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**WOMEN'S VOICES IN A MEN'S WORLD: THE POWER OF
SONG IN THE RECENT HISTORY OF NORTHERN SOMALI
SOCIETY**

by

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WOMEN'S VOICES IN A MEN'S WORLD:
THE POWER OF SONG IN THE RECENT HISTORY
OF NORTHERN SOMALI SOCIETY

by Lidwien Kapteijns (Wellesley College),
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Husbands are stronger than we are. We cannot fight back, but we can defend ourselves verbally. Directly a woman cannot speak up or protest and she has no time for it either. Women pass this wisdom (murti) down from generation to generation. That is oral education. (Khadiija Muuse on women's oral literature)¹

Raggu, nin waliba waa hooyadii oo gambala'
Every man is his mother without a headscarf
(Axmed Caadan Cadcadleh)²

INTRODUCTION

Northern Somali society of the precolonial era was a small-scale, non-state society in which gender and age were the major axes of inequality.³ The patriarchal nature of this society was evident in the structural inequality between men and women, while its age bias manifested itself in the social disabilities of unmarried young men. In the five crucial areas of areas of (i) access to resources, the division of labor, the exercise of formal political and religious authority, the accumulation of wealth and power, and the system of moral values by which each member of society was judged, age and gender were major factors of differentiation and inequality. A pastoral woman, for example, could not establish or independently head a household, the basic unit of production and reproduction in Somali society.

¹Maxamed Cabdillaahi Riraash, RTD, TV Program 2. This series of TV programs for Radio and television Djibouti in 1988 and 1989 will be referred to as RTD followed by the number of the program.

²RTD 6.

³The following outline characterization of the social structure of precolonial and early colonial northern Somalia is based on Kapteijns, "Women and the Somali Pastoral Tradition." While the British established a colonial state in the region in the beginning of the twentieth century, many social arrangements changed only gradually.

While society acknowledged her work as crucial, her labor and her fertility always served the household to which she belonged. She could not exercise formal political or religious authority, could not accumulate wealth in her own name, and was judged, because of her gender, as morally and intellectually inferior to men.

In pastoral northern Somalia young men too were structurally unequal to adult males and elders, but only temporarily, until they would establish, through marriage, their own households. Until then they were assigned the hardest work (that of raiding, warfare and the dry-season care of camels), but saw the fruit of their labor largely go to their fathers. They were obliged to defer to their fathers and close paternal relatives, as they could not get married without the latter's approval and material support. They were not yet taken seriously either politically or religiously, and were as a group looked upon as hot-headed, immature and irresponsible.

Marriage was a crucial mile-stone for both women and men. It allowed young men to finally become full members of their society, in charge of their own herds and household, commanding the labor of wife (wives), children and other younger relatives, and able to accumulate wealth and political and religious authority in their own names. A wife too could finally begin to accumulate power and wealth of her own, but only by giving birth to, and investing in her children, in particular her sons. Her future status and wellbeing was to depend to a large extent on her husband (who, however, could divorce her) and her sons who were taught to look upon their mothers with an almost sacred sense of responsibility.

The structural inequalities of northern Somali society were real and informed the lives of all its members. However, like any status quo, this one too was the object of continuous and dynamic interaction, negotiation and struggle between various social groups and their uniquely individual members. It is one of the central objectives of this essay to make audible the voices of one of these two unequal groups, that of women. For women's voices, preserved, however incompletely, in song, provide evidence both for women's social inequality and for their feelings and strategies towards that inequality.

Two theoretical insights, both derived from recent anthropology, are relevant in this context. In her critique of "the romance of resistance," Lila Abu-Lughod rejected the "tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Abu-Lughod 42). She instead proposed to use evidence of resistance as a "diagnostic of power," turning Foucault's thesis, "where there is power, there is resistance," on its head, by arguing, "where there is resistance, there is power." Listening to the voices of the socially disadvantaged should allow us to understand power relations in detail, to "locate their positions, [and] find out their points of application and the methods used" (Foucault in Abu-Lughod 42).

While Abu-Lughod attempted to articulate a method, or better, an objective for the study of the voices of the subordinate, Brinkley Messick emphasized how difficult it is in a patriarchal society even to hear the voices of women. "In sexually polarized societies the barriers imposed on self-expression by the available forms of articulation are great..." (Messick 216). This difficulty of hearing women, he argued, "goes beyond the problem of male supervision of what is said, and beyond that of the presence of male ethnographers, and is centered instead on the fundamental conditions of speaking in a male structured idiom and articulate world." In this context Messick proposed the concept of "subordinate discourse," a form of expression that co-exists with a dominant ideology, from which it nevertheless differs "with respect to both power and epistemology" (Messick 217). One characteristic of such subordinate discourse is, Messick argues, that it does not represent an explicitly and publicly elaborated ideology of resistance, so that it usually remains sufficiently unnoticed by the dominant order to avoid suppression. Thus Messick interpreted the weaving ritual of Algerian women weavers of the past as a non-verbal, subordinate "commentary upon the male-perspective world" (217).

The Somali scholar Axmed Cali Abokor reached a somewhat similar conclusion in his "Somali Pastoral Work Songs: The Poetic Voice of the Politically Powerless" (1990). Abokor argues that Somali oral literature (or orature) has a "normative hierarchy of prestige genres" that is based not so much on the formal and aesthetic characteristics of the genre, but on the social status of the poet and the composition of the audience (Axmed Cali Abokor 1990:41). Thus the superior genres are those authored by, and performed before adult males and elders; of these the gabay, dedicated to men's philosophical concerns, is most prestigious. According to Axmed Cali, "Oratory among women and youth is played down and considered by male elders as immature and unable to contribute anything substantial" (37). In Somali society most tasks requiring muscular and physical strength are assigned to men, he argues:

But even the act of oratory, which does not require strength of muscle, is deprived from women, who are not allowed to express their feelings and thoughts as men do

Specifically, women are not socially permitted to talk about anything concerning the relations between men and women (31-32).

Similarly, youth are not allowed to express anything that might undermine the authority of adults (48). In reality young men and women did express themselves in a variety of ways. However, the cultural power elite regarded their genres, in particular those falling into the category of heeso (songs), as trivial, simply because they were the authors. In the eyes of the male elite, the nature of the occasion (for example, work or dance), the audience (i.e. the absence of adult males), and the at times less formalized form (allowing more improvisation and repetition)

further underlined the lack of social significance and artistic value of young men's and women's songs.

Axmed Cali's study of Somali worksongs explicitly criticized the adult male pastoralists' dismissal of songs as trivial:

It is the thesis of this essay, however, that heeso are not trivial at all, but offer a medium of expression for youth and women on topics they are not permitted to deal with in gabay form, from which they are excluded (42).

Women, he argued, and one could make a similar argument for young men:

employ the singing situations as forums to which social conflicts are brought, discussed, and solved without undermining social relationships (136).

It is one of the objectives of this essay to study women's songs as sources for a diagnostic of power relations in the northern Somali society of the recent past and to examine the nature of women's social commentary upon a male-dominated world. I have therefore examined the body of oral texts available to me with three goals in mind. First, to outline the society's dominant cultural values with regard to proper or ideal girl-, woman-, and wifeness. Secondly, to examine the voices of women as a social commentary upon these dominant values and the power structure they represent. Thirdly, to examine these oral texts for information about the power relations between older and younger men in so far as these involve competition for the access to, and control over women.

For the first task I have turned to a body of Somali poetic and prose texts recorded, published and sometimes translated by several generations of Somali and non-Somali scholars (see bibliography). For the second task, I have drawn largely on sources I collected in Djibouti in 1989, where I was kindly allowed membership in the cultural team associated with the Ministry of Culture and Information and consisting of scholars and literary experts such as Ismail Teni, Maxamed Cabdillaahi Riraash, Cali Muusa Ciye, and Cumar Macallin. The texts were transcribed by Mariam Cumar Cali and myself (see bibliography under oral sources). For the third task, I have turned to young men's work songs published by scholars such as Axmed Artan Xange and Axmed Cali Abokor and on a genre of prose stories which I propose to call the Caadan-gal stories. Nin Caadan-gal ah was a term used around the turn of the century for Somali men "trading on Aden." The young men who left the pastoral economy and headed for towns and trade-centers such as Aden, Berbera and later Djibouti were often unmarried and in search of bridewealth for a bride back home. Several such adventurers became the informants and collaborators of Austrian and German linguists who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, recorded their repertoire of proverbs, poems, and in particular stories. While the publications resulting from this linguistic and ethnographic research (Czermak, Jahn, Reinisch, and Von Tilung), are multifaceted and complex, the voices of the unmarried young men and

their social commentary upon the status quo are emphatically present.

CULTURAL DEFINITIONS OF SOMALI WOMANHOOD

There is a Somali story called "The Pool of Intelligence," which relates how God created intelligence before he created people and animals. When he had created the latter, he put intelligence in a pool and invited all animals and humans to come and drink. The animals came, but only sniffed the water. Women drank, but jumped up again to go and do something else almost immediately. Only men sat down to really drink. That is why, the story has it: "Domestic and wild animals sniff everything. Women have intelligence, but no intelligent woman sticks to a decision. Men, however, contemplate everything well."⁴ This belief "that biological differences between females and males bring about differences in intelligence" (Axmed Cali Abokor 1990: 45) was a feature of the dominant gender ideology of northern Somali society. The relevant biological differences, it was said (Interview 3), were dhiiggii, dhalashii iyo caanihii (menstruation blood, giving birth, and mother's milk). Thus the proverb says kal caano galeen, kas ma gelin, "no intelligence can reside in a chest that has produced milk."⁵ While men are biologically predisposed to be rational, unemotional, steadfast, courageous, tough and strong, women are by their nature irrational, emotional, impressionable and capricious, fearful, soft and weak. Women are, according to this reasoning, moreover associated with a powerful sexuality which they cannot easily resist, as is illustrated by the widely known story of the legendary Moniso. The latter was a female imaam or prayer leader of the past. She lost her lofty position, however, when she was tempted by the devil whose virile member, emerging from below the dirt on the path to the mosque, she could not resist (Interview 4). A modern Somali popsong concludes, aammin dumar ma yeesho, Moniso aqoonleh shaydaan afuufay, "women cannot be trusted, Moniso knowingly allowed herself to be seduced by the devil." However, women's lack of garaad or cagli (intelligence) serves as a general justification of their social inequality and their subordination to men. Women are considered defective members of

⁴Shire Jaamac Achmed, Gabayo, 62. See Axmed Arten Xange, Sheekoxariirooyin, 71-72, 175, for another version of the same story. Compare Helander, "Gender and Gender Characteristics," 27.

⁵Compare Axmed Cali Abokor, "Somali Pastoral Work Songs," 47, kas caano galeen iyo kas ba kala dheer, "intelligence and a chest which has produced milk do not go together."

their species: Naagi waa dheri dhanla', "a woman is a pot with one side missing" (Interview 2).

Women of a pastoral background usually know the stories and proverbs concerning their alleged defective intelligence. They rarely explicitly challenge this concept, partly maybe because they believe that it is sanctioned by their religion. "God gave men [the ability to make] intelligent decisions, [to have] intelligent insights, and physical strength and power," said one informant (Interview 2). Yet her own definitions of proper womanhood included the qualities of intelligence, resourcefulness and cleverness.

Somali oral culture gives abundant and explicit information about its definitions of proper and improper girl-, woman-, and wifehood. Women should be beautiful and be born of a good and large family, in particular on their father's side (tolleh). They should be obedient to men, sexually modest before marriage and sexually faithful to their husbands after marriage. They should be competent in all women's economic tasks. They should be fertile, and in particular bear many sons. They should be good and competent mothers. They should moreover show self-restraint in food. And finally, women should be economically dependent on men. Let us look at the dominant cultural definitions of proper womanhood in more detail.

[The paper then examines the characteristics of ideal womanhood as dominant culture defines them and also as women comment upon, reinforce or criticize them in their sayings and songs. Some attention is paid to the social commentary of young men. The characteristics examined are those listed above. The paper ends with the following conclusion.]_

CONCLUSION

In a sexually polarized society, Messick argued, women confront very specific conditions of speaking (216). In Somali culture, adult men and elders had adopted a social convention that defined socially significant speech in such a way that it excluded anything said by women (and young men). Thus women were formally mute, for even though they spoke for all to hear, their voices could not be registered by the official receivers of patriarchal Somali culture.

However, Somali convention was not identical with Somali reality but an attempt at controlling and prescribing rules for that reality (see also Helander 42). On the basis of the texts examined here, one may draw three conclusions. First, even if one examines only mainstream or dominant oral literature (that is to say, if one excludes the voices which are recognizably those of women and young men), the debate (or dispute) between men and women about whose definitions of proper and improper womanhood would be accepted as the social and cultural standard was loud, funny, and while often indirect, not muted. The cultural ideal

prescribed female sexual fidelity, but oral texts reveal men's concern and anxiety about women's infidelity. The dominant social convention assigned to women less intelligence than to men, but oral texts attest to their intelligence and resourcefulness - men may call it deceit - and wit. The cultural ideal prescribed obedience for women, but oral texts give evidence of men's anxiety over their wives' discontent and sharp tongue.

Secondly, while this essay has not done full justice to the poetic and prose texts authored by young men, one can recognize their irreverent and boisterous voice in the poetic genres of guux (blues) and shubaal (watering song) and in the prose stories I have called Caadangal. Their irreverence often targeted the socially and religiously prescribed sexual unavailability of girls and married women, and their forms of expression often broke the literary taboo on sexually explicit language observed in the respected genres of adult men and elders.⁶

The third and, for this essay, most important set of conclusions, deals with the ways in which women experienced and commented upon the society in which they lived. Women were conversant with, and at least partly subscribed to the dominant cultural prescriptions for proper womanhood. Whether and to what extent they accepted or rejected these prescriptions, depended not only on personal conviction and choice but also on specific social circumstances such as wealth, family background, marital status and age. However, while the male elite of northern Somali society clung to the fiction that women did not speak and could not be heard, women indeed spoke and have continued to speak in a variety of ways and voices.

One category of cultural expression women appropriated was that associated with the supernatural, including the dream, the divination ritual called the faal, and - most relevant to this essay - the curse.⁷ As the saying has it:

Three kinds of men will not live:
who takes the wealth of orphans
who robs the livestock of the religious scholars of Harar
and who makes an old widow cry so that she curses him⁸

⁶Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan might serve as an exception to this rule.

⁷For a reference to the dream and faal, see Reinisch, Die Somali Sprache, 122-23.

⁸Reinisch, Die Somali Sprache, 251: hatana ninkii habar armali ah kaga oohiyaa, way habaartaa, u ma noolaado. Adjusted transcription.

While these forms of "speech" were considered particularly powerful in old women (or, for that matter, in old men, as women did not monopolize this category of expression), younger women too, as we saw above, powerfully expressed themselves in the curse. While curses did not necessarily follow specific poetic rules, women often cursed by employed the buraanbur, a genre that is formally very close to the men's gabay (whose lines are slightly shorter).⁹

While older women through the curse had a culturally authoritative form of expression, two other forms of expression associated with the supernatural, while socially condoned, did not have such cultural authority or approval. These were the bittikoobir for young women and the saar. The bittikoobir, as we saw above, was a culturally condoned safety-valve for the suppressed romantic and sexual feelings of unmarried girls. A girl could indeed "speak" in the bittikoobir, but as the affliction was considered a disease, her speech might be effective but not prestigious. Women, in particular married and older women, could and did express themselves through the medium of the saar possession dance and song. While only casually referred to in this essay, recent studies of the saar in Northeast Africa (Morsy, Boddy) have interpreted the saar as an alternative discourse resorted to by women who (often through no fault of their own) failed to live up to the standards of proper womanhood and the dominant gender ideology of their environment.

By appropriating the supernatural through the use of the curse, women used the shared belief system of the society and the muted male recognition of their full humanity to express themselves and bring about change. Through the curse, women succeeded in intimidating their environment. By taking recourse to the supernatural in the form of spirit possession, women, in the eyes of men and many other women, temporarily compromised their proper womanhood in order to speak and act freely and without restraint. These women accomplished at least a temporary breather from the status quo; they achieved the temporary relief.

A second way in which women found expression for their specific concerns was through their ability to demarcate a culturally acceptable "room of their own." In practical reality they accomplished this in many ways, for example through their expertise in child care and children's medicine. In orature the best example is that of the sittaat, in which women celebrated the values central to their lives, those of mother- and daughterhood. Not only did they reinforce the religious and social values of motherhood, they also indulged in being the daughters of heavenly mothers and in basking in the love of the mothers of Islam. The women of the sittaat achieved a room of their own.

⁹For genres, see Maxamed Cabdillaahi Riraash, "Somali Poetry."

Women voiced more direct challenges to the male elite and status quo in a third category of cultural expression, that of the work songs. In the pounding songs they ridiculed the gododleh (the polygamous man), the imbecile and unclean bachelor (doob), the meddlesome husband (godhgodhe), and the gluttonous father-in-law. In both the pounding songs and the songs for small children, they purposefully reversed gender values. Thus they sang the praises of the dogon (useless, cowardly) man rather than the geesi who, they mockingly argued, would break his back for his paternal kin and not for his wife and children, and who would get himself killed in war (Interviews 3 and 6). Thus they hopefully envisioned that their daughter might not get married at all, but would stay with her parents and give her labor to them (note 64), or that she would marry a weak man, who would be under her control (RTD 3). It would appear that, through work songs, women accomplished that they could openly criticize the existing gender order. This is, however, only partly true.

While the challenges expressed in women's work songs were often extremely direct, women allowed (or men insisted on) a cultural interpretation of these challenge as play and not as serious attacks on the status quo. Axmed Cali Abokor explained this social convention as follows (1990:47):

Since open arguments and confrontations between the sexes are socially avoided, women usually employ singing in working situations as appropriate forums to express their feelings, transmitting messages through their songs. Men tend not to treat the messages conveyed through this manner seriously, because they consider songs as "play" and thus socially meaningless when they are composed by women in a working situation

When women expressed themselves directly and explicitly, it must be concluded, a social convention (undoubtedly the product of earlier negotiation and struggle between the sexes) muted women's voices by defining the genre of women's work songs as socially insignificant and not serious. Through work songs, women gained a indeed a voice, but a muffled and muted one.

A fourth form of women's literary self-expression was the personal, private expression of joy, pain, jealousy and anger in the genre of the buraanbur. It is significant that Axmed Cali Abokor, during his field work, found that these were "conventionally considered personal secrets that cannot be exposed to a third party" and could therefore not be recorded by him (1990:3). Thus the most important women's genre that was not a work song was, when it dealt with gender relations and the personal problems ensuing from these, by cultural prescription confined to the privacy of the relationship between man and wife. While other subcategories of the buraanbur, the wedding buraanbur, the camel-loading buraanbur, and the sittaat were all public, the buraanbur expressing private gender-related emotion was at least officially muted. Of course in practice this

official muting could not undo the powerful impact of the poetic articulation of a woman's private emotion upon the man in question and her immediate environment. However, women's orature, even the "serious" genre of the buraanbur, as Seynab Maxamed Jaamac has pointed out,¹⁰ has suffered from this official silencing. Since it, by verdict of the male elite, never became culturally established as men's orature was, it never obtained a formal structure of memorization as did, for example, the gabay. Thus many of the voices of the Somali women of the past have been lost.

The Somali women who, through the centuries, have expressed themselves through oral literature, chose to engage their society in a continuous debate about relations between men and women. Women always had the choice (and sometimes made it) not to participate in this debate and to act either in conformance or in open confrontation with the dominant culture and the status quo. While of great significance to Somali history, the women who acted but did not speak are not the subject of this essay. Those women who did engage in orature provided a continuous and varied social commentary on the status quo, expressing their feelings and opinions about it, acting upon it, reinforcing or undermining it, and always affecting and changing it. This essay represents a provisional and modest attempt at uncovering some traces of their social commentary.

Was women's orature in the northern Somali society of the recent past a subordinate discourse as defined by Messick (217)? Its relationship to power, that is to say, the ways in which the social and cultural conventions of the male elite muted women's voices in a variety of ways, would indeed suggest this. However, epistemologically women's literary voice was perhaps not different enough from mainstream oral culture to be called subordinate in Messick's sense; for women's voices, categories of thought and concerns were acknowledged, if not echoed and paralleled, in the preoccupations, concerns and anxieties of the dominant oral culture and the orature of young men.

It is at present impossible to reconstruct the historical struggle that gave rise to the forms of expression available to the women whose voices are recorded above. At best, Somali oral sources, recorded at various times and places and notoriously hard to date, allow us glimpses of that struggle as it existed in

¹⁰Seynab Maxamed Jaamac, M.A. thesis on Somali women's buraanbur, London University, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990, and "Maansada Dumarka Soomaaliyeed: Cod la Dhagaysan La'Yahay," [Somali Women's Poetry: Voice Which Is Not Listened To], Hal-Abuur (London) 1, 1 (1993):21-23.

the countryside, in the recent past.¹¹ During the cultural flourishing Somalia experienced after independence in 1960 and in particular, after the change of regime in 1969 and the introduction of an official Somali orthography in 1972, the literary debate about gender relations found fervent expression in the new forms of literary expression such as drama, the short-story, and the novel. The disasters that have struck Somalia from the late 1970s onward have changed the fabric of Somali culture and society in ways still only incompletely understood. For many Somali women of the tortured present, the forms of expression which the rural Somali women of the past struggled to obtain will not have the same relevance as they once had. Yet current conditions have made that very struggle itself as relevant, if not more relevant than ever.

¹¹While the texts recorded by the Austrian and German linguists represent somewhat of a baseline for the dating of oral literature and social practice, the problem of dating the gender debate in recent Somali orature cannot be solved here in a satisfactory way. Provisionally, one may propose that, for this essay, the relevant time-period is that of 1900-1940, although in some parts of pastoral northern Somalia this period would deserve to be extended both backwards and forwards in time. For a provisional analysis of the causes and processes of change, see Kapteijns and Spaulding, "Class Formation," Kapteijns, "Women and the Somali Pastoral Tradition," Kapteijns, "Women and the Crisis," and Samatar, Pastoralism and the State.

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I collected most oral sources during two visits to Djibouti, namely a one-month visit in June-July 1987 and a four-month visit from September to December 1989. I am grateful to Wellesley College, the Social Science Research Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society and the American Council of Learned Societies for financial support of this fieldwork and other components of my research.

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Interview 4:

Casha Maxmuud Libaan, Djibouti, 5 October 1989.

Interview 5:

Khadiija Muuse and Casha Maxmuud Libaan, Djibouti (Balbala), 5 October 1989.

Interview 6:

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RTD 2: Heeso Hawleed, Work Songs

RTD 3: Hooyada iyo Carruurta, Mother and Children.

RTD 4: Saar, The Saar Possession Dance

RTD 5: Bittikoobir iyo Saar.

RTD 6: Maxamed Cabdillaahi Riraash interviewing Axmed Aadan Cadcadleh, 17 October 1989.

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