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The Life of 'Ilmi Bowndheri, a Somali Oral Poet Who Is Said to Have Died of Love

There is hardly a more popular story in the northern region of the Somali Republic than that of the tragic love of 'Ilmi Bowndheri. His fame has spread to other regions of the Republic and to all the territories where Somali is spoken, in Ethiopia, Kenya, and French Somaliland. Even in Somali cafés in Aden, London, or Cardiff his name is pronounced with reverence and extracts from his poems are quoted, especially by the younger men. He was a Somali oral poet who is reputed to have died of love shortly before the Second World War. In his poetic art he belongs to the great Somali "classical" tradition of alliterative verse (see Bibliography), but his originality lies in the application of the old majestic imagery and meter to a subject which previously had seldom constituted the sole theme of a poem.

Before him, love was touched upon by serious oral poets only incidentally, when it had some bearing on a topic of general public interest. Their poems were usually concerned with wars, peacemaking, alliances, politics, comments on public affairs, religion, the prestige of one's clan or one's friends, attacks on one's enemies, or public justification of one's actions. Love as a subject per se was left to the simple ditties or dance songs of young camel herders or girls.

To be fully understood, the story of the life and death of 'Ilmi Bowndheri has to be set in the traditional Somali environment which existed until the great social changes which began during the Second World War and still continue. In those days, only a very small part of the population of the Somali peninsula, and especially its northern part, lived in towns. The majority earned their precarious living in the nomadic interior, tend-

ing camels, sheep, and goats, and also, wherever there was enough water, cattle. From time immemorial the Somali pastoralists have lived in clans, organized according to patrilineal descent and governed by their elders. A Somali clan is, in its very nature, a miniature welfare state, which makes great demands on the loyalty and wealth of its citizens, but in return offers them protection and security. In any trouble or emergency members of the clan act collectively. They defend the rights of each clansman against the encroachments of another clan and avenge any wrong done to him.

Within a clan, wealth-sharing arrangements, though voluntary, are almost universal; they are dictated both by the spirit of fellowship and the necessities of camel herding in a difficult environment. Joint care of large herds is easier and more economic than any small scale enterprise undertaken by individuals, especially during the dry season when long marches to the wells and the toil of watering make cooperative efforts particularly attractive. Mutual help is generally considered as one of the highest social virtues, while miserliness with regard to wealth or service is greatly despised. To refuse a clansman in need is felt to be akin to crime. "No one is destitute in a clan which follows the law," says a Somali juridical proverb. Membership of a clan is like a multipurpose insurance policy without restrictive clauses. If a man dies, his clansmen will look after his next of kin. If he falls sick or is injured they will maintain him and care for him as long as he needs it. If he is robbed or suffers losses through fire, storm, flooding, or some other cause, a collection is made among his clansmen to help him in his need.

Marriage in the nomadic interior is patrilocal in the sense that when a man marries he normally brings his bride to his own clan, where they live together. To marry, a man must obtain the consent of his clan elders. The initiative in choosing a wife may come from him, but frequently everything is arranged by the elders and the liking of the prospective bride and bridegroom for each other is merely one aspect of the matter. Such attitudes are not surprising, as the clan is less concerned with the personal feelings of its individual members than with its own total welfare. In the tough conditions of the nomadic interior, to be moved entirely by love in the choice of a wife would be regarded as soft, sentimental, and even antisocial. Womanly virtues such as industry, politeness, obedience, and loyalty are more valuable than personal charm, and physical beauty, though much appreciated, is less important than the expectation of good

hereditary characteristics in the future offspring. This would be assessed by applying simple rules of folk genetics.

Until recent times it was an almost universal custom that in order to obtain a girl in marriage a man had to make a very substantial payment to the clan of the bride, usually in livestock. An individual could rarely afford the bridewealth from his own resources and had to rely on his clan. If they disapproved of the match, they could simply withhold help and this was enough to prevent the marriage from taking place. In the Somali customary law there is a provision for elopement, of which those who are desperately determined to marry can avail themselves. If a man runs away with a girl and is not caught by either his or her clansmen while within the territory of her clan, he can then marry her and the marriage has to be recognised by everyone. But this hazardous way of marrying is not often adopted. Absolute secrecy is necessary both in the preparations for the journey and in the actual escape, and in a nomadic village one is constantly under the observation of one's kinsmen and neighbors. Then the risks of getting lost in the wilderness or being attacked by beasts of prey at night are sufficient to discourage most girls from such a venture, and it also takes much courage for a girl who has been brought up in ways of strict filial obedience to defy her parents, even if she feels that she is backed by an age-long tradition. If they are caught, the couple has to face the anger of the elders and might never have another chance to escape the watchful eyes of the clan.

A man could leave his clan with the consent of the elders if he wanted to work in a town, at sea, or abroad, provided that he undertook either to send contributions home or eventually to bring home a substantial sum of money. His payments were an equivalent of his labor as a camel or cattle herder in the service of his clan. He could then always come back and expect in return all the privileges, including help in paying bridewealth when he needed it. If, however, he ran away against the wishes of the elders and was either unable or unwilling to contribute to the economic welfare of his clan, he could not count on their help. If he was in need he had to rely on his own resourcefulness; if he wanted to marry he had to save enough money to pay the bridewealth himself.

A member of a very poor clan might find himself in the same situation even if his clan approved of the marriage but was unable to help him very much. He would have to look for a wife from a clan who did not enjoy much prestige on account of poverty or weakness; alternatively he

might find himself a woman who for some reason had not been sought in marriage by anyone else and whose clan would in despair demand very little bridewealth. Much sought after girls from wealthy clans would be completely out of his reach unless he made money in urban employment or at sea.

With or without the consent of their elders, many young men left the nomadic interior and moved into towns, and this trend gathered momentum after 1920, when the War of the Dervishes ended and when the ports of Djibouti and Aden, and even Berbera, offered increasingly attractive opportunities of employment or trade. The gay lights of the town, the constant supply of water, and a generally softer mode of life, though still harsh by European standards, appealed to many, luring them away from the hardships and the boredom of nomadic life. We have not been able to establish whether 'Ilmi Bowndheri left his nomadic village with the consent and blessing of his clansmen or simply ran away to town in the hope of a better life. One thing seems certain, however: that there was some kind of conflict between him and his clan, at least at the time when he fell in love and wanted to marry. They refused to provide him with the requisite bridewealth and this would indicate that they either disapproved of his choice for some reason, or considered him no longer a fully paid-up member of their society and thus not entitled to the privileges of wealth-sharing. It is also possible that they simply could not afford to help him without making great sacrifices.

Having set the scene we turn now to the story itself. The version given in this article is a translation of a Somali narrative which is illustrated by poems composed by 'Ilmi Bowndheri and preserved by oral tradition. The Somali text of the narrative has been written down by Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, the co-author of this article. The prose portions of it are based on what he recorded from H̄irsi Baadi'awstume and on what he heard from other people in northern Somaliland; the text of the poems, however, is a verbatim transcript of a tape-recording made by Baadi'awstume in Hargeisa in 1965. It should be noted that while Mohamed Farah Abdillahi was born after the death of 'Ilmi Bowndheri, Baadi'awstume was already a young man at the time of the tragic events described in the narrative. He knew 'Ilmi personally and saw him on various occasions during his illness. Himself a poet and reciter of poems, Baadi'awstume broadcasts oral traditions on Radio Somali from Hargeisa, and as Somali audiences are extremely sensitive judges of the purity of their

language and demand high standards for the oral transmission of poetry, he can be regarded as one of the guardians of the Somali traditional heritage. Steeped in his own culture, he shows hardly any traces of Western influence.

The text of the Somali original is available in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, W.C.1, and its Catalogue Accession Number is 184974. Applications for microfilm copies should be sent to the Photographic Department, University Library, University of London, London W.C.1 Arrangements can be made with the authors of this article for anyone who wishes to listen to the tape-recording of the narrative and the poems.

Our translation is as near to the original as English usage permits. We have neither subtracted nor added to the imagery of the Somali text, except in a very few cases where appropriate explanations are given in notes. The poems are translated line by line, but without any attempt to imitate the patterns of Somali scansion or alliteration, which has to occur twice in each line and with the same alliterating sound throughout the whole poem.

Translation of the Somali Narrative and Poems

§ 1. 'Ilmi Bowndheri was born about 1908, and was at first one of the people who live in the nomadic interior. He was a young man who knew nothing about poetry, and even if he did know something about it, no one had ever heard it while he was living in the nomadic interior. He came to Hargeisa as a young man and stayed there about one year. He went on to Berbera and came to stay with a man called Muuse, whom he had known before and who was his friend and a companion of his youth. Afterwards he got a job in a restaurant. The proprietor of the restaurant also owned a bakery.¹ After he had been working in the restaurant for some time he learned how to make bread, and a short while later he was made the head of the bakery.

§ 2. 'Ilmi, as was said before, was a young man from whom one never heard poems; neither was there in him anything refined or entertaining. He was just a simple, good-natured young man. One day in 1934, while he was the head of the bakery, a flash of lightning appeared before him. This flash entered his head, his heart, his soul, and his whole body. And what was this flash of lightning? It was a girl whose name was Hodan, the daughter of 'Abdi, and it

¹ Literally, "an oven in which bread is baked". It can be inferred from the context that what was in question was not only the oven but the bakehouse itself.

was she who appeared to him as a flash of lightning. He felt like a man who had been imprisoned in a wilderness and had never seen human beings, or like someone who was born blind and could see nothing, and whose eyes God suddenly opened and who saw things in front of him.

§ 3. Hodan was a girl who was born in Berbera and whose family lived there. She was young and beautiful and one of the wealthy girls of the Berbera of that time. Hodan was very much attached to her family and did not disobey them in anything they told her to do; this was the case with most girls living in those days. It is well known that girls of that period had a strong sense of decorum and no one would expect them to be independent in their thoughts and decisions.

§ 4. 'Imi's love for Hodan began on the day he saw her. What happened on the days which followed was that he could eat but very little food; he also became negligent in his work, at which he used to be so good. On some days, while he was dreaming about her, he used to oversleep. Then the people who worked with him in the same place used to ask themselves: "Is he asleep today? Is he in pain? Is he ill? What is wrong with him?" The answer was: "Love has taken hold of him." The people who lived at that time had never seen a man so overpowered by love and they were very, very astonished. From time to time they used to revile him and on some occasions they even used to say: "He is feigning illness and is not sincere."

§ 5. At that point 'Imi could no longer endure their insults and his love. Then he composed his first poem, which was:

"It was God the Just who long ago created the love of women.
It reached the Lord whose light shone upon the world, and 'Ali.²
People have been bringing forth offspring since the time of 'Iise,³ the
prophet, till now.
If they had all been of one sex they could not have sprung forth in an
unpeopled land.
They were made of two kinds so that they might inspire admiration in one
another.
Evil is the custom of Somalis⁴ — otherwise they would not revile me.

² I.e., Muḥammad, the founder of Islam and his son-in-law 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib. In our translation we have rendered the Somali word *'arshi*, borrowed from Arabic, as "world." Literally this word means "throne" and reference is made here to a common Muslim notion according to which the world is regarded as God's throne. Note that persons of great sanctity are believed to radiate mystic light which illumines their surroundings. We have come across oral traditions concerning Somali mystics who could read the Koran at night by the radiance of their souls alone.

³ I.e., Jesus. Note that Muslims regard Christ as one of the prophets.

⁴ The custom referred to is the old Somali way of scorning and laughing at a man who falls in love, admits it openly, and allows himself to be swayed by it.

Even though I cleanse my bosom, like a milkvessel, with a fire brand
 And wipe it then with a fiber rag, will anything pass my gullet?⁵
 What I would wish to chew, I was refused, and I can do nothing but brush
 my teeth.⁶

The amulets written by men of religion⁷ failed to stop the sickness.
 I sought the sacred knowledge⁸ and medicines but failed to find a cure.
 You cannot wash away the love which turned into grey hair upon you.”⁹

§ 6. As 'Ilmi's love grew stronger and stronger he cut down his food so much that people became apprehensive about his condition. At that time four Berbera girls tried to do something for him for their part, after they had been to Hodan but failed to get anything out of her. The four girls said to themselves: "Women, this man who is so emaciated, and of whom it is said that love caused him to become like this — he needs a girl! Why don't we do something and show that boy what would bring health to his heart, if the sickness is concerned with womankind?"

§ 7. The girls said to 'Ilmi, "You will be our guest," and 'Ilmi accepted their hospitality and went to see them. Each of the girls put on her best silken clothes. When they had sat together for a while, 'Ilmi said to the girls: "You have called me and said we shall have a discussion, and I have come to you. Well, I want you to tell me what you have called me for."

§ 8. They said: "We shall tell you. Is it true that you love a girl and that your thinness, which it is said is not natural to you and which you did not used to have, has been caused by her, and that you love her best of all you see?" "Can you help me in any way in this matter?" he said to them. "We shall tell you," they said, "but is it so, and is all that we asked you really true?" "It is," he said. "If we do something about it for you, what will your reaction be?" they said. "It is what I wanted," he said. Then they said, "We promise you that as for the

⁵ In the nomadic interior, where water is scarce, milk vessels are cleansed with fire-brands and then wiped with bark fibers. This line implies that even though he tries to cleanse his heart of love, the poet cannot do so and his love prevents him from eating anything.

⁶ The normal way of cleaning one's teeth in the nomadic interior is to brush them with a small stick whose fibers are split at one end for this purpose. Usually people clean their teeth after a meal. This poetic image symbolizes the deprivation and frustration of the poet.

⁷ This phrase is a translation of a Somali word which denotes the practice of writing verses of the Koran in charcoal ink inside a cup. When water is poured in, the ink dissolves and the potion is drunk by a person who is ill or in some other way in need of God's protection.

⁸ In moments of trouble Muslims often turn to men of religion, who consult their holy books and select prayers appropriate for the occasion or give them advice and guidance based on the Koran, the Tradition (*Hadith*), or theological treatises.

⁹ A poetic expression which does not refer to becoming grey-haired on account of worry but here is a symbol of the irresistible and irremovable effect of love on the poet.

four of us girls, for each of whom her family has required bridewealth, there will be no conditions in your case.¹⁰ Of the four of us, the one whom you want will go with you. Marry her! Hodan turned a deaf ear to you. Abandon her!”

§ 9. Then ‘Ilmi, instead of saying, “Let me consider it,” replied to the girls’ words and said:

“If the eye catches sight of something that brings it solace and coolness
And if a human being can achieve any contentment at all in the beauty
which he beholds,
Then I have seen it in Qatra¹¹ and in the limbs of Hodan.
And yet it is through this that love entered me, butchering my soul.
Oh girls, you have touched and torn my wound.
You have buffeted the heart which I was nursing back to health.
The tinkling of the trinkets on your arms has dismayed me.
With your little smiles you lead us men astray.
Cover up your breasts, so that God may not confound you!”

§ 10. When he gave his reply to the girls, ‘Ilmi did not stop at that point, and again showed to the girls that he could never leave Hodan, even though she turned a deaf ear to him. He warned other girls whom one might expect would come to him with similar arguments, and said:

“When a mature he-camel learns how to sport with other camels and throw
them down
He is the most playful among all the livestock.
Again and again he forces down with his neck¹² the frolicking young she-
camels.
Before he is six years old if he becomes expert in dealing with them
One cannot turn him away, until his thigh weakens.
And I also cannot pluck out from my bosom the love for Ladan.¹³
I shall go with it under the tombstone.
I shall take it with me into the grave, for it is more steadfast in me than
may appear.
Do not trouble yourselves, any one of you, about me, for the heart can
never love two!”

§ 11. It was the time of the midday meal when the girls invited him. At that time he did not work during the day and used to bake bread at night. He felt like going to sleep in the house to which the girls had invited him. While he

¹⁰ I.e., he could marry any of the girls without paying bridewealth.

¹¹ A Somali woman’s name but it refers to Hodan. It is a very common Somali poetic convention to use different names for the same person or animal, especially in the case of women, camels, and horses.

¹² Reference is made here to the mating habits of camels in which the male forces the female to sit down by pressing her neck with his neck, and then copulates with her.

¹³ A woman’s name which, however, refers to Hodan; see note 11.

was asleep, Hodan came to the girls, who were both her friends and neighbors, and they said to her, "Do you recognize the man who is asleep?" Then Hodan said, "Why, how could I recognize him?"¹⁴ "It is 'Ilmi Bowndheri," they said. "Shall we wake him up for you?" Then Hodan said, "No, do not wake him." The girls said to her, "Sister, let us wake him up for you! Of all that he can see, he loves you best. He eats neither food nor anything else now, but it is possible that through seeing you he will eat something for a few days." "I am afraid," she said, "that if he sees me he will die." The girls, startled, said, "In that case do not wake him up, and leave him alone."

§ 12. Once Hodan had left, 'Ilmi woke up and the girls said to him, "Oh 'Ilmi, Hodan came to us, and then went away." Then, reproaching himself on account of having missed Hodan through sleep, he said:

"Evil is the sleep at noon; alas, what made me go to sleep?

Unless there is a curse on me, what else has made me miss Hodan?"

§ 13. When 'Ilmi, with his poems and everything else, found nothing but despair, and when Hodan had not come into his arms, he gave up the work at Berbera, and left it without having been dismissed. At that time he was angry with Hodan. Although one might suppose that she had some affection for him, yet, as has been mentioned before, she was a girl much devoted to her family. She could not bring herself to oppose her family when they rejected 'Ilmi. She became to 'Ilmi like a wall which would not budge.

§ 14. Then he went away to Zeilah, saying this:

"As if you were my cloak and my kilt¹⁵ which I had cut for myself

And as if you could rescue me from the pit of the Other World¹⁶ and death
Every new day, when I wake up it is for you that I gird myself.¹⁷

And wherever I sit down I draw signs on the ground.¹⁸

¹⁴ These words seem to suggest that either she could not see him clearly or that his appearance had changed very much.

¹⁵ The word "cloak" attempts to render the Somali word *go'* which is a piece of sheeting wrapped around the body and constitutes the traditional dress of men in the nomadic interior; normally men wear two pieces, wrapping one around the loins and legs and another around the shoulders. The word "kilt" refers to a kind of skirt, cut out of one piece of cloth, also worn by men but much longer than its Scottish equivalent. Here the image suggests the closeness of the poet to his beloved, who seems as near to him as his own clothes.

¹⁶ I.e., grave, which is viewed as the gate to the Other World. To rescue or stop a person from entering it would mean to protect him against death.

¹⁷ "It is for you that I gird myself" is a common poetic expression which means "It is for your sake that I set out on a journey or errand." It often implies that the purpose of setting out is to obtain wealth.

¹⁸ Literally, "holes in the ground." It is an old Somali custom to draw lines or make holes in the ground with a stick and such signs usually have no particular meaning, except that they indicate that the person is deep in thought or is worried or perplexed. Note that when casting horoscopes from the beads of the Muslim rosary (a practice called *faal*) Somalis sometimes work out the permutations with a stick on the sand.

Oh Hodan 'Abdi, why did I not break away from you, on account of wrongs and indignities?

You are a wall. What then has put me by your side?"

§ 15. In 1936 love gripped 'Imi with great strength, and at that time he was in Zeilah. His love for Hodan turned into sickness. He refused to lift a finger or to take food. This became even worse when he heard that Hodan was asked for in marriage and that she was going to be given as wife to another man. Then he could not endure it and looked for someone who might inform him whether the news was true or not. At that time, when ships went from Zeilah to Berbera they used to spend one night on the journey, and the cars which passed through Hargeisa used to spend two nights on the journey.¹⁹

§ 16. One night or two nights was too long for 'Imi. It seemed to him like two years. Then he said to himself: "Of all beings to whom you can hand a message, the wind is the swiftest." He then spoke to the wind as if it were a person and said:

"Talking winds are perhaps something that is new to the world,
Yet you must swear²⁰ to me by the Everlasting One that you will record²¹
my words.

I would have handed a bundle of letters to the sailing ships
But they would tarry several nights on their journey and I have decided on
you for the sake of speed.

You must swear to me by the Everlasting One that you will record my
words.

You pass above the ground, where there are settlements.

You never stop running, as if you were always on God's errands.

You do not get weary, it is only those who have life who wear out.

It is said that other men stepped forward to claim the girl on whom my
mind was set.

You must swear by the Everlasting One that you will carry my words
through the air.

It was at Daaroole²² that I knew the remedy for my love.²³

¹⁹ It is an old Somali custom to measure the duration of a journey by the number of nights which the traveller spends between the points of departure and destination.

²⁰ Literally, "I adjure you." It is a common Somali custom to insist that someone should take an oath to carry out a particular command or request. The expression "I adjure you," i.e., "I shall cause you to take an oath," is often used merely in the sense of "I earnestly request you" or "I solemnly command you."

²¹ Literally, "imprint" or "stamp."

²² An archaic name for the central part of Berbera, used by the people from the interior. Etymologically it means "place which has stone or brick houses."

²³ Literally, "I knew a remedy." This line is obscure in the original owing to the probable distortion of the word *dawo* (remedy, medicine) into *daawi*, which is a poetic coined word. The translation provided can be inferred from the general tenor of the poem. The sight of his beloved was thus the remedy for the lovesick poet.

Neither a bad road nor a screen partition²⁴ can stop you.
 Muuse²⁵ who knows the country knows the way to her.
 There is a man who is committing injustice²⁶ — and in this world it is only
 wealth that matters.
 Tell her that even walls and stone houses would have felt the pain.
 Tell her that termite hills would have sprouted green grass on account of
 my words.”

§ 17. The answer turned out to be that Hodan was already married and given away to a man. On the same day as he received the reply, his friends were jesting with him and said, “Ilmi, we have heard that the girl is already married. Well then, in that case is Hodan still a cause of distress to you?” Then, explaining to his friends that even now at the mention of her he felt most grieved and loved no other girl but Hodan, he said:

“As camels who have become thirsty after they have been grazing in the
 Haud²⁷ for a long time
 And who are stopped in front of the well,²⁸ while a youth sings to them
 And while the word ‘hoobay’²⁹ is chanted and voices interchanged,
 So I grow wild with impatience when you say ‘Hodan’.
 What seems to you so simple, to me brings grief and woe.
 Until people tread earth into her grave,³⁰ I shall not give her up.
 Rapt in a deceitful trance³¹ I thought I was sleeping with her
 But it was only that a djinn counterfeited the image of her sister.³²”

²⁴ I.e., a mat partition used for screening off the place where people sleep.

²⁵ One of the poet’s friends mentioned in § 1. The poet tells the wind to inquire from Muuse for directions where to find Hodan.

²⁶ Most probably these words refer to Hodan’s suitor.

²⁷ A plateau which stretches over the southern part of the northern region of the Somali Republic towards the Ogaden.

²⁸ “In front of the well”: This phrase is not present in the original but its sense is implied in the context. When camels are brought to the well they usually have to wait until the herders draw the water and pour it into troughs. During these activities camel herders sing special traditional work songs which the camels know very well and which thus excite even further their longing for water.

²⁹ “Hoobay” is a part of the phrase “hoobayow-hoobee” which is sung in work songs at the beginning and as a refrain after each line. It has no particular meaning, but in this context would be immediately associated in the mind of the listener with the familiar scene of camels being watered at the well.

³⁰ Literally, “until people pound her with their feet.” It is customary for the mourners at a Somali funeral to tread the earth on the grave so as to harden its surface. This poetic phrase simply means “until she is dead and buried.”

³¹ The word “trance” corresponds to Somali *hammo* which has a wide range of meanings. It refers to deep or obsessive thoughts and powerful longings of such intensity as to bring about complete oblivion of the world around.

³² “Counterfeited the image of her sister”: Literally, “put an awning above the one with whom she shared a mother” or “obscured with a shadow the one with whom she shared a mother.” The meaning of this line is not very clear in the original and our

I aimed to snatch her by her hand — the place beside me was empty.
 When I discovered that I was striving but that no one was there
 I woke up abruptly, having tossed from side to side.
 I rumbled my bed, like a prowling lion
 I attacked and pounded the bedclothes as if it were they who had caused my
 deprivation.
 I lowered my face, like a hero against whom men have combined.
 I was humbled like a boy from whom a herd of camels, which belonged to
 the clan, were looted.
 I felt disgraced like a woman to whom the words 'I divorce you' had been
 spoken.
 It is degrading to yearn for what you cannot have.
 Alas, alas, what a disaster has come upon me!"

§ 18. It is likely that he who hears this story will ask himself why Hodan was refused to 'Ilmi. Now what is indispensable for him is that he should go back to the bonds of life among the Somalis of the old days and to the customs they had concerning marriage. Let us return to 'Ilmi. He used to live with his family who stayed in a place in the country. When a man was young or adolescent, his family needed him then very much. A young man is a pole on which the whole family is supported. Also, there was another thing: all the time when that boy or man was helping the family and was staying with them he had a share in the wealth of the family. If he went away from them, it is possible that they might refuse to give him the share which he had in the wealth of the family, or would not allow him to take it. This would be done in order that the family could build up its strength and wealth.

§ 19. When 'Ilmi left his family and went to Hargeisa, he became a man who owned nothing in the wealth of his family, and no longer counted as a member. Later, when he fell in love with Hodan, he went to her family and said, "Let the girl be given to me in marriage." "Have you any wealth?" they asked him. At that time 'Ilmi knew that he could not ask his family whom he had left for wealth; they would not give it to him. "I shall work," he then said; "let her be kept for me, as I love her." "We cannot make a promise to you," they said, "but we will see."

§ 20. 'Ilmi then tried to work hard so that he could get Hodan. It was bad luck, however, that he turned into a person who had no resourcefulness and who was not backed by wealth. He became a man whom love overpowered with suffering, of which no one took any notice. He became a man overwhelmed by the situation in which he found himself in the world. He was a man who was confronted with a disaster and could not escape from it.

translation is of a conjectural nature. The poetic image seems to be as follows: The djinn obtained an image of a girl who was either the sister of Hodan or closely resembled her and then cast a shadow over it so that it could be mistaken for the poet's beloved. He put the phantom in the poet's bed in order to deceive and torment him.

§ 21. When Hodan went to another man's arms, he left Zeilah and went to Djibouti, where he died in 1938; may God have mercy on him! The last words which he said were:

"I am taking leave of this our Somali land.

I am going away from confusion among men and defenselessness among women."

*Variants of the Story*³³

As Somali is an unwritten language it is only natural that no contemporary documents are available which would record 'Ilmi's poems or the events of his life. However, the oral traditions, which are the only source of information, are, generally speaking, quite consistent, except for small details in which a tendency to exaggeration can be detected. We have met a young man of about twenty-five, living in Hargeisa, who maintained that a very large number of girls came to 'Ilmi, offering to marry him. According to him there might have been as many as a hundred of them, coming even from other towns such as Djibouti, Harar, Dire Dawa, and from the nomadic interior. To attract 'Ilmi's attention they uncovered their breasts when they paraded before him. This sensational aspect of the story, which is not confirmed by Baadi'awstume's version, might be due to a literal interpretation of the poet's words "cover up your breasts" (see § 9), which were more likely to refer to a low décolletage than anything else, in view of the puritanical atmosphere of the northern region, especially thirty years ago. It is also possible that the phrase was simply a

³³ Since this article was submitted for publication, its authors had the opportunity of collecting further materials on the poet and his works. B. W. Andrzejewski, during his recent visit to Berbera, met Musa Farah (Muuse Faarah), a kinsman of 'Ilmi Bowndheri who was his close friend and companion for many years. He is mentioned in the poem given in § 16 of the text of the translation, as "Muuse who knows the country." Musa Farah's account of the life of the poet differs in certain details concerning his travels, but the main discrepancy is in the place and date of his death. According to Musa Farah, 'Ilmi Bowndheri died in Berbera in 1941 and not in Djibouti in 1938. Moreover, he gives as the sole reason for 'Ilmi's inability to pay his bridewealth, the economic difficulties of his family, who were, however, always well disposed towards the poet. Musa Farah remembers many poems which are not included in this article and of those which are, his versions often differ from those of H̄irsi Baadi'awstume. Mohamed Farah Abdillahi had the good fortune to meet another friend of the poet, Yusuf Ismail (Yuusuf Ismaa'iil), a seaman from the Burao district of the Somali Republic, who remembers some of the poems. His versions again differ in some details from both those of Musa Farah and H̄irsi Baadi'awstume. It is hoped that the new material will form the subject of another publication.

poetic expression brought about by the rigid requirements of alliteration.

The poems of 'Ilmi given in this article constitute only a small part of the number preserved in oral tradition, and we appeal to anyone who has access to them to record them on tape or write them down, with as many annotations as possible. One of his longer poems, not given in our text, is available in an excellent English translation with annotations in *A Tree for Poverty* by Margaret Laurence, pp. 40-44 (see Bibliography).

Reasons for the Popularity of 'Ilmi Bowndheri

In assessing the great popularity of 'Ilmi Bowndheri, we must first of all state that his poetry has all the positive qualities of style and language which are generally appreciated by the Somali public. We have ascertained this by questioning people directly and by comparing his style and diction with that of Somali poets of undisputed fame.

Most of his metaphors and similes, though original, are drawn from the same sources as those of such renowned Somali poets as Raage Ugaas, Maḥammed 'Abdille Ḥasan, Qamaan Bulḥan, and Salaan 'Arrabey. They are taken from the life of the nomadic interior and the natural scenery of the country; images depicting camels, milk vessels, domestic utensils, traditional clothes and ornaments, the sky, the wind, and the rain always stir the artistic imagination of the Somali public, even in towns.

The supernatural element, which is appreciated in the poems composed in the classical tradition, is also found in 'Ilmi's poems, and the same applies to the images which he draws from anatomy and the functioning of the human body. His poetic diction is enriched with general philosophical observations about life, again in the established tradition, thus adding intellectual content to those artistic effects which appeal to the sensory imagination.

Above all 'Ilmi Bowndheri is praised for the beauty of his language (a vague notion, but frequently used in Somali in various contexts) and this he shares with all the other Somali poets who achieved fame in their society.

In addition to the characteristics we have described, he owes his fame to the fact that he became, probably without knowing it himself, the mouth-piece of a powerful social trend which was beginning to change the pattern of marriage in Somali society and is still in progress. When peace came in 1920 after the War of the Dervishes, the northern Somali towns began

slowly to grow and new opportunities for employment opened up. With urbanization, motor transport, trade, and the expansion of government administration, a new way of life developed whose ideals differed considerably from those of the nomadic interior. It was now possible for many men to earn enough money to be completely independent of their clan. Such men, if they wished, could marry without having to ask the clan elders for help in gathering enough livestock or money for the bride-wealth. In the subsistence economy of the nomadic interior, girls were an asset to their parents as they looked after the sheep and goats, but in towns they were often a burden; it was not customary to send them out to work and in any case employment was difficult to find. Because of this some parents would demand less bridewealth and it was much easier for a man to find a wife. In the urban environment love now often came to be regarded as the most important reason for marrying, and economic and clan considerations were pushed into the background. The fate of 'Ilmi Bowndheri became a symbol of the cruelty which the old dispensation inflicted on many young lovers. Though not a man of public affairs, he became the spokesman of social reform.

He expressed what many people wanted to say but lacked the ability and the courage to defy the established, traditional view of love and marriage. He said it in a poetic form which was aesthetically acceptable to the most refined tastes and now had to be taken seriously even by those who were hostile towards the sentiments which he represented.

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