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## **Life History and Works of Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal (1917-1980)<sup>1</sup>**

When writing about the works and life history of Muuse Galaal, one is obliged to base it on the setting of the Somali rural culture and nomadic life style. This is because all his later works and activities had their roots back in the nomadic culture where he was born and brought up. It is actually in this rural background where Muuse acquired his early training and inspiration for his later works in life.

The calendar year as known in Western culture was not significant then and the Somali nomads had their own methods for marking and dating events. They used seasons of severe drought or good rain to mark the birth, death, marriages and other events of importance. Severe droughts, epidemics, wars or other natural disasters were given names in accordance with their bearing on the life of the people, e.g. *Duumaale*, referring to the malaria epidemic 1951, or *Daba-Dheer*, the drought of 1974<sup>2</sup>. Such droughts or periods of disaster could always be referred back to a specific year but not date or month.

Muuse Galaal was born in a *gu'* season (main rainy season) which failed culminating in a very severe drought known to the people of Tog-Dheer region (Northern Somalia) as the drought of *Jaahweyn*. This corresponds to the calendar year 1917. The effect was severe and devastating both to livestock and people in the region where Muuse was born. On the night of his birth the family was on the move to a far away place where the drought was less severe and relatively better pasture was available for the livestock. The expectant mother was not only supposed to follow the trekking but also to fulfill her due role as the head figure of the family. It was a night of full moon. Traditionally the nomads preferred to move at night to avoid the direct heat of the sun during daytime.

That night at a place called Kirir, which was half way to their destination, labor struck and the caravan was temporarily halted. Help was rendered to the delievering mother and without any complications Muuse was born with the help of the moonlight and stars. Immediately when the process of birth was over, Dhool, Muuse's mother, advised the journey to be continued without delay. The infant and his mother were left alone with some drinking water and asked to follow the track of the Caravan. Dhool did not accept to be left with some one to nurse or help because such an act is regarded as a weakness in the nomadic Milieu. Therefore she carried her infant and followed the track to their destination with no complaint.

Muuse during his childhood grew up happily in the rural environment learning the essentials of life from his parents and the society. He herded camels and moved from one place to another in search of good pasture and water, in far away places from family camps, sometimes for several months or possibly a complete season. During this period he only survived on what could be milked from the camel. This could not be not much particularly, in the *jiilaal*<sup>3</sup> season, when pasture and water are both limited.

In those days, the opportunity for formal education in the Somaliland Protectorate was minimal or non-existent. Wherever it existed, it was in religious centers and restricted to the urban settlement and therefore only to the advantage of the minority of the population living in the towns. Nevertheless there existed another form of education. An education form with practical application. This was the form of education and training the young generation of pastoralists learned from the parents, elders, poets, historians, and the folk of the nomadic

society. Here a child is trained to cope with the demands of the immediate environment. That rural life was harsh, unforgiving and could only be survived by those trained and equipped for it from childhood. It involved wandering with livestock in search of good pasture and water. At times during the dry season one can go without food or water. Complaining was a direct sign of weakness while bravery, toughness, oratory, patience, generosity, and a good sense of judgement was regarded as the foremost qualities in the pastoral environment.

The knowledge of stars, seasons, land geography, animal husbandry, plant culture, wildlife, medicine and other natural systems were the basic knowledge transferred from the elders of the nomadic society to the young generation. This was the genuine practical education in the nomadic way of life.

In the words of his elder brother Jama Galaal, Muuse was energetic and inquisitive about everything. He was keen and listened with curiosity to what elders and sages had to say. He used to appreciate challenges and performed duties entrusted him with ease and to satisfaction. He enjoyed poetry, songs, stories, proverbs and he liked folklore dances and other entertainment forms within the nomadic culture. He was interested and fond of getting together with his peer group for dances. Muuse was talented in art and crafts. Later in his nomadic period, Muuse began to compose poems, songs and fables.

As a young man, he appreciated adventures and travelling to new places. To him, the thrill of coming into contact with peoples from places and ways of life different from his own was in itself an experience. He could have been influenced by a Somali proverb which says *Nimaan dhul marini dhaaya la'* meaning 'a man who has not seen beyond his locality has seen nothing and knows nothing'. In his late teens, Muuse traveled to Aden (South Yemen) for his first major adventure abroad.

In Aden he was confronted with the challenges of the different environment and peoples with different values and modes of life than the one he knew. He adjusted himself accordingly and soon after his arrival, Muuse began to work for his living, picking one job after the other. Also there he completed the Qur'aan, and learned Arabic, English and General knowledge in which he progressed exceptionally fast.

At the start of the Second World War, he was recruited into the British Army in Aden to serve with Somali forces under British command. During his services in the army forces, he was sent on a course to Kenya, training as a chief instructor for the Somali forces, and on his return from Kenya he became Education officer for the Somaliland forces, a position he held till the end of Second World War.

After the war, Muuse joined the newly established educational system for Somaliland Protectorate and held positions of teacher and head master. In 1949, the Protectorate department of Education introduced a research project aimed at exploring the phonological and grammatical structure of the Somali language for an attempt to write the Somali language.

He was singled out on merit to take part in the research along with the late B.W. Andrzejewski. The method of transcription used in their research was the International Phonetic Alphabet with adaptations by the School of Oriental and African Studies. Muuse realized the fact that the Somali language and Somali culture and literature are inseparable and one can not study one without the other. His works with the orthography met with great opposition, the scheme was labeled a foreign plot against Islam and Somali interest but Muuse was not deterred by his critics. He did not conceal his transcripts and activities as a collector of the Somali oral literature.

Muuse had a nationalistic vision, believing that Somalis are one nation united by one common language and cultural heritage. He advocated the extension of the scheme to cover all territories where Somali is spoken and this led him to visit Mogadishu in 1951. In pursuit for a proper orthography, Muuse did not confine him self one based on the Latin script, he did

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research on the Arabic characters as well and how it suited the other several languages which had adopted Arabic characters for their transcription. He came to the conclusion that the Arabic script was incapable of representing the Somali sounds unless some other adaptations are made.

In 1951, Muuse was offered for a post of research assistant in Somali at London School of Oriental and African Studies. This was an opportunity to continue his research in depth and to study English literature and phonetics. It was not long before the Somali community in Britain came to know about his research based on the Latin script. He was attacked again, and finally he decided to retry the Arabic script with some modifications. He financed that project from his own resources. He invented new signs for the missing letters and soldered it on an Arabic typewriter. To his surprise and dismay, this one too was met with more opposition, on the grounds that Somali written in Arabic will distort the teachings of Qur'aan.

He returned to Somaliland in 1954 while the report of the language research which he submitted was shelved and nothing was done about its implementation. He became director of an adult education scheme in the Protectorate and he was also in charge of Radio Hargeisa which gave him the opportunity to broadcast some of his own writings.

In 1955, he participated in the meeting of the Somali Language (Kulanka Afka) which was arranged by the two colonial governments of the North and South and held in Mogadishu that year. In the years 1956-1960, he held different positions in the Somaliland Protectorate Education department, he became Adult Education officer and some time principal of Sheikh Intermediate School.

As an Adult Education officer, Muuse was all the time travelling throughout the territory of Somaliland Protectorate in order to open sites of adult classes (evening classes). With limited material resources he successfully established many adult classes and encouraged many Somalis who were feeling ashamed to start school in adult age, because he believed that 'Education itself is a process that never ends, and no one is too old to learn'.

After independence in 1960, the government, realizing the gravity of the multiple problems in the country caused by the absence of script for the Somali Language<sup>4</sup>, appointed a committee of nine Somalis under the chairmanship of Muuse, to investigate and recommend the best way of writing Somali. That committee having worked for a period of one year, and having agreed on all the seventeen guiding principles for determining the merits of each script, submitted their report to the government in which a modified form of the Roman characters was recommended.

In 1966, the government called a UNESCO commission on the subject, with which Muuse co-operated closely. The commission was representing three linguistic schools specialized on African languages in the U.K, France and Poland. When once more no decision was taken, he became disappointed for the third time.

All the attempts made in the past to write the Somali language failed, due to a lack of decision on the government side to choose one of the scripts devised by the public, but not in the absence of suitable script. Then the civilian government was overthrown in 1969. The military regime which took over the power immediately declared their political agenda to rule the country, and their policies included two important points, namely:

1. to take adequate measures for developing the writing of the Somali language;
2. to eradicate illiteracy.

The latter could not be overcome without the solution of the former and in February 1971 a Language committee of twenty-one members, among them Muuse, was appointed. They were all selected by the Revolutionary Council as a result of their academic qualifications in linguistics or their long experience in the research of written Somali, and that was a positive

step towards the solution of the language problem. Eighteen months later exactly, on the National day of October 1972, the written Somali language was officially announced by the president. This decision marked the end to a historical problem that faced many governments including the colonial regimes and which they had left unsolved.

Muuse, who for a period of more than thirty years devoted himself to see the Somali language written, who traveled to China, the Soviet Union, Europe, America and many other countries in Asia and in Africa to find a suitable orthography for his language. He, who tried both the Arabic and the Latin script, he who was faced with opposition and who supported different scripts at different times other than the one he himself invented, had now seen the fruits of his struggle. At last his dreams became true and he had to express his feelings with happiness and relief. On that remarkable day, to show the extent of his happiness, Muuse composed the Poem of the Language, of which an excerpt follows:

Oh men, for a long time of that road  
I have been aware  
The years that I have been shouting  
Have now passed for two decades  
Many times treats and insults  
Were thrown at me

In this poem he mentioned how the idea of writing the mother tongue first came into being and what were the problem as well as the initiatives of the researchers<sup>5</sup> in this field. What kind of obstacles was everyone faced with, including him? One may ask why Muuse was so seriously committed to and so extremely concerned about the matter of the language. To find a satisfactory answer one has to look back at the society to which he belonged - that nation of poets described by Margaret Laurence.

For centuries Somalis were known as an oral society. All their philosophy, poetry and literature were preserved in the memories of the old people. Every old man that passes away takes with him treasures of the Somali history, Somali sociology and Somali life. Muuse had the feeling for the necessity to record as much as possible of that important literature before it disappears forever. If this step is not taken and the old people die with their knowledge, the future Somalis shall one day be in difficulty to know their culture. This factor and others brought by the change in the 'method of learning' were among the forces pushing always his ceaseless effort.

From the time he was a young nomad, he was interested in Somali folklore. He was one of the best dancers which inspired him to be an amateur poet himself. Then he was lucky enough to meet some of the greatest poets in Aden and his interest in composing poetry and his ability to do so increased. From those days he joined the field of Somali oral literature. Whenever he heard an interesting poem, he jotted it down and continued to do so until he went to London. There from time to time he started to compose dramas and other interesting poems. This was how he started to become a poet himself. He also collected a vast body of Somali literature at his own expenses and transcribed them with his script.

His work as preserver of Somali oral literature remained unrecognized until 1960 when he became a research officer in the cultural department of the Ministry of Education. In the years before the language was officially written, he taught several of the young Somalis in the Department of Culture transcribing Somali and methods of oral collection. He had the character to appreciate the works of others and was helpful in guiding several foreign researchers in the field of Somali tradition and literature.

Muuse was proud of his own culture and the Somali traditional way of life. That is why he used to compose things as a Somali. Muuse was not only confined to the scholarly pursuit of a

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Somali script and the preservation of Somali cultural heritage, but was constantly engaged in a lifetime research on various subjects of Somali culture and tradition. He was a poet, novelist, astronomer, historian, philosopher and playwright.

Several people, like John W. Johnson, Lee Nichols and Margaret Castagno, to mention but a few, featured his works in their bibliographies. He had written about fifty poems, some dramas and a novel. Among his major productions can be mentioned:

1. *Hengel*, 1952 ('Mourning Dress')
2. *Qaalle Adduun*, 1953 ('The Problems of the World')
3. *Qayb libaax*, 1955 ('A Lion's Share')
4. *Hikmad Soomaali*, 1956 ('Somali Wisdom')
5. *A collection of Somali literature: Mainly from Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan*, 1964
6. *Stars, season and weather in Somali pastoral traditions*, 1970

Further unpublished research materials in poetry and culture are inestimable. Here, however, is mentioned only a concise note of the Somali culture which is part of Muuse's unpublished research materials. In Muuse's own words:

**Somali Basic Culture**

The aim of these notes is to outline concisely some aspects of the traditions of our people, with a view to illuminate some of the intimate factors that lie beyond the tracks beaten by the previous foreign authors, owing to my experience as nomad during the first twenty years of my life, and because of the opportunity I had in the field while in government services during the subsequent 25 years. It is an attempt to approach the topic from the most reliable angle known so far, which is through the oral traditions.

**Basic Somali Culture is founded on:**

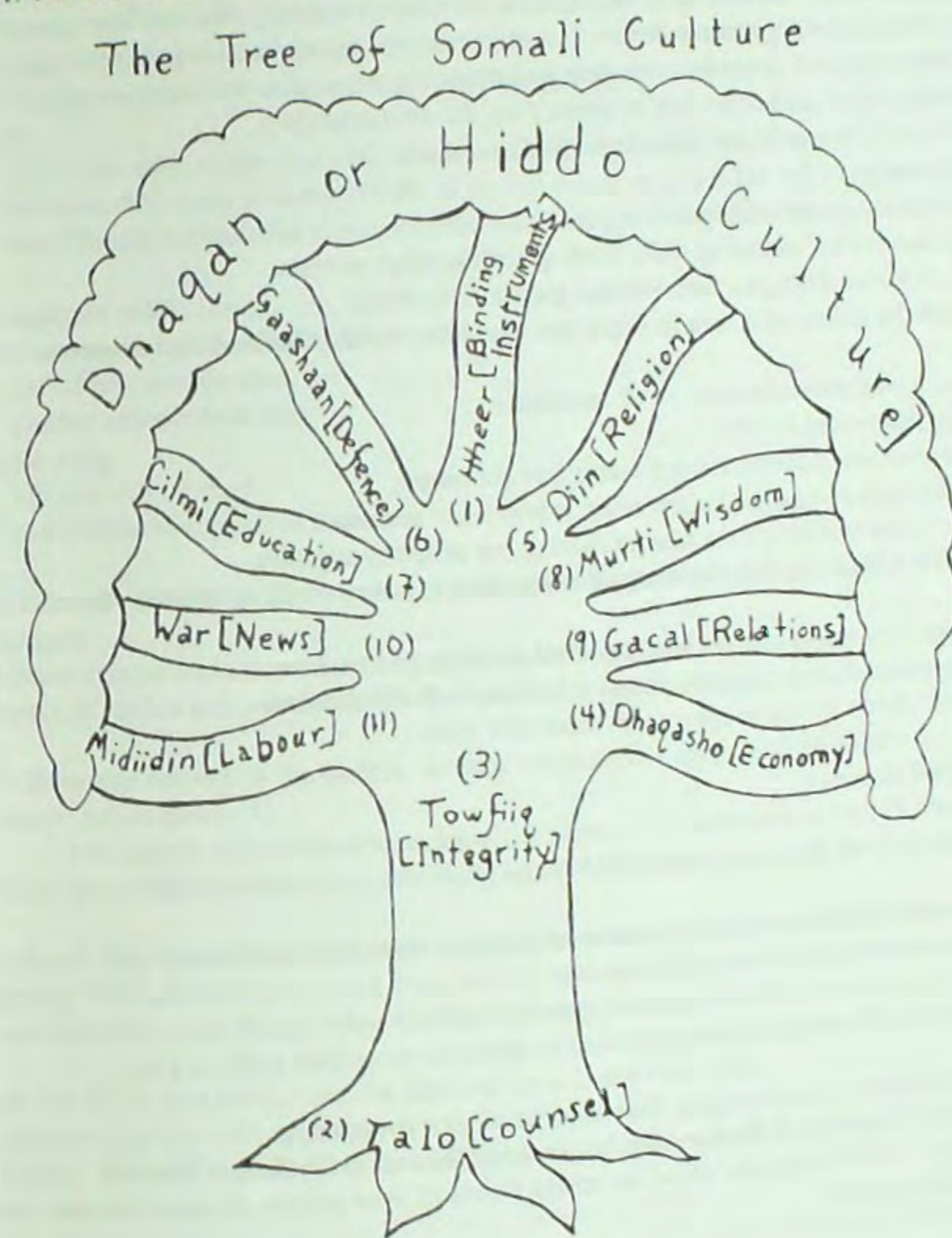
1. Pure nomadic pastoralism by which the economy is derived:
  - a. Rearing of camels and flocks of sheep and goats (*Reer oodeed*). This type of grazing is long range, and takes the nomad far in to the hinterland.
  - b. Rearing the *mugul*, i.e. cattle, flocks of sheep and goats, horses, mules and donkeys within close range of watering centers (*Reer mugul*).
2. Shifting agricultural system in which the basic economy is derived from:
  - a. A primitive kind of farming.
  - b. Rearing of *mugul* animals, i.e. sheep, goats, cattle, horses, donkeys and mules.
  - c. Sporadic movement from one agriculture area to another, movement itself being a part of Somali system of basic economy.

The chief components of Somali culture, as Muuse identified them through his research, are 1. *Xeer* 'Binding Instruments'; 2. *Talo* 'Counsel'; 3. *Towfiig* 'Integrity'; 4. *Dhaqasho* 'Economy'; 5. *Diin* 'Religion'; 6. *Gaashaan* 'Defence'; 7. *Cilmi* 'Education'; 8. *Murti* 'Wisdom'; 9. *Gacal* 'Relations'; 10. *War* 'News'; 11. *Midiidin* 'Labour', as shown in the tree chart below. In this paper, only one topic, *xeer*, will be explained in detail.

**Xeer: Binding Instruments**

*Xeer* are articles of binding instruments formulated by each clan assembly on the common problems of their day to day affairs. The commonest problems met by the Somali nomads and upon which *xeer* is formulated as follows - the relevant examples of each article from folk literature are given.

Figure 1. The Tree of Somali Culture, drawn by Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal.

**Purposes of the Xeer**

1. To encourage virtuous action taken by an individual member of the clan or community.
2. To discourage all unjust and immoral actions.
3. To assist the needy.

*Maahmaah: Waxa tol loo yahay:*

*Nin qalloocan qabashadii,*

*Nin qumman la quweyntii iyo*

*Nin qolman wax siintii.*

Proverb: All men are bound together under the following rules:

- The checking of unjust actions
- The encouragement of right and virtuous actions
- And the assistance of weak and needy persons.

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## 4. To feed and care for guests.

*Hees cayaareed*: Alliterated by M:

*Saddex hal weyga maan dedan:*

*Ninka maranli doorale, ee tu kale u maraac tegey,*

*Ninka maal adduunyo leh, ee marti Nebi ka dhabandhigay,*

*Garta laba markhaati leh, ee mooyi laga naqay.*

Dance song:

Three things astonish me:

A man with a charming wife, hunting with another women;

A rich man failing to feed Muslim guests in his home;

And the failure of a man to win a law case after having obtained two witnesses

## 5. To recognize the reciprocity of all assistance.

*Gabay* (alliterated by W):

*Reerkeenmu waynoo waraar kama wax doonaane,*

*Waxaygiyo waxaagaba aan cuno, waalli soow ma aha.*

Poem: I don't object to the idea of sharing our property together

What I object to is (your idea) of eating what is mine as well as what is yours.

## 6. To insure the safety and return of any lost property to its owner.

*Maahmaah* (alliterated by B): *Baadi islaameed bahalka ka xeree.*

Proverb: Keep all lost property safe from wild beast.

## 7. To arrest thieves.

*Odhaah*: *Tuug baa la xidhaa.*

Saying: It is the thief that is chained (not me).

## 8. To insure the safe return of any borrowed property at the appointed time.

*Gabay* (alliterated by the vowel sounds):

*Ayaan iyo wixii laba ka badan eregtu waa ceebe.*

Poem: It is shameful to retain borrowed property for more than a day or two.

## 9. Never disclose to the foreigner the weakness of your own people.

*Odhaah*: *Shisheeye halkaaga adag baa la tusaa, sokeeye na halkaaga jilicsan.*

Saying: To the foreigners, show the strong points of your people; to your kinsmen, show the weak points.

10. To protect your *magan* (the people committed to your charge).

*Gabay* (alliterated by M):

*Magan nimaan ku dhiman, xilhi waa, meher la'aadaane.*

Poem: A man who fails to defend his own subjects is not worthy for a noble girl to marry.

## 11. To join all rallies for joint actions by the clans.

*Odhaah*: *Nin maqan kabihisaa dhaama.*

Saying: A man who makes himself absent from the rallies of his clan is not worth his own shoes.

## 12. To defend the common property of your own clan (livestock, wells, grazing land, wives, etc.) from all attacks and infringements.

*Gabay* (alliterated by T):

*Istaageerid bay laba gacmood tamar ku yeeshaane*

*Tiska waxa la qaadaa markay, tiirisaa bidixe*

*Hadday midigtu keli taagantahay, tahar ma gooyseene.*

Poem:

Two arms only achieve success when they help one another:

Man can only carry a heavy bundle of thorny branches when the left hand assists

For if the right hand was alone, it could not even cut the smallest membrane.

## 13. To maintain public order.

*Hees cayaareed* (alliterated by D):

*Diradira-cadaabeedow,*

*Dadka nabada kala daa.*

Dance song:

Oh you evil monger

Let people live together in peace.

14. To refer all cases of justice to *xeer-beegti* (law keeping elders) and to abide by their decisions.

*Odhaah*: *Xaajo hadday qoraxooto, guddiday hadh-gashaa*

Saying: If justice gets overheated in the sunshine, it goes to the judges for shade.

## 15. To show due respect to the leaders, women, children, the aged, and the weak.

*Gabay*: Alliterated by C:

*Nin cirrale cadaabkiina waa, lagal ceesaaye.*

Poem: Even Allah abstains from punishing a gray-haired man by putting him in hell.

*Odhaah*: *Rag waxa kuugu sita ninka xantaadana wanaaja, xaaskaagana wax siiya.*  
Saying: The best friend you can have is the one who speaks well of you in your absence and who helps your family, when they are in need.

Finally the entire idea of *xeer* may be summed up as in the following:

*Odhaah*: *Tol xeer lihi, caydh ma leh.*

Saying: A clan with a sound system of *xeer* has no poor members.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This material is part of my ongoing research, subject to later publication.

<sup>2</sup> As a result of this, much livestock and many people died and the Somali government requested international aid.

<sup>3</sup> *Jilaal* is the dry season corresponding to winter in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> The new State inherited two different languages for the written medium of its administration and education: English and Italian.

<sup>5</sup> Among them: Maxamed A. Xasan, Yaasiin C. Keenadiid, Cabdirahmaan Qaadi, Shire Jaamac Axmed as well as others.

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Muuse's dairy book of 1959 and several tapes recorded by himself.