ii) *jiib*, folkloric song, iii) *guux*, pastoralist "blues," iv) *maahmaahyo*, proverbs, and v) modern Somali poetry.

### *Shubaal, or the Work Song for Watering Animals*

This genre of Somali literature contains six or seven vowels; because of its short meters, it is easily picked up and memorized by anyone. At the same time the *shubaal* genre forms the nucleus of many longer Somali poetic genres, and since every pastoralist or herder memorizes a great deal of the *shubaal*, all Somali pastoralists have the potential to become poets.

The *shubaal* genre is not only for amusement; it is one of the means by which Somali pastoralists educate their young in their way of life. When instructing the young that order has to be strictly watched and that each herd should be watered in its turn, the following verse is used:

*Geelu geel fulay  
gaadhi maaye  
haka daba fulo*

The camels cannot overtake  
the camels that have already been watered.  
It should leave when it has its fill.

When the experienced herder is reminding the young and inexperienced herder of times past, he tells him in the following song that the world is an ever-changing process:

*Ardaa guri yada  
abuuriinada  
uun horaa degay  
isna ka abaad  
adnase ogow*

These ancient sites  
and ruins  
were occupied by ancients.  
But they are no more,  
and you should be aware of that.

In another song, he expresses how, if you do not protect your camels with your firearms, you may lose them to hostile clans:

*In rag sara kacay  
siigada al kumay  
seddexmaarra ha  
sinta laga lulay  
siddaa ma ogtahay*

That men have stood up,  
that dust has been blown up  
and that firearms  
are being taken up—  
are you aware of that?

The following verse is recited as an expression of constant tension between camel owners:

*Sidiiloo helay  
ragma loo hiray  
loogu hadalyoo  
looguma heshiin*

Since camels came into possession  
and men were repelled,  
there has been a quarrel over it,  
and there has never been a concord.

Sometimes a camel herder expresses his worries using the following verse:

*Cirku mayeybuu  
la ma dawyahay  
anna murugiyoo  
maxay noqonbaan  
la madoobahay*

The sky, because of morning rain,  
it is dark.  
And I, because of sadness,  
and what the future holds,  
I am dark.

It is through the *shubaal* that the greater part of the pastoralists' "educational system" is propagated; the rest is passed on through other forms of work songs and other types of Somali traditional poetry, such as the important *jiib*.

## *Jiib*

The *jiib*, a genre which contains nine vowels, is used in most of the songs that are sung with the Somali folkloric dances, such as *botor*, *seddexlay*, and *riixa*. During the moony nights of the *gu* season, after the camel herders join the herders of other types of livestock, young people of both sexes stay out dancing and singing.

One of the best known folkloric songs which uses the *jiib* genre is the *riixa* (pushing one another). This name characterizes the dance in which the dancers form two rows, one of young men, the other of young women; between these rows, they move back and forth in a very elegant manner. The camel herder checks whether the younger girls, whom he has not seen since the end of the last *gu* season, have grown up to be approached for marriage.

The camel herders, who make up the core of the dancers, expect each and every young girl in the village to come out for the dance. They start singing with the following verse:

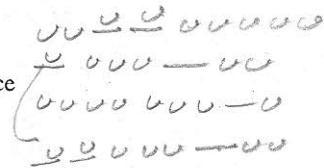
*Inantaan soo janbalaq odhan*

The girl that does not come readily for the dance

*een sacabka kuu jebin*

and does not clap her hands warmly,

*wax la daba jajaba maaha*  
should not be sought after.



As in the *shubaal* genre, they express their views of tragedy and its effects on both humans and animals.

*Marbuu geesi ooyaa  
waa marka geel la qaadaa  
gabankii jiray la gawraco  
marbay gaari ooydaa  
waa markay geesi weydaa  
gocorbaas lagu gadaada  
marbuu geelu ooyaa  
waa marku maqasha waaya  
ee maqaarbaas lagu gadaadaa*

When a hero feels sorrow  
is when his camels get looted  
and their herder has been slaughtered.  
When a good woman feels sorrow  
is when she loses her brave husband  
and is forced to remarry a very weak one.  
When camels feel sorrow  
is when they lose their baby camels  
and are deceived by hides erected on frames to look  
like real baby camels.

For them, camels are like intimate relatives or friends and they are affected by their happiness as well as their grief.

The season of the *gu* is the time when the camel herder looks for his future wife. It is only after marrying that he will be relieved of his responsibility as a camel herder. Through the *jiib* he expresses his appreciation for the girl of his

choice. He tells her the length and breadth of the area he covered just to be near her.

*Habsanay tima haldhaalay*  
*hal kiyo hawdka Jarareed*  
*meella kaaga hadhimaaye*  
*halaha waan ku dabawadi*

O! attractive one, whose hair looks like the feathers of  
a male ostrich,  
all the way from the Jarar area  
I won't stay far from you.  
I will drive my she-camels to wherever you go.

*Jiib*, like the first genre, *shubaal*, is widely used by the young camel herders to tell about their difficulties, exploits, and expectations. Interestingly, in many verses, and in different situations, camels are still the main reference; the singer even likens himself to the camel stallion:

*Lo'ada baarqabkeedii*  
*waaka beeria lagu qodo*  
*geela baarqabkiisii*  
*waata buulka lagu raray*  
*adna baarqabkaagii*  
*waakan beydda kuguwada*

Cattle's stallion  
is used for ploughing the land;  
Camel's stallion  
is made a beast of burden;  
and your stallion  
is the one who is dancing with you.

Many women's pastoralist songs are based on the *jiib* genre; however, the camel herders still dominate the scene in the quantity and the quality of the songs and the multiplicity of the dances. Both the *shubaal* and the *jiib* are group songs, but the genre *guux* is sung by individuals.

### Guux

This genre, which contains about ten or eleven vowels, is exclusively composed, sung, and propagated by the camel herders when they are still unmarried. Through this genre they express the frustration that results from their long isolation from their peer group and especially from the opposite sex, since girls never go with the *geelxer*.

The theme of the *guux* is mainly concerned with the camel herders' yearning for marriage. The herders complain about their exile with other herders in the remote corners of the camels' grazing lands.

*Uustardheera ninlaa gudbada*  
*ameeta ninlaa huwada*  
*aroos ninlaabaa hadh gala*  
*ee aroori anna ku hadhay*

A rifle is taken up by him who possesses it.  
A warm sheet of cloth is worn by him who has it.  
And he who is wed rests well,  
but I am left in the wilderness.

It is through the *guux* verses that the young herder appeals to his parents for permission to look for his future wife, or requests his father to arrange marriage for him.

*Kuwii aabaha lahaa*  
*amma agoon xoole la ahaa*  
*aroos yey wada galeen*  
*ee aroori anna ku hadhay*

Those whose fathers are still alive,  
or those whose fathers died but left a multitude of  
livestock,  
were wed to beautiful girls,  
but I am left in the wilderness.

I will call the *guux* a Somali pastoralist's "blues." The way he sings in his loneliness in the middle of the night, while blowing his traditional flute (*foodhin*), makes his colleagues feel sorry for his plight. But in some cases, it is a way of keeping him awake to guard against nocturnal beasts of prey, like lions, that may venture over the thorn fence into the camels' midst.

Since the *geelxer* is an all male society, the verses they compose refer directly to sex or sexual organs—a topic that is taboo to talk about when the womenfolk are around. The following verse is explicitly referring to a physical lust which the herder blames on his personified male sexual organ:

*Dhaban malahoo*  
*ka dhirbaaxi maayo*  
*feedha malahoo*  
*ka fugsiiimaayo*  
*la i gal yoo*  
*la i goondhabe*  
*sida warrabe*  
*la ii qudqudhi*

It does not have cheeks  
that I could slap.  
It does not have ribs  
that I could beat with my fists.  
I am being disturbed  
and am being hit hard  
as if a hyena  
is constantly feeding upon my living body.

Sometimes he daydreams of his underaged beloved. He has been promised her hand in marriage but on the condition that she grow to maturity to be in a position to tackle her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

*Aabaheed bilanbuu yidhaa*  
*hooyadeed bilisay tidhaa*  
*anna baraar leegbaan idhaa*

Her father calls her *bilan*,  
her mother calls her *biliso*,  
and I call her the one who is like a baby sheep  
(*baraar*).

*laye baraar adhi wuu koraaye*  
*ee baraarka haween ma koro*

A baby sheep grows up,  
but a baby woman never grows up.

Because of his long association with camel herding, a herder may feel nostalgia for that way of life even after he marries.

*Gaana dumarbaa laygu daray*  
*garaw la caanayn baaihelay*  
*sidii geedkaan u dhadhay*  
*sidii gumartaan u uray*  
*ee geelasheenni maaragteen*

I have been wedded to a very strong woman.  
I have been fed with ungreaed millet.  
I have been shrunk like a dead tree.  
And I have smelled like a *gumar* (Acacia Oerfota) tree.  
Can you tell me where our herds are grazing?

As a genre *guux* or *gunuunucas* is confined to the extreme west of northern

Somalia and the Republic of Djibouti, where the names of famous composers—though most composers, like those of the *shubaal* and *jiib* genres, are anonymous—are remembered by the camel herders of the area. The composer of the last verse, for instance, is Cawaale Bustaale, who remained unmarried for a long time.

### *Maahmaahyo, Proverbs*

Together with the work songs, the folkloric songs, and the *guux*, proverbs and other quotations refer to camels. Somali pastoralists stored their wisdom and stated their conclusions about the world around them through proverbs, many of which glorify the camel.

*Geel nimanlahaynin waa magan.*

He who does not own camels lives under the protection of others.

*Geel nabad buu u abaarsadaa.*

Camels' plight comes if there is no peace.

*Naago ubadbay u abaarsadaa.*

Women's plight comes if they don't have children.

*Ragna aqoonlil buu u abaarsadaa.*

And men's plight comes if they are ignorant.

*Dhaari seddexba way kaxaysaa:*

A false testimony takes three things away:

*Ragga xugunka,*

It takes men's fertile sperms away,

*dumarkana xaylka,*

it also takes women's fertile ova away,

*geelana xoorka.*

and it takes the camels' milking ability away.

For them, human fertility and propagation are only possible if enough milk can be secured. A camel herder can simply swear by the expression "wallaahidaan caana waayaa,"—"By Allah, may I never have milk." To stay in a place where there are no camels is a waste of time:

*Iga kici kobtaan geel ku dhalin  
kuudad xumadeeda*

At a place where camels did not calve,  
I will not stay.

For them, life is only worth living if one owns camels; a man who does not own camels when he dies will pass unnoticed.

*Geel niman lahayn  
geeridii warmaleh*

For a man who doesn't own camels  
the event of his death will pass unmarked.

Even in the next world, *aakhiro*, a man without camels will be at a disadvantage.

*Aakhiro nimaan geel lahayn  
lama amaanayn*

In the next world a man who does not own camels  
is despised.

There is no doubt that the Somalis' Islamic background contributed to their veneration of camels.

*Ilal ibili lama soo dejeen  
aayadii horae  
assaxaabi hii horabawey  
kuintifaaceene*

The Quranic verse  
wouldn't have been revealed  
but for the Prophet's companion  
who made the best of use.

### *Modern Somali Poetry*

How camel herding and camel ownership influenced the Somali way of life even after settling in urban centers is best illustrated in the modern Somali songs. They are based on the pastoralists' traditional poetic genres and camels are widely used as a reference.

*Geel laba awr  
oo absiimada eesta  
kuma sama  
reerku laba oday  
oo arrimiyaah  
aadba kuma sama  
loodu oon iyo  
guul arooriyo  
abaar kuma sama  
anna aayaha  
kaan ku eleleday  
oon isweynaa  
waygu adagtahay*

For she-camels to have competing stallions  
for mating  
is not appropriate.  
For a clan, two competing leaders  
to lead  
is not appropriate.  
For cattle thirst  
driving it for watering in a night  
and a draught are not appropriate.  
For my future  
the one of whom I dreamt,  
not to have him  
is unbearable.

The above verse has been put to music for a modern song; it is one of the most popular songs broadcast over Radio Djibouti. There are a multitude of other examples that could be used to illustrate how all the Somali poetic genres are being adapted for modern theater and modern music.

The camels' grazing lands are still used as an artistic reference even in modern songs.

*Sidii cirku hooray*  
*meel cossobloo*  
*cadceed usoo*  
*baxdaatahay*

Your beauty is reminiscent of grazing land on which  
 it rained recently  
 and on which a bright sun  
 shone.

To conclude, camel herding and ownership has dominated the Somali way of life. It shaped their destiny and greatly influenced their attitude towards themselves and towards others. It has left its greatest mark on their language and literature; definitely it will keep on influencing their life and actions. To understand the Somalis, one has to understand their culture; and to understand it, one has to look back to the Somalis' long association with camel herding and the mode of life that has sprung from it.

In fact, camels are not the most useful livestock. For immediate utility they cannot be compared with either sheep, goats, or cattle. From these other types of livestock, people accumulate butter, which they sell in the cities; they use the income from this to buy the things they need. But still, camels, like gold, are the standard unit for measuring everything that is of value in life.

## NOTES

All the facts and verses which were used in this paper are from the collections of Radio Djibouti Cultural Programmes, 1984-1987. The major contributors are the following:

1. Ahmed Aden Adadle, a poet and a great artist; age 72.
2. Omer Good Buuh, a poet, camel herder, folkloric dancer, *Guux* composer, and oralist; age 54.
3. Ismail Mahamoud Sugheh, an oralist; age 54.
4. Hassan Elmi, an oralist and author of major plays and theatrical pieces of very high quality. He contributed greatly to the emergence of the modern Somali song. More than anyone else, he used almost all the Somali pastoralist poetic genres in his modern songs. He composed the verse for the modern song which I used to illustrate how the modern Somali song makes use of the traditional poetic genre; age 55.
5. Ibrahim Garabyare, one of the originators of the Somali modern song, a composer and singer who started his career as an artist in 1943 and is still active in both composing and singing; age 62.
6. I am very indebted to my colleague and friend Omer Ma'llin, whose collection of poems and proverbs I used for illustrating the duel between the urbanized Somalis, represented by the late Sudan Idriss, and those who see camels as the best insurance, represented by the late Osman Hande.