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**VARIATIONS ON THE THEME
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SOMALINESS**

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Poetry as an Expression of Somali National Ethnicity

Exile, whether forced or self-imposed, is difficult for any group of people at any time in their history, and the Somalis are no exception. In fact, deep concerns have arisen among Somalis of the diaspora about losing their traditions and even their ethnic identity to the mainstream worldviews of the many countries to which they have now emigrated. Quite a number of actions taken, among other things, to preserve 'Somaliness' among these emigrant communities can be observed.

For example, in these lands to which the Somalis have moved, one finds newsletters, newspapers, and portions of neighborhood newspapers devoted to Somali topics such as news of the homeland, local welfare services, and employment possibilities. Annual Somali community festivals and arts programs are not uncommon. The world wide web is host to a number of sites devoted to Somali culture and politics. The abundance of Somali dictionaries published in countries in Europe and North America over the past decade is another attempt not only to assist Somalis in adjusting to their new homes, and to assist people in these places to understand Somalis, but I also see this form of publication as an attempt by Somalis to preserve knowledge of their language, especially among the young Somalis who may begin to lose some of their 'Somaliness' in exile.¹

At a conference in London some years ago, members of the Somali Studies International Association witnessed first hand the frustrations of both immigrants and first-generation Somalis in anguish about losing their worldview and knowledge of the Somali homeland to British cultural hegemony. Already at that time, we could hear different British dialects spoken by these children of emigrant Somalis living in different geographical areas of Britain and associating with different British social classes. Geography and social class are two aspects of culture that result in different dialects in the United Kingdom.

Today, Somalis face the dilemma that all emigrants have faced over the centuries: the attempt to preserve their culture and traditions as strangers in a strange land. Some minorities have been successful in preserving their ethnic identity, while others have not. Take the Jewish culture, for example. Jews have maintained their traditions and ethnicity for centuries in diaspora, sometimes because of racial prejudice and sometimes because of their religion. With other groups, like many Native American tribes in the United States, ethnicity has been lost to cultural assimilation into the society of their conquerors. Whether diaspora Somalis will be able to maintain ethnic identity remains in question, as their mass migrations are only a couple of decades old.

Before approaching the main topic of my paper, I should like first to look at some of the tenants of Somali ethnic identity, because some understanding of this concept is necessary before hunting for it in poetic expression. My list will not be exhaustive, but some traits are perhaps easier to isolate than others.

In my view, language is probably the most important trait for Somali ethnic identity. Dialects notwithstanding, most Somalis can understand and converse in a 'general Somali', which Andrzejewski attributed to national and international radio broadcasting beginning in the late 1940s. With the coming of a Somali orthography in the early 1970s, more standardization occurred, in some cases even forced upon Somali minority populations by the Siyaad Barre regime. Literacy and dictionary writing does not halt the use of regional dialects,

but it often results in one of these dialects becoming a *lingua franca* in politics, economics, and social interaction among groups from disparate areas of the language population.

Religion also contributes to Somali ethnic identity, although there are many Moslems in the world, and religion alone cannot define Somaliness. Geography is an important aspect of ethnic identity. Muuse Galaal used to say, 'Somalis go as far as their camels go', stopping at the highlands of Abyssinia.

It is, however, possible to retain Somali ethnicity outside the Horn of Africa, as the long-standing Somali community in Cardiff (Wales) has proved. Nomadism as a socio-economic way of life is also important to Somali ethnicity, although here again, there are settled populations in Somalia which practice agriculture, as well as settled populations of former nomads who have migrated into agricultural areas and cities. In an extended fieldwork trip to Buuhodle in 1987, I even observed semi-settled populations of nomads made possible by the construction of large water tanks (*ballis*) which store water year round for the care of camels, sheep and goats.

All these aspects of Somali society to ethnic identity, but one mode of cultural expression may be paramount in contributing to the definition of Somaliness, and that is poetry. Somali poetry has long been recognized as the primary mode of artistic expression among all the clan families, clans, and subgroups on the Horn of Africa. From precolonial times through the colonial years, and the two major phases of independence (the Republic and the Siyaad Barre Regime), as well as the period of chaos following the recent fall of the government, poetry has been a major force of expression among Somalis. It is somewhat ironic that when conditions in Somalia are at their worst, poetry absolutely flourishes. Poetry is also a unifying force for Somali nationalism and ethnicity and has played this role from early periods beyond memory up to the present, both as a vehicle of Somali local expression and, in more recent times, as a mechanism for national political agendas. I believe that it also plays a unifying role as an expression of Somali ethnicity and unity in widely dispersed areas of the world for Somalis of the diaspora.

When I first began to study Somalia over thirty years ago, I was amazed at their abilities as poets and especially as memorizers. Later, after post graduate studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, I came to realize that poetry is a major form of expression of many, if not most, of the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa. Oral memories of one kind or another are powerful and prolific amongst all oral societies if for no other reason than simple daily practice. I began to think that my earlier views on Somali poetic abilities and use were premature and even somewhat naive. After further post-graduate studies in the discipline of folkloristics, after interaction with colleagues who study oral literature both in Africa and in other parts of the world, and especially after my recent computer-assisted studies into the structure of Somali oral poetry and its relationship to music, I have come full circle, back to where I began. I am absolutely amazed at Somalis' abilities in oral composition of their many genres of oral poetry, and at the extensive and widespread use of this poetry in the social and political arenas. In short, it does appear to be unique after all.

Nothing defines Somali ethnicity more than their extensive and widespread use of poetry, indeed their devotion to this form of oral art. If one wishes to make a serious political argument, and to have it taken seriously by fellow Somalis, it must be in verse. This fact has been recognized by foreigners from the very first time they interacted with the Somalis. Writing about his famous trip to the Horn of Africa in the late nineteenth century, Sir Richard Burton made an oft-quoted assessment of this tradition in his book *First Footsteps in East Africa*, which I will quote again here (Burton 1966:93).²

The country teems with 'poets, poetasters, poetitos, poeticcios': every man had his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed by a century of magazines - the fine ear of his people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions, whereas a false quantity or a prosaic phrase excite[s] their violent indignation.

The most recent encounter between foreigners and Somalis also provided an opportunity for this recognition of Somali poetic prowess. During the occupation of Somalia by the US marines and the United Nations relief forces in 1992 after the fall of the Siyaad Barre regime, one of the first things the foreign administration did was to sponsor a poetry contest. It was thought that Somalis would respond positively to such a challenge, which indeed they did. Several dozen poems were entered in the contest, and many were published in the UN newsletter that was circulated in Muqdisho at the time.³ Needless to say, the purpose of the contest was to encourage the Somalis to respond positively to the occupation, which many of them did, at least for a while. But the point I want to make here is that poetry among the Somalis is a major vehicle for defining ethnicity, and this fact has been recognized by foreigners from the beginning.

Poetry as a vehicle of Somali ethnicity may be observed in a number of ways. First of all, Somali poetry expresses ethnic identity by the very fact of its existence. Somalis conduct major social and political business in verse. If Europeans and American leaders and politicians practiced the same traditions as the Somalis, each member of parliament or congress would have a poet on his or her staff, or they would be poets or memorizers themselves. Somalis also discuss their ethnicity directly in the poetry they compose. Moreover, they do so in a wide variety of genres. In this paper, I will employ examples of the genre *heello* taken from my firsthand fieldwork. A *heello* composed by Cabdullaahi Cabdi Shube in 1961 celebrating Somalia's independence from colonial powers illustrates this point (quoted here from Johnson 1996:187-188).

- I *Dibi geesaliyo*
Ido gorod madow,
Waa waxa dhulkeena u gaarehee
Laynagu gartaa,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee!
- The bull with horns, and
 The black-headed sheep
 Are animals special to our country,
 We are famous for them
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
- II *Geed qodhax leh iyo*
Gudin iyo hangool
Waa waxa dhulkeena u gaarehee
Laynagu gartaa,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee,
Maantay galladi,
- The thorn tree, and
 The thorn-cutting-axe and corral-building-staff
 Are things special to our country,
 We are famous for them
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
 Today, happiness

- Noo soo gaashee,*
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee!
- Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
- III *Wiil geel-jiroon,*
Gaajadu karayn,
Waa waxa dhulkeena u gaarehee
Laynagu gartaa,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee!
- Boys who herd camels, and whom
 Hunger cannot disable
 Are special to our country,
 We are famous for them
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
- IV *Reer-guuraayiyoo,*
Gaashaan xardhani,
Waa waxa dhulkeena u gaarehee
Laynagu gartaa,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee,
Maantay galladi,
Noo soo gaashee,
Gobanimadayada,
Guullow adkee!
- Nomadic settlements, and
 Decorated shields
 Are things special to our country,
 We are famous for them
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
 Today, happiness
 Has come to us.
 Strengthen our independence
 Oh God, the Victorious!
- Somalis debate and discuss many aspects of their ethnicity directly in their poetry. The Somali language was the subject of a *heello* composed in 1960 by Cali Sugulle exemplifying attitudes about their own language, especially in relation to the several foreign languages that they were forced to learn during the colonial period (quoted here from Johnson 1996:123-136).
- I M: *Asaageen horow maraan arkayaa*
Ilays calanyow iftimiinaya!
Asaageen horow maraan arkayaa
Ilays calanyow iftimiinaya!
- I see our equals in the world progressing
 O glowing flag!
 I see our equals in the world progressing
 O glowing flag!
- F: *Ammankaag iyo yaab, argaggax*
Abboowe macaanow hooy
Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran
Abboowe macaanow hooy
- Astonishment, surprise and shock
 O, sweet brother
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet brother
- M: *Waan asqaysanahee*
- I am maddeningly confused [by foreign
 tongues]
- Ku aaway, abbaayo macaaneey hooy*
- Where are you, sweet sister?
 Tell me what troubles you
- F: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran*
Abboowe macaanow hooy
- O, sweet brother
- M: *Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?*
- Does education mean foreign tongues?

- F: *Maya, maya!*
 M: *Ma ahee! Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?* No, no
 Indeed no! Does education mean foreign
 tongues]
- F: *Maya, maya!*
Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe
geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuuro
dadkee
 It does not! True knowledge is what God
 bestows on each person
- M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah*
Laysuma siiyee?
 This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal*
Laysuma tartee?
 This is our opinion
 Do you think that people may be recreated into
 someone else?
- M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal*
Laysuma tartee?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 given on loan
- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah*
Laysuma siiyee?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 given as a gift?
- M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal*
Laysuma tartee?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 given on loan
- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La*
iibsan karaa?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 given as a gift?
- M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La*
soo ergistaa?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 bought?
- F: *Maya, maya!*
 No, not at all!
- M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La*
soo ergistaa?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 borrowed?
- F: *Maya, maya!*
 No, not at all!
- Tog: *Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe*
geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuuro
dadkee
 It cannot. It is what God bestows on each
 person
- II F: *Oggoli oo wax barashadu waa ii*
eegtahay
Af shisheeye ayaynu addoon u nahee
Oggoli oo wax barashadu waa ii
eegtahay
Af shisheeye ayaynu addoon u nahee
Waan asqaysanahee
 How I agree: education is essential for us!
 But we are slaves to foreign tongues!
 How I agree: education is essential for us!
 But we are slaves to foreign tongues!
- M: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran*
Abboowe macaanow hee
Waan asqaysanahee
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign
 tongues]
- M: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran*
Abboowe macaanow hee
 Where are you, sweet brother?
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet sister
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign
 tongues]
- M: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran*
Abboowe macaanow hee
 Where are you sweet sister?
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet sister

- F: *Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?*
 M: *Maya, maya!*
Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe
geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuuro
dadkee
 Does education mean foreign tongues?
 No, no!
 It does not! True knowledge is what God
 bestows on each person
- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah*
Laysuma siiyee?
 This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
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- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La*
iibsan karaa?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 given as a gift?
- M: *Maya, maya!*
 No, not at all!
- F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La*
soo ergistaa?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be
 bought?
- M: *Maya, maya!*
 No, not at all!
- Tog: *Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe*
geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuuro
dadkee
 It cannot. It is what God bestows on each
 person
- III M: *Itaalkii baa Lays ammaahinayaa*
Iskeen ma u wada adeegnaayeeey
Itaalkii baa Lays ammaahinayaa
Iskeen ma u wada adeegnaayeeey
 People lend each other strength, but
 Shouldn't we do something for ourselves?
- F: *Ammankaag iyo yaab, argaggax*
Abboowe macaanow hooy
Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran
Abboowe macaanow hooy
 People lend each other strength, but
 Shouldn't we do something for ourselves?
 Astonishment, surprise and shock
 O, sweet brother
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet brother
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign
 tongues]
- M: *Waan asqaysanahee*
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign
 tongues]
- F: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran*
Abboowe macaanow hooy
 Where are you, sweet sister?
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet brother
- M: *Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?*
 F: *Maya, maya!*
 M: *Ma ahee! Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?*
 Does education mean foreign tongues?
 No, no
 Indeed no! Does education mean foreign
 tongues?
- F: *Maya, maya!*
 No, not at all!

- Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa*
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuurro dadkee
 M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah Laysuma siiyee?*
 F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal Laysuma tartee?*
Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah Laysuma siiyee?
Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal Laysuma tartee?
 M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La iibsan karaa?*
 F: *Maya, maya!*
 M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La soo ergistaa?*
 F: *Maya, maya!*
 Tog: *Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa*
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuurro dadkee
- It does not! True knowledge is what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 Do you think that people may be recreated into someone else?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given on loan
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given as a gift?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given on loan
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given as a gift?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be bought?
 No, not at all!
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be borrowed?
 No, not at all!
 It cannot. It is what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 Do you think that people may be recreated into someone else?
- IV F: *Aboor baa dundumo ilkaha ku dhisee Aqbalka na qof kalaa arrinshoo ururshee*
Aboor baa dundumo ilkaha ku dhisee Aqbalka na qof kalaa arrinshoo ururshee
Waan asqaysanahee
 M: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran Abboowe macaanow hee Waan asqaysanahee*
Ku aaway, abbaayo macaaneey hooy
 M: *Ii sheeg maxaa Kuu daran Abboowe macaanow hee*
 F: *Af qalaad aqoontu, miyaa?*
 M: *Maya, maya!*
Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
- The termite builds its nest with its own teeth
 This agreement has been engineered by others
 The termite builds its nest with its own teeth
 This agreement has been engineered by others
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign tongues]
 Where are you sweet brother?
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet sister
 I am maddeningly confused [by foreign tongues]
 Where are you sweet sister?
 Tell me what troubles you
 O, sweet sister
 Does education mean foreign tongues?
 No, no!
 It does not! True knowledge is what God bestows on each person

- Ayay nala tahay annagee*
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuurro dadkee
 F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah Laysuma siiyee?*
 M: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal Laysuma tartee?*
Ma ogtahay aqoontu ammaah Laysuma siiyee?
Ma ogtahay aqoontu abaal Laysuma tartee?
 F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La iibsan karaa?*
 M: *Maya, maya!*
 F: *Ma ogtahay aqoontu miyaa La soo ergistaa?*
 M: *Maya, maya!*
 Tog: *Ma ahee waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa*
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Waa intuu qof ba Eebbe geshaa
Ayay nala tahay annagee
Ma ogtahay, dib Looma abuurro dadkee
- This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 Do you think that people may be recreated into someone else?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given on loan
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given as a gift?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given on loan
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be given as a gift?
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be bought?
 No, not at all!
 Don't you know that knowledge cannot be borrowed?
 No, not at all!
 It cannot. It is what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 'Tis what God bestows on each person
 This is our opinion
 Do you think that people may be recreated into someone else?
- In the political arena, Somalis utilize poetry for local, national and international topics. Indeed, verse may be analyzed as a chronicle of Somali history and politics. But poetry does not necessarily record history in its text. It is often necessary for a reciter to explain in prose the background of a poem, which may be very obscure to an audience unacquainted with it. Somali political poetry also exemplifies an interesting trait as a result of its frequent use of veiled speech and hidden messages. Poems composed for one situation or reason may be recycled to fit new situations for which they were not originally composed, but to which they can be applied with equal meaning and force. A *hello* sometimes referred to as *Leexo* illustrates this trait. I have never been able to uncover details of the original situation for which Axmed Suleebaan Bidde composed this poem, but its recycled history is known to many Somalis. The *hello*, composed in the early 1960s, in the meter of *jiifto*, goes like this (quoted here from Johnson 1996:139-142).
- I *Innakoo lammaane ah Iyo laba naf-qaybsile Talo geedku laashee Adigaa is lumiyo Isu loogay cadowgoo Libintaadii siiyee Waadiganse liitee Leexadu Ku sidatee Had ba laan cuskanayee Waadiganse liitee*
- While we were together
 Helping each other in every way
 You cast good counsel away to the top of a tall tree
 You caused yourself distress
 And slaughtered yourself for your enemy
 Giving your victory to him
 Now you are so weakened
 That light breezes bear you up
 And from time to time, you grasp at a branch.
 Now you are so weakened

- Leexadu Ku sidatee* That light breezes bear you up
Had ba laan cuskanayee And from time to time, you grasp at a branch.
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
- II *Waa laac adduunyada* The world is but a mirage
Labadii walaalo ah And for every two happy brothers
Mid ba maalin ladamyoo Only one being happy each day
Ruuxii u liil-galay The one who is fortunate
La ma loolo dhereggoo Should not abuse his prosperity -
Luggooyada ma geystee Should not maltreat his brother
Wa'adigan se laabt' iyo And as for you
Lugaha is la waayaye Your breast and feet were out of accord
Meel sare lalanayee For you are drifting up into the air.
Wa'adigan se laabt' iyo And as for you
Lugaha is la waayaye Your breast and feet were out of accord
Meel sare lalanayee For you are drifting up into the air.
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
- III *Aniga ba lafiyo jiidh* Behold, my flesh and bones
Waa kii i laastaan Were completely consumed by him
Liqi waayay oontee I cannot even swallow food
Adigaa lts caanood The abundance of milk
Iyo laad xareediyo Pure rain water
Laydhiyo hadh diidee Fresh air, rest in the cool shade - you have rejected.
Wa'adigan sidii litg You, like a male garanuug
Laasimay ugaadhee Left the presence of other game, and
Waaclada u leexdee Turned to a desolate place.
Wa'adigan sidii litg You, like a male garanuug
Laasimay ugaadhee Left the presence of other game, and
Waaclada u leexdee Turned to a desolate place.
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Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
- IV *Dhaaxaad ladnaan rays* So often in the prosperity of the rains -
Sidii aar libaax tay As though you were a proud lion -

- Tallabada ladhaaysoo* You walked about majestically
Anna lahashadaadii Whilst I, because of your carousing
Ledi waayay ciil oo Had sleepless nights from impotent anger
Liidnimo raacdee And behaved like a fool
Lallabaa habeenkiyo The beacon fire in the dark of night
Ma libdhaan jacayl oo And love never disappear
Waa labalegdoodaan They roll on and on after you.
Lallabaa habeenkiyo The beacon fire in the dark of night
Ma libdhaan jacayl oo And love never disappear
Waa labalegdoodaan They roll on and on after you.
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
- V *Innakoo lammaane ah* While we were together
Iyo laba naf-qaybsile Helping each other in every way
Talo geedku laashee You cast good counsel away to the top of a tall tree
Adigaa is lumiyo You caused yourself distress
Isu loogay cadowgoo And slaughtered yourself for your enemy
Libintaadii siiyee Giving your victory to him
Waadiganse liitee Now you are so weakened
Leexadu Ku sidatee That light breezes bear you up
Had ba laan cuskanayee And from time to time, you grasp at a branch.
Waadiganse liitee Now you are so weakened
Leexadu Ku sidatee That light breezes bear you up
Had ba laan cuskanayee And from time to time, you grasp at a branch.
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?
Liibaanteed adduunyada For all the pleasures of this earth
Ruux na laasan maayee One cannot fully enjoy
Maxaa luray naftaadii What causes you this distress?

Whatever the original meaning, this poem has become one of the most well known of all Somali *heellooyin*. Once known as 'the poem that overthrew a government', it may now become known as 'the poem that overthrew two governments'. Let me explain both of these situations in detail.

On 10 June, 1967, the incident which led to the first overthrow took place. Under the constitution that Somalia adopted upon independence in 1960, Somalis elected ministers to a parliament, but they did not vote directly for the president of the country. This election was held in the parliament itself, the ministers voting upon whomever they wished to represent them, and ultimately the country. The president then appointed the prime minister, who formed a government. On the night of the election, Radio Muqdisho sent an announcer to cover the election in an extended news program, which was broadcast as the events were taking place. In fact, the broadcast was conducted from the floor of the Parliament. Commentary accompanied floor activity while Parliament was in session, and music was

played during the recesses when caucusing took place. The music was broadcast both to the radio audience and to the members of Parliament over loud speakers around the assembly hall. Running for the post of president were the incumbent Aadan Cabdulla Cusmaan and some other contenders, including Dr. Cabdi-rashiid Cali Shar-Ma-Arke. Two balloting polls were held and announced over the radio with no clear majority for any candidate. During the recess and caucus before the third ballot, the announcer for Radio Muqdisho played *Leexo*. On the next ballot, the incumbent was defeated by the supporters of Shar-Ma-Arke, who was elected as the new president. Since Shar-Ma-Arke was not to take office until 1 July, the old administration had the radio announcer arrested and charged with sedition against the state. Of course, since the poem had been recycled from an earlier possible political situation (or love affair), nothing could be proved in court and the announcer was released from custody. *Leexo* thus gained the title of 'the poem that overthrew a government', which it well deserved, though obviously, other reasons can also be cited for the change of presidents in Somalia in 1967.

Twenty-four year later, another incident occurred with the same poem, recycled to yet another political situation. This story was reported to me by Martin Orwin through international post. Martin works a few hours a week at the B.B.C., Somali Section, and had heard the story from a colleague there. On Saturday, 26 January, 1991, Saciid Cali Muuse, one of the B.B.C. announcers, played *Leexo* over the air during his weekly music and greetings program. These broadcasts are heard widely over short-wave radios in Somalia. At first, Saciid hesitated about broadcasting the poem, because of the political situation in the capital at that time, especially considering the beliefs about the power of this poem in the previous incident. After some weeks of considering whether or not to broadcast it and with the consent of Florence Akst, Program Organizer of the B.B.C. Somali Section at the time, he played the tape of the poem on the air. It was about 5:30 pm in Somalia. In less than an hour - or so it was reported - Maxamed Siyaad Barre fled Muqdisho, having finally been overthrown conclusively by the United Somali Congress. Orwin wrote in his letter to me that Saciid was fully aware of the political situation in Somalia at the time, and that he did broadcast the poem 'deliberately knowing its history and associations'. What he did not know was the exact situation on the ground in Somalia. There are beliefs in Somalia about the mystical power of poetry, especially with certain genres when used in certain ways. Knowing these ethnic beliefs about poetry in Somalia, I would not be surprised to learn that *Leexo* has come to be considered 'the poem that overthrew two governments'.

In the social arena, Somalis utilize poetry to debate issues important to their worldview and changes that confront it in modern times. For example, in the following *heello* composed sometime in the 1960s by a poet unknown to me, the role of women is debated. The poem is sung by alternating male and female voices who represent their sexes' arguments on this topic, of worldwide importance at the time of the composition. It is composed in the meter of *jifto* (quoted here from Johnson 1996:7-11).

I M: *Dumar waxa u fiicnayd*
Tii doorkii Nabigii
Reer Laga dillaashee
Duufsaday iblaysku ye
Biyaha uu Dul-joojee
Hadhkeedii dad mooddee
 M: *Dumar waxa u fiicnayd*
Tii doorkii Nabigii
Reer Laga dillaashee

Of all the women, the best one
 Was the one from the time of the Prophet Adam
 Her Garden in Eden was destroyed
 She was led astray by Satan
 He placed her by the stream
 Where she thought her reflection was someone else.
 Of all the women, the best one
 Was the one from the time of the Prophet Adam
 Her Garden in Eden was destroyed

Duufsaday iblaysku ye She was led astray by Satan
Biyaha uu Dul-joojee He placed her by the stream
Hadhkeedii dad mooddee Where she thought her reflection was someone else
Aadan oon dembi lahayn Adam, who had never committed a sin
Daaqsiiisay geedkee She compelled him to eat of the Tree of Life
Diinteemu sheegtee So teaches our religion
Aadan oon dembi lahayn Adam, who had never committed a sin
Daaqsiiisay geedkee She compelled him to eat of the Tree of Life
Diinteemu sheegtee So teaches our religion
Inta Loogu daw-gelay This is the reason that they
Jannadooy dabbaashaan While swimming in Paradise
Dibadda Looga saaree Were expelled to the outside
Inta Loogu daw-gelay This is the reason that they
Jannadooy dabbaashaan While swimming in Paradise
Dibadda Looga saaree Were expelled to the outside
Waa iga dardaraan e This is my final word:
Waxaan Kaaga digayaa What I warn you about is
Dabka hura dhexdeenee The conflict that burns between us
Waa iga dardaraan e This is my final word:
Waxaan Kaaga digayaa What I warn you about is
Dabka hura dhexdeenee The conflict that burns between us
 F: *Waan idin dar-yeelloo* We gave you assistance
Idin daadahaynoo We taught you to walk
Dusha idin ku qaadnee We carried you on our backs
Ruux idin ku daaloo Refrain from giving insults to
Dambarkiisa nuugteen Those who became fatigued for your sakes
Haw deeqin caydee And from whom you sucked your first milk
Waan idin dar-yeelloo We gave you assistance
Idin daadahaynoo We taught you to walk
Dusha idin ku qaadnee We carried you on our backs
Ruux idin ku daaloo Refrain from giving insults to
Dambarkiisa nuugteen Those who became fatigued for your sakes
Haw deeqin caydee And from whom you sucked your first milk
Carrabkiinoo daaha gala The tongue which you possess
Lama-dublaysaan Speaks two opposing things
Sidaa aar dad-qaadee Like the male lion who stalks people
Carrabkiinoo daaha gala The tongue which you possess
Lama-dublaysaan Speaks two opposing things
Sidaa aar dad-qaadee Like the male lion who stalks people
Idinkaa daliishaday You have demonstrated that
Dadka kala sarreeyoo Some people are better than others
Ummadda kala dambaysee And that some are not as good as others
Idinkaa daliishaday You have demonstrated that
Dadka kala sarreeyoo Some people are better than others
Ummadda kala dambaysee And that some are not as good as others
Dan bay innaga dhaxaysee Necessity brings us together:
Daacad aan ahaanno Let us be honest with each other
Aynnu wada dadaalee Let us labor hard together
Dan bay innaga dhaxaysee Necessity brings us together:

Daacad aan ahaanno
Aymmu wada dadaalee

II M: *Dadkii raacay Nebigii*
Kuwii diiday Shaafici
Maalintay is dilayeen
Doqorkii uu Sayid Cali
Intuu daray kufaartii
Daafacaayay Abu Jahal
Dadkii raacay Nebigii
Kuwii diiday Shaafici
Maalintay is dilayeen
Doqorkii uu Sayid Cali
Intuu daray kufaartii
Daafacaayay Abu Jahal
Ee dhiiggu daatee
Sida daad qulqulayee
Maydku daadsanaa degel
Ee dhiiggu daatee
Sida daad qulqulayee
Maydku daadsanaa degel
Dabcigiimu waa kii
Hadba qolada debecco
Aad ku digan jirteenee
Dabcigiimu waa kii
Hadba qolada debecco
Aad ku digan jirteenee
Waa iga dardaraan e
Waxaan Kaaga digayaa
Dabka hura dhexdeenee
Waa iga dardaraan e
Waxaan Kaaga digayaa
Dabka hura dhexdeenee
F: *Dayax dhaca habeen dam ah*
Iyagoon dembi lahayn
Idinkaa dalaagee
Reer ay daruureen
Idinkaa ka dira oon
Dawgooda marininee
Dayax dhaca habeen dam ah
Iyagoon dembi lahayn
Idinkaa dalaagee
Reer ay daruureen
Idinkaa ka dira oon
Dawgooda marininee
Dibnahoo qaminiyo
Dabkay taas leedahay
Ayaa idin ka daahane
Dibnahoo qaminiyo

Let us be honest with each other
Let us labor hard together

The people who followed the Prophet Muhammad
And those who rejected the *Shaafici*⁴
Fought with each other one day
While Sayid Cali⁵
Slew the infidels with his weapon
And defended his people against Abu Jahal⁶
The people who followed the Prophet Muhammad
And those who rejected the *Shaafici*
Fought with each other one day
While Sayid Cali
Slew the infidels with his weapon
And defended his people against Abu Jahal
And blood was spilled
Was like a rushing flood
Bodies covered the ground
And blood was spilled
Was like a rushing flood
Bodies covered the ground
Your character is like this
You are always pleased to see
A group of people become weak
Your character is like this
You are always pleased to see
A group of people become weak
This is my final word:
What I warn you about is
The conflict that burns between us
This is my final word:
What I warn you about is
The conflict that burns between us
You divorce them when
They have committed no wrong
On a dim night when the moon has set
You expel them from
The homes which they themselves constructed
You do not allow them their rights
You divorce them when
They have committed no wrong
On a dim night when the moon has set
You expel them from
The homes which they themselves constructed
You do not allow them their rights
You are not aware of
The lips which are bitten in anger
And the fire that this ill treatment causes
You are not aware of

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Dabkay taas leedahay</i> | The lips which are bitten in anger |
| <i>Ayaa idin ka daahane</i> | And the fire that this ill treatment causes |
| <i>Xaqayaga aad daboosheen</i> | You are in debt to us |
| <i>Damac yaad ku qaaddeen</i> | For our rights which you have hidden |
| <i>Ayaa idin ku deyne</i> | You have taken them away in greed |
| <i>Xaqayaga aad daboosheen</i> | You are in debt to us |
| <i>Damac yaad ku qaaddeen</i> | For our rights which you have hidden |
| <i>Ayaa idin ku deyne</i> | You have taken them away in greed |
| <i>Dan bay innaga dhaxaysee</i> | Necessity brings us together |
| <i>Daacad aan ahaanno</i> | Let us be honest with each other |
| <i>Aymmu wada dadaalee</i> | Let us labor hard together |
| <i>Dan bay innaga dhaxaysee</i> | Necessity brings us together |
| <i>Daacad aan ahaanno</i> | Let us be honest with each other |
| <i>Aymmu wada dadaalee</i> | Let us labor hard together |

This poem, like many hundreds of others, chronicles Somali ethnic worldview. The one quoted before it chronicles Somali history. And there are thousands like them in a number of genres amongst the Somalis both at home and throughout the diaspora. In conclusion, I put it to you that Somali poetry is *the* major vehicle for debates and discussions of Somali ethnicity and identity as a nation. Topics such as language, politics, and social issues, while not an exhaustive list of issues, are most seriously discussed in verse. In my view, the maintenance of poetic expression and the ability to compose and understand poetry in Somali will be essential to Somali ethnic identity in the many lands and territories to which they have now been dispersed. If they lose their interest or ability in composing poetry with which to debate the issues that interest them, then they may indeed become one of the world's nations that have become assimilated by the majority populations in the countries to which they have emigrated in diaspora.

Notes

- ¹ Of the 43 Somali dictionaries I have in my personal library, 15 of them, more than a third of them, have been published by Somalis in exile during the past decade.
- ² This edition of Burton's book was edited with an introduction and additional chapters by Gordon Waterfield. The original book was published in 1856.
- ³ Xerox copies of most of the poems entered in this contest have been donated to the Somali collections in the Indiana University library by Mari Borstelmann.
- ⁴ *Shaafici*, from the Arabic *Shafi'i*, 'Intercessor', a panagoric epithet applied to the Prophet Muhammad, and some major Sufi saints.
- ⁵ *Sayid Cali*. Sayyid 'ali bin Abu Talib, the son-in-law and paternal cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. Some Somali myths of origin claim that Somalis are direct descendants of this famous warrior and poet.
- ⁶ *Abu Jahal*. Abu Jahl was one of the leaders in Mecca who opposed the Prophet Muhammad and was killed in the Battle of Badr in 623 A.D. Abu Jahl was of the same clan as the Prophet. The poet uses the allusion to him as an allegorical analogy against women. Abu Jahl dragged his followers down with him by his infidelity and were destroyed, just as Eve dragged down Adam by her infidelity, and they were cast out of Paradise.

Bibliography

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