

Somalia
in Word
and Image

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SOMALI VERBAL AND MATERIAL ARTS

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musical
poetry

^{allegorically} Those acquainted with the language and culture of the pastoral Somalis will have appreciated the preeminent, sometimes sinister role which poetry plays in Somali life and thought.¹ Whereas in the industrialized West, poetry — and especially what is regarded as serious poetry — seems to be increasingly relegated to a marginal place in society, Somali oral verse is central to Somali life, involved as it is in the intimate workings of people's lives. Indeed, the one feature which unfailingly emerges even from a casual observation of Somali society is the remarkable influence of the poetic in the Somali cultural and political scene. The Somalis are often described as a "nation of bards" whose poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life.

In seeking to account for the unusual hold of the poetic art on the Somalis, British and Italian social anthropologists and folklorists would look to environmental factors for clues. The life of Somali nomads, it is said, is a life of wandering and danger, devoted as it is to eking out a living in a demanding environment. In the great boredom and bleakness of their surroundings, the theory goes, the Somali nomads turn to their poetry, the one thing that does not cost them anything and provides them with drama and entertainment. According to this view, without the twin inspiration of their faith and verse, the Somalis would waste themselves in fury and desperation.

Storeroom of lyrics
(in search of comparative
material)

Drama-like
poems

Admittedly, that is a quaint argument, though it may have some merits. Environmental bleakness per se hardly makes for poetry and poetic creativity. To interpret the lyric verse of the Somali pastoralists merely as a survival mechanism, a feeble and self-pitying cry designed to mitigate life's cruelties to man, is to miss the significance of the poetic craft in Somali society.

musical
arts

What, then, makes the poetry such a pervasive force in Somali society? To the Somalis the question is not so difficult to answer: poetry is the medium whereby an individual or a group can present a case most persuasively. The pastoralist poet, to borrow a phrase, is the public-relations man of the clan, and through his craft he exercises a powerful influence in clan affairs. Unlike Western poetry, which appears to be primarily a concern of a group of professionals dealing with, more often than not, a subject matter intended for the members of what seems a small, highly literate section of society, Somali pastoral verse is a living art affecting almost every aspect of life. Its functions are versatile, concerned not only with matters of art and aesthetics but also with questions of social sig-

poetic
musical
poetry

nificance. It illuminates culture, society, and history.

In addition to its value as the literary and aesthetic embodiment of the community, Somali poetry is a principal medium of mass communication, playing a role similar to that of the press and television in Western societies. Somali poets thus, like Western journalists and newsmen, have a great deal to say about politics and the acquisition of political power. Because it is the language and the vehicle of politics, the verse that Somali poets produce is an important source of Somali history, just as the printed and televised word performs a similar function in the West.

mass media

It is the duty, for example, of the Somali pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize in verse the dominant issues of the age—in short, to record and immortalize in verse the history of his people. And since the poet's talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts, and actions of his age.

poets
reflection

The widespread community acceptance of the validity and efficacy of the poetic medium in social relations seems to stem from pastoral notions of feud and vendetta, especially the institution of *godob*. Among the various components that constitute the *godob* institution is the concept of speech vendetta—the notion that certain kinds of oratorical forms can be used for slander. To borrow a pastoralist phrase, poetic orations serve the potent task of either “violating or ennobling the soul” of a person or a group. When poetic formulations are used to wound someone's honor, a case of *godob* has been generated. The resulting grievance, if it is not redressed or offset by a counter poetic formulation, becomes grounds for violent hostility between persons or groups. And indeed, poetic slander has been the source of many a lethal interclan feud, for an insult or slander in poetry is considered in pastoral sanctions to have the same effect on the victim as a physical assault.

By the same token, the power of poetry can be (and is) used to reconcile two parties who are on the brink of war. Thus, in pastoral ethos, poetry is both the instrument to precipitate and sustain feuds and a principal means to bring feuds under control.

poets' role
reconcile
control

The second point making for the power of poetry in pastoral culture concerns the monopolistic nature of the craft. In pastoral society as in others, a relatively small number of people are endowed with the talent to compose high-quality verse—artistic genius hardly comes in abundant supply. As a result, the inaccessibility of the art to most members of the population makes it a scarce commodity, the exclusive tool of a favored few. The few, aware of the high demand of their skill and the privileged status which their trade confers on them, use their talents to maximize their social and political influence. Hence, the pastoral bard occupies a prominent place in society. Lord of the desert and the dominant voice of the clan, he is envied by his less endowed kinsmen. It is his coveted task to articulate and register in verse the concerns of the

community and the noteworthy deeds of his people.

Given its regular features of alliterative and metrical structure, Somali pastoral verse is easy to memorize, far more so than prose can be. The significance of this fact is easy to grasp if we bear in mind that in an oral culture where writing is unknown, except by a few roving holy men, the only libraries of reference materials men have are their memories. Thus, the events which are truly memorable in clan affairs are committed to verse, first so as to underscore their importance, and second, so they can better be remembered. In this way versification enables the pastoralists not only to transmit information across considerable distances but also to record it for posterity. Hence, Somali pastoral verse functions both as a social communicator and as an archival repertoire.

Somali society is largely nomadic, with people constantly on the move to find fresh pasture and water for their herds of camel, cattle, sheep, and goats. That necessitates frequent dispersals and comingling of people as the clans respond to the erratic patterns of yearly rainfall. At least once every other year, when climate permits, the clans reassemble to settle outstanding issues, and often to hold poetic contests. Each clan presents its best poets and their retinue of poem memorizers (*Hafida yaal*), whose task is to disseminate and preserve for posterity the texts of the master poets who do verbal battle with opponent poets of rival clans.

The contest is overseen by a hoary panel of elderly arbitrators universally recognized for their mastery of the art of literary criticism and for rendering impartial decisions. Prizes are given to the best half-dozen or so poets, and the prizes offered on a particular occasion depend on the size and wealth of the assembling clans, ranging from a token gift such as a dagger or a piece of cloth to half a dozen camels. Needless to say, the latter represents considerable financial reward. But the greatest incentive for pastoral poets to compose stems from the honor and prestige that they derive from the exercise of their talents.

The change over the past forty years of a great many Somalis from nomadic to urban life and the consequent growth of written literature have not diminished the appeal of the oral arts. Contrary to the common misconception that an oral literature disappears as soon as a written one makes its appearance, the writing of Somali for the first time in 1972 has not adversely affected the oral traditions. If anything, it has expanded their influence. To cite a few examples, the word *layli*, meaning school "homework" in the urban context, is the word for "breaking" a young camel for burden bearing. The lover in a modern drama based on a written text says that because of unrequited love, he is stricken with *dukaan*, the disease which camels in drought suffer from. Similarly, the singer of a popular song likens the tender sentiment which he has toward the lady he loves to what, in the metaphor of oral poetry, a camel feels toward her suckling baby: "Groan in agony of love," he sings, "like a camel whose baby is unjustly sequestered away from her." For her part, the woman poet admonishes her suitor to give her "fine pastures, and

memorize
oral

nomadic
cam, cow
goats

competition

prizes

urban
laborer
poets

metaphor

pat her gently on the udder so she'd give milk." The jealous husband, in his bitter sarcasm and ridicule, points out to his wayward wife that it is only the "camel which enjoys being milked by two men at the same time, and that not only in all seasons, but solely when she is in full lactation." "Anything else of the feminine gender shared by two men is soon debased," he moralizes.

The term *warfin* (express mail delivery) is derived from the same root as *waraf* (slingshot), the old weapon used to pelt the destructive birds which peck on camels' humps. Similarly, the scholar acknowledges a debt every time he uses the word *raadraa* (to trace something), which is used to denote the word *research*. The word is employed by the nomads when tracking lost animals or when tracing stock thieves. The Marxists, too, have a debt to the nomads for appropriating *hugaanka*, a pastoralist term for leading a camel by the rope, as their modern term for their bureau of ideology (Hugaanka Ideologiyadal).

Moreover, the introduction in urban centers of modern media of communication such as the radio and motor transport have greatly enlarged the reach of oral poetry. Somalia has two radio stations, one in the city of Hargeisa in the north and the other in Mogadishu in southern Somalia. In addition, there are weekly Somali services on radio of foreign capitals, for example, in Cairo, Rome, London, Moscow, and Peking. Thanks to Japanese and Korean mass production of cheap, portable transistor shortwaves, which have made their way to the Somali countryside, the nomads tune in regularly to these radio stations to keep in touch with world developments and to avail themselves of literary productions broadcast especially from the Somali national radios and the BBC. Pastoral poets participate in these programs by sending their works with poem-memorizers, who travel on lorries to the cities, where the poems are tape-recorded, evaluated, and, if deserving, broadcast over radio. Thus, it is a common, if amusing, thing to come upon a group of nomads huddled excitedly over a short-wave transistor, engaged in a heated discussion of the literary merits of poems that have just been broadcast while they keep watch over their camel herds grazing nearby.

Somali poetry, surely one of the principal achievements of the Somalis, has at long last received the kind of serious academic attention that it rightfully deserves. What so far has escaped the notice of foreign scholars—and hence makes this project distinctive—is the intimate connection between Somali visual and poetic arts, enabling these two elements of the culture to nourish and sustain each other as they enhance the Somalis' daily experience. The connection between the two realms of art stems from a complex set of interactive, underlying principles (moral, philosophical, aesthetic, utilitarian) which shapes the creation, use, and philosophy of both. Somali artists (both visual and poetic) do not create just for the sake of creating or for pleasure; they create for a reason. The occasion that prompts, for example, a poet to compose verse is socially significant, e.g., reconciling two hostile clans which are on the brink of

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war, through a poetic appeal. The best works of pastoral masters such as the Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan (the mad mullah of British history), Salaan Arrabay, Qamaan Bulhan, and Ali Duuh is a committed verse. The Sayyid composed his 120 pieces (which the Somalis consider immortal) to appeal to his fellow countrymen to support his nationalist struggle against British colonialism, to mobilize public opinion for the cause, to discredit (through poetic diatribes) his enemies, and to enhance his own position. In short, he used his poetry as a formidable political weapon. Salaan Arrabay's best work, "O Kinsman, Stop the War," was, as the title implies, a poetic appeal to bring an end to a chronic virulent feud between two rival sections of his Isaaq clan. Tradition has it that the poet on his horse stood between the massed opposing forces and, with a voice charged with drama and emotion, chanted the better part of the day until the men, smitten with the force of his delivery, dropped their arms and embraced one another.

This and countless other examples (which space will not permit us to go into) illustrate the principle that while a pastoral poet may occasionally compose to give expression to a private inspiration, his ultimate concern is utilitarian: to inform, persuade, or convince a body of kinsmen of the merits of whatever task he seeks to accomplish.

As with the poet, so it is with the maker of material objects. Each carved or woven article, as the collection plainly demonstrates, is never an end in itself, but is rather a means to a larger cause or truth. Each object in the gallery of woodwork and woven material—the porridge bowls, spoons, milk jugs, baskets, headrests, camel bells, and watering troughs—represents a specific utilitarian function. Because their primary objective is functional, they are simple in design, lacking the ornate and complex intricacy of art for pleasure only, yet possessing an elegance and a grace in their simplicity. Even the large variety of decorative necklaces and beads which on surface appearance seem to have been created purely for aesthetic effects are in fact designed to make an important commentary on social relations. Thus, the kind of necklace a woman wears signifies her age and social status. As a child, she wears one kind of beads or necklace; as a teenager, another; as a young woman of marriage age, still another; and finally, as a grown woman with children, still another set. A woman wearing a ponderous set of golden beads wants to show to the world not only the wealth of her lineage but also the costly bridewealth a prospective candidate for her marital hand would have to provide; while by another set of beads, she signifies her willingness to entertain men with sexual favors.

If the utilitarian principle underlies the creation and appeal of Somali poetic and visual arts, their value in society rests on different but mutually reinforcing functions. The power of poetry, as we have seen, rests on its regulatory function of the political relations among the clans, that of visual art on mediating social relations; that is to say, on formalizing the metaphor by which social behavior is legitimated. For example, the vast

majority of Somali artifacts whose original justification lies in their function as weapons, such as daggers, spears, axes, and other metal tools, are made by an artisan clan whose members specialize in making tools. Members of this clan occupy a superior economic position because of their monopolistic hold on industry, but a low social position which prohibits intermarriage with other clans. Their knowledge and skill in making tools are a badge of their social standing: thus, in a curious way economic success limits social status. The underlying rationale of this seemingly irrational sanction is to discourage the kind of grasping greed and unyielding acquisitiveness which accompanies the accumulation of material goods referred to as capitalism in the West. Thus, Somali visual art reflects the egalitarian anticapitalist temper of pastoralism in the way that oral poetry performs a similar function. To speak of the anticapitalist temper of pastoralism is not to suggest that the nomads are indifferent to material possessions and the power and prestige which they confer. The nomads cherish their few belongings. But in a sparse material culture, an untempered spirit of acquisitiveness and the accompanying mentality of every man for himself would undermine the processes of mutual help and collective action necessary to survival in the desert.

By traditional sanction, this clan of craftsmen and artisans is barred from composing verse; this principle is expressed by the proverb "To possess two good things is to rob your brother." These craftsmen possess one good thing: as principal artisans, they wield vast economic power. To keep them from gaining political power also (and hence becoming robbers), they are barred by social norm from composing verse, the key instrument to sociopolitical power. Members of this clan, therefore, attach themselves as clients to noble clans who have the political power to protect them. Poets from noble lineages compose verse on behalf of the artisans to immortalize their contribution to the culture, while the artisans make the tools and crafts that the noble clans need to meet daily necessities.

In the south of Somalia, among the sedentary population, a related but significantly different oral tradition has developed, which reflects the more hierarchic social structure of this region. A feature of it is the technique of formulaic praise-singing, in honor of individuals or families, by professional performers, known as *laashin*. It typically occurs at public festivals or weddings. Often it is combined with the communal chanting of refrains, which accompanies processions celebrating particular groups. *Laashins* also function as repositories of traditional history, since allusions to their patrons' ancestral glories are an important part of their performance. They carry their art into the modern context by performing at political meetings or occasions such as the opening of a school, and introduce the topics of the day into their performances alongside allusions to events in past history.