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**VARIATIONS ON THE THEME
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*edited by
Muddle Suzanne Lilius*



**Centre for Continuing Education
Åbo Akademi University**

Abdilahi Qarshi

The Birth of Somali Modern Music*

...The Somalis are by nature deeply religious, and the birth and acceptance of the modern *heello* had to overcome the antagonisms and resistance of tradition and of religious leaders. In its infancy the *heello* was considered to be something completely against Somali and Islamic culture. For those of us who were involved, it was a creative and recreational pursuit. We would gather in a house in the evenings to compose and to play and to sing. But the music of the *heello*, the clapping and unconstrained enjoyment of it, and the ill-famed houses where women danced to it were not acceptable, the behaviour therein being considered far beyond the limits which were set for young people. By custom, traditional songs and dances were always performed by young people in the open air, in full sight of their elders; anything else was looked upon with deep suspicion. The prevailing attitude to be overcome is appropriately summed up in the saying quoted by Professor Johnson:

Haddii aan sacabka xeeli ku jirin, maxaaa habeenkii loo tumaa?

If there is no hidden purpose in the dance, why is it done under cover of darkness?

I vividly remember the night when religious resistance reached a climax. A well-known sheikh climbed onto the roof of a building in Hargeysa where we were enjoying a *heello* party, with music, singing, clapping, and some ladies dancing. It was midnight, not a normal time for a religious service, and the sheikh was calling people to prayer. The neighbours came running to see what was happening. The sheikh started to preach to the gathering assembly about the evils of these new habits and how they must be stopped by any means possible, for it was a great sin to stand by and watch young people going astray. The crowd became so incensed that had we not scattered and run for our lives that night, I think that some of us would probably not have seen the morning.

However, the incident proved to be a turning point for us, forcing us to think about what we were trying to do and leading to some important changes. At that time we were still using the name *balwo* to describe the newly born form of song, and this term was helping the opposition. The earliest composers began their songs with the words, '*balwooy, balwooy, hoy balwooy...*' - derived from the word *belo*, 'meaning calamity' or 'misfortune' in Arabic. But in Somali usage, the word had acquired the implication of profligacy in matters of sex, womanizing, drinking, and so on. Thus we see that the name *balwo*, which had bad connotations in Somali, was adding to the unacceptability of the '*balwo* movement' in respectable society. It provided the religious leaders with ammunition to have it suppressed and outlawed.

So we changed the name to *heello* and began the first few bars of the song not with '*balwo*' but with the acceptable, traditional invitation to dance '*heelloy heellooy...*' We also worked hard to improve upon the lyrics, which, to be honest, I have to describe as being at that time generally meaningless, weak and inferior. Professor Johnson cites one such poem

* This text is an excerpt from Abdilahi Qarshi's foreword to the second edition of the book *Heelloy, Modern Poetry and Songs of the Somali*, by John William Johnson, London: Haan, 1996. © Haan Publishing. Reprinted here with the kind permission of Haan Publishing, London.

The Dynamics of Word Art

which deals with a punctured tyre. They dealt with trite and insignificant subjects, and we were reviled by older people, especially by the poets and literary minded. Early examples of the *balwo* were composed not by established figures in society, but by hopefuls dreaming of a bright future, by young government servants, and by truck drivers and their assistants as a way of passing the time on long journeys away from home. We determined to polish the poetry and minimize any grossly improper meanings or innuendo so that the songs would be worthy of respect from all Somalis, both young and old, and would be suitable for performing at social gatherings such as weddings. We introduced themes other than love, and marches and patriotic songs began to be composed.

It was now in the 1950's, and national independence was very much on the agenda; the *heello* became a natural vehicle for freedom songs which expressed the people's aspirations. In the end the popularity of this once 'forbidden' music and song swept over the country like an unstoppable tide.

Somali oral culture stretching back into the mists of time is filled with poetry, chants, work songs, and children's rhymes. The appearance on the scene in the middle of this century of poetry sung to a melody and which became known as *heello* stands on firm foundations, and it has established its own legitimacy. It has produced its own hall of fame of exponents and devotees, a long line of famous and respected figures, male and female, singers, composers, musicians, fanciers, and actors proud to be associated with it, including Cabdi Sinimo and Khadiija 'Balwo'; others to be remembered are Busaad, Aaden Dacay, Yuusuf Qodban Sharif, Belaayo Cas, Maxamed Aadan 'Ayban', and Abdo Sofi.

In every age there have been people who supported new artistic ventures and who by luck or vision helped to nurture new cultural trends. In spite of massive resistance, there were those - some from government circles, some who were opinion leaders - who lent their approval and muscle, and in some cases their financial backing, to what we were about. Among those were Xaaji Axmed Naaleeye, a wealthy businessman of Hargeysa, Jaamac Nuur Dacar of Djibouti (ex-French Somaliland), Calwan from Aden Colony, and Warsama 'Sayaad', a fish merchant also from Aden. There was Yuusuf Xaaji Aadan, a government school teacher, a graduate from the Sudan, a poet in both Somali and Arabic, and a supporter of our cause, himself a composer in the genre. Maxamed Axmed Cali, often referred to as the 'Father of Education' in our country, was a courageous supporter of liberal causes; he was someone who seemed to recognize our potential, and he gave encouragement to me personally.

.../...

After more than half a century, the *heello* is a well established and flourishing form of expression among Somalis. In the 1960's, 70's and 80's, Somali artists were hosts to and hosted by artists from many other countries. Cultural exchange visits with, and participation in international festivals in China, the Sudan and Egypt, Senegal and Nigeria, (East) Berlin, Paris, Rome, Moscow, and Sofia provided stimulus and cross referencing of musical expression in particular.

In more recent times, the scattering of Somali society throughout the world following our national trauma has informed much of the lyric expression of the day./...

Editor's note: By reprinting this text, we wish to pay tribute to Abdilahi Qarshi, a formidable figure in Somali music. We had wished to invite him to our Congress, but just as we were about to contact him, in late October 1997, we were reached by the news that he had passed away.

His music lives on, through recordings and through other musicians performing his songs. Here, we can read what he said himself about the birth and growth of modern Somali music. Some echos of what he recalls from the beginnings, the hesitations and the opposition

to the movement, can be heard today again, when yet new developments follow. Young Somalis today face a world very different from the one of their parents' youth, many of them growing up in exile, at the crossroads of many cultures and religious interpretations, and they now come up with new musical trends.

That Abdilahi Qarshi was a staunch defender of modern Somali music is evident from his text and his life work. That he also approved of research being undertaken into the subject is evident from the final line in his foreword to the second edition (London: Haan 1996) of John William Johnson's book (first published in 1974):

'My hope is that the republication of this study will encourage others to build on the foundation of information so ably laid by Professor Johnson.'