

# Set Theory in Somali Poetics: Structures and Implications

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One of the difficulties Westerner scholars have had to face in their study of African poetry has been in trying to avoid the ethnocentric assumption that the structure of all the poetry of the world would resemble Western metrics. In an article entitled « A Survey of African Prosodic Systems », published in 1960, for example, the renowned linguist Joseph Greenberg, stated that:

« It appears safe to conclude that except for possible recent influences of European rhymed poetry, the vast majority of African peoples south of the Sahara, including here the non-Moslem peoples of West Africa and all the Bantu peoples except the Islamized Swahili, do not possess prosodic systems (p. 928) ».

Interestingly, in the same article, Greenberg, went on to state that « ... there are two exceptions ..., the occurrence of tone riddles among the Efik in Nigeria, and the ... system of alliteration among the Somali ». But even here, he thought Somalis had been influenced by Arabic poetry and that « ... the prosodic system of the Somali is about the minimum conceivable ». Using texts published by Reinisch (1900), Kirk (1905), and Cerulli (1913), in which the graphemes for long vowels were not doubled to provide an important clue to the overall scansion system, Greenberg based his suspicion solely on the obvious trait of unified Somali alliteration, one of many rules now known concerning Somali metrics.

Least I appear myself to be possessed of self-righteous hindsight in this matter, let me plead guilty to my own charge. I attempted off and on for fifteen years to uncover the rules of Somali prosody, but alas, to no avail. It took a Somali, Cabdullaahi Diiriye Guuleed, to discover the key to Somali poetics, the *mora* which is a temporal unit equivalent to a short vowel in colloquial Somali. I have described how this happened in an earlier essay (Johnson 1980).

If we are ever to solve all the problems of African systems of prosody including the Somali, and we have only just begun Somali poetics, we must look closely at the structure of the indigenous languages involved and at their relationships to the music employable in their actual recitation. Key concepts from the study of Western poetry can help, but only to a certain degree. Metrics in the Somali case may be viewed as a language which has a minimum of three constraints placed upon it: first the grammatical, second the prosodic, and third the musical. Then having solved the structural problems, we must look to the relationship between poetry and its actual use in real performance situations in Somali.

And finally, as I have often contended, there are very significant theoretical implications of Somali metrics upon a general theory of oral literature and the sociology of literature.

This essay will deal with the first and third of these issues and conclude with a statement about much needed research on the second issue.

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The Somali classical genres of *gabay*, *jiifto*, *geeraar*, and *buraambur* are governed by the temporal unit of the *mora*, Somali prosodics depends upon a relationship between syllables and the *mora*. It is not merely how many syllables to a line, but rather theoretically the amount of literal time it takes to sound out the vowels on a line which determines its length. Thus, short vowels fill half the amount of time that long vowels do, and if one counts short vowels once and long vowels twice, a consistent number of *moras* per line are characteristic of each genre in question.

Although *moras* are a key part of the constraints of Somali poetry, they belong to the set of grammatical constraints from colloquial language mentioned above. How they relate to each other in poetry, however, becomes a part of the prosodic constraints which constitute, if you will, the « grammar of poetry ». This brings up another key concept of Somali classical prosody.

*Moras* from the colloquial language fit into metric slots which are called *semes*, and which come in a variety of forms. To understand how classical poems scan, one must have a clear picture of these *semic* patterns, for they are more important in the scansion of poetry than any other unit. As the *foot* can be considered the key to many a Western poem, it is the combination and configuration of *semes* which are the key to Somali classical metrics, some of which do not exhibit combinations which may be classified as a foot. This *semic* distribution is governed by a system, which I propose to call *set theory*.

So the temporal unit of the *mora* and the prosodic slot into which it fits, the *seme*, are key pairs in Somali metrics. In order to round off a complete understanding of set-theory, it is important to understand that syllables also play a role in some of the genres or internal parts of them. Indeed, in set theory there exists a relationship between *moras* and syllables, which Cabdullaahi and I have termed the *moro-syllabic relationship*.

Now, there are two things to understand here. First, in all classical genres and apparently in a few other genres we have not yet fully investigated, *semic* configurations and moro-syllabic relationships are fixed. Moreover, three varieties of *semes* exist. There are *monosemes*, into which a short vowel governing only one syllable may fit; there are *disemes*, into which a long vowel governing one syllable, or two short vowels governing two syllables, may fit; and there is at least one case of a *triseme* into which a long and a short vowel governing two syllables, or three short vowels governing three syllables may fit. Each genre ties specific *semes* together in different configurations, and I will describe each of the four classical generic *semic* patterns below. It is these configurations, and the moro-syllabic relationships which govern them, that determine the uniqueness of each classical genre.

The second thing to understand is that there are three varieties or sets in moro-

syllabic relationships, and there may be four: open, closed, semi-closed, and semi-open sets. (We are not yet sure of the fourth pattern at the present state of our research.) Set theory attempts to account for these relationships and their meaning in Somali classical scansion.

Let me state a few absolute rules as a jumping off place to understanding set theory. The boundaries between *semes* of any variety may not be crossed by long vowels. While the *mora* count remains fixed in all sets and is not affected by *semic* boundaries, the moro-syllabic relationships are determined by each genre.

What may fill the *diseme* and *triseme* depends on the moro-syllabic relationship. Strangely enough, the same is true of the *monoseme*, though in all but the closed set moro-syllabic relationship, a *monoseme* is a slot into which only a short vowel may fit. Note that regular colloquial vowel length must be honored in the open set. In the closed set, a long vowel may fit into a *monoseme*, thereby violating the grammatical constraint, but not violating the prosodic constraint. This phenomenon is an example of what may be termed « poetic license ».

In the closed set, the *monosemic* occurrence may be symbolized by a *micron superimposed on a macron*, an either/or situation in which a long or a short vowel from colloquial speech may fill the *seme*, but it will always be considered a short vowel in metrics. Note here that regular vowel length may be manipulated by the poet. A long vowel be « shortened » if necessary without regard to colloquial practice.

In the open set, any *diseme* may be filled with a long vowel or two short ones anywhere the *diseme* occurs. In other words, a maximum to minimum syllable count is the rule. Note that regular colloquial vowel length must be honored in the open set. For all intents and purposes, the open set may be considered to have no moro-syllabic constraint, and the *diseme* may be symbolized by a pair of *microns* superimposed on a *macron*.

In the closed set, again a *diseme* may be filled with either a short vowel or a long but is always symbolized by a lone *macron*. I might just add that in the closed set, most often it is the case that short vowels fill *monosemes* and long vowels fill *disemes*. The poet simply has the license to lengthen short vowels and shorten long vowels if he or she needs to do so, in order to get the message across at the semantic level of the poem. A fixed syllable count is characteristic of this set and will be identical to the *mora* count.

With the *semi-closed set*, both *mora* and syllable count are again fixed, but on the line or half-line, no specific *diseme* is designated to receive the long vowel. Only one example of a semi-closed set has so far been found, and that is the *gabay-hooris*, or second half-line of the *gabay*, in which 8 *moras* and 6 syllables must occur. This means that, within the restrictions of the half-line where three *disemes* occur, two must be filled with long vowels and the third must be filled with two short vowels, but which pair contain the long vowels is not specified. Again note that regular colloquial vowel length in Somali must be honored.

The importance of understanding and fully describing set theory in Somali metrics cannot be overstressed, for it appears to be the manipulation of these *semic* configurations and moro-syllabic relationships that may actually account for how Somali genres of this type evolve over time. When *semic* patterns change new genres are created, and Somalis seem to enjoy the intellectual exercise of manipulating these patterns to coin new genres. It must be an ambition among

Somali poets to become known as the innovator of a new genre, a point worth checking first hand in Somalia.

Let me turn now to a description of each of the four classical genres by describing the *semic* configurations and the particular metric sets involved with each genre. I will not describe all the rules of these poems, but only the ones which relate to set theory.

In the following analysis, *microns* are used to symbolize short vowels, while *macrons* are used for long vowels. *Double vertical lines* are employed for foot boundaries and *single vertical lines* for semic boundaries. They mark *monosemes* when only one *mora* may occur between them; *disemes* when two *moras* may occur between them; and *trisemes* when three *moras* may occur between them. *Single vertical dots* divide *disemes* in which either a long vowel or two short ones may occur. *Double spaces with no dots* dividing the *diseme* must be filled only with long vowels (closed set trait). A *large mid-line space* represents the caesura, or half-line pause, in appropriate genres.

Now, if I am to take my own advice and look at Somali poetry from the point of view of Somali linguistics and not Western preconceived units of scansion, we must adopt a guiding rule to successfully uncover all the rules of Somali metrics. Let that guiding rule be the following. Let us start with the smallest unit of recurrent pattern and proceed to the next largest unit. This rule will take us from the *mora*, the smallest unit, all the way to the *strophe* or *stanza* or the poem as a whole if there is only one strophe.

First, the *gabay* may be defined as a genre whose foot pattern may be described as *diseme-diseme-monoseme* (||u|u|u|u|u|). There are four feet per line, thus:

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There are 20 moras per line, but an « up-beat » at the front of the line is permissible, allowing for 21. Twelve *moras* occur in the first half-line, while 8 occur in the second. The open-set moro-syllabic relationship applies to the first hemistich rendering a maximum of 12 syllables possible and a minimum of 7. The semi-closed set occurs in the second hemistich where 6 syllables and 8 *moras* always occur. The caesura occurs between the 12th and 13th *moras*, after the first *diseme* and before the second *diseme*, of the third foot, a trait unique to the *gabay*. An example of a *gabay* line is as follows:

J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I J N T I

*Ilaah baa dabkoodiyo sandahay, danabbadoodii ye*

God has put out their fire, and has dampened [the valor of their heroes].<sup>1</sup>

With the *jiŋto* there are no discernible feet shorter than the line. The *semic* configuration for this genre is *diseme-diseme-monoseme-diseme-diseme*, thus:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

<sup>1</sup> This line of *gabay* is reprinted from Andrzejewski and Musa H. I. Galaal, 1963.

The *jiiſto* exhibits an open-set moro-syllabic relationship with a maximum of 9 syllables possible and a minimum of 5 per line. There are always 9 *moras* and only one alliteration per line. Because *jiiſto* are most commonly composed in couplets (sometimes triplet lines can also be found in a poem), *enjambement* is common. For this reason, scholars of the past have incorrectly transcribed two *jiiſto* lines as one. The fact that they are couplets explains what was commonly thought to be the unusual phenomenon of line-and-a-half type *jiiſto* lines, which are in reality triplets. No triplet *jiiſtos* as such occur, but triplet lines sometimes occur within normal couplet *jiiſtos*. An example of a *jiiſto* couplet is as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

*Waxaan Kaa dalbahayaa,*

1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

*Duunkaagu wuxuu qabo.*

What I claim from you,  
Is only what you yourself owe me.<sup>2</sup>

The *geeraar* may be defined as a poem with a foot pattern of *monoseme-monoseme-diseme* (||\|\|\_||). Two feet occur per line and it is common to add a *monoseme* at the end of the second foot, giving a sort of syncopation to its rhythm. Thus, there are 8 or 9 *moras* per line:

11/11/11 11/11/11 11/11/11

Because the *geeraar* exhibits a closed-set moro-syllabic relationship, there are always 6 or 7 syllables on the line, depending on whether or not the optional *monoseme* occurs. An example of a *geeraar* line is as follows:

|| ۛ | ۛ|\_ || ۛ | ۛ |\_ | ۛ ||

*Waar tolow, colka jooja!*

Oh clansmen, stop the war! <sup>3</sup>

The *semic* configuration of the *buraambur* is very complex and may be described as *triseme-diseme-diseme-monoseme-diseme-caesura-diseme-monoseme-diseme-monoseme-diseme*, thus:

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The *triseme* contains three *moras* and one initial or terminal long vowel is possible there, though three short vowels may occur. There are 18 *moras* per line, with 10 in the first half-line and 8 in the second. The moro-syllabic relationship is open, rendering a maximum number of syllables identical to the *mora* count

<sup>2</sup> This line of *jüfto* is reprinted from Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964: 74-77.

<sup>3</sup> This line of *geeraar* is reprinted from Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964: 130-31.

and a minimum number of 11. An example of a *burambuur* line is as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129 130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147 148 149 150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159 160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189 190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209 210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239 240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 261 262 263 264 265 266 267 268 269 270 271 272 273 274 275 276 277 278 279 280 281 282 283 284 285 286 287 288 289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298 299 300 301 302 303 304 305 306 307 308 309 310 311 312 313 314 315 316 317 318 319 320 321 322 323 324 325 326 327 328 329 330 331 332 333 334 335 336 337 338 339 340 341 342 343 344 345 346 347 348 349 350 351 352 353 354 355 356 357 358 359 360 361 362 363 364 365 366 367 368 369 370 371 372 373 374 375 376 377 378 379 380 381 382 383 384 385 386 387 388 389 390 391 392 393 394 395 396 397 398 399 400 401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409 410 411 412 413 414 415 416 417 418 419 420 421 422 423 424 425 426 427 428 429 430 431 432 433 434 435 436 437 438 439 440 441 442 443 444 445 446 447 448 449 450 451 452 453 454 455 456 457 458 459 460 461 462 463 464 465 466 467 468 469 470 471 472 473 474 475 476 477 478 479 480 481 482 483 484 485 486 487 488 489 490 491 492 493 494 495 496 497 498 499 500 501 502 503 504 505 506 507 508 509 510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519 520 521 522 523 524 525 526 527 528 529 530 531 532 533 534 535 536 537 538 539 540 541 542 543 544 545 546 547 548 549 550 551 552 553 554 555 556 557 558 559 560 561 562 563 564 565 566 567 568 569 570 571 572 573 574 575 576 577 578 579 580 581 582 583 584 585 586 587 588 589 590 591 592 593 594 595 596 597 598 599 600 601 602 603 604 605 606 607 608 609 610 611 612 613 614 615 616 617 618 619 620 621 622 623 624 625 626 627 628 629 630 631 632 633 634 635 636 637 638 639 640 641 642 643 644 645 646 647 648 649 650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659 660 661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668 669 670 671 672 673 674 675 676 677 678 679 680 681 682 683 684 685 686 687 688 689 690 691 692 693 694 695 696 697 698 699 700 701 702 703 704 705 706 707 708 709 710 711 712 713 714 715 716 717 718 719 720 721 722 723 724 725 726 727 728 729 730 731 732 733 734 735 736 737 738 739 740 741 742 743 744 745 746 747 748 749 750 751 752 753 754 755 756 757 758 759 760 761 762 763 764 765 766 767 768 769 770 771 772 773 774 775 776 777 778 779 780 781 782 783 784 785 786 787 788 789 790 791 792 793 794 795 796 797 798 799 800 801 802 803 804 805 806 807 808 809 810 811 812 813 814 815 816 817 818 819 820 821 822 823 824 825 826 827 828 829 830 831 832 833 834 835 836 837 838 839 840 841 842 843 844 845 846 847 848 849 850 851 852 853 854 855 856 857 858 859 860 861 862 863 864 865 866 867 868 869 870 871 872 873 874 875 876 877 878 879 880 881 882 883 884 885 886 887 888 889 890 891 892 893 894 895 896 897 898 899 900 901 902 903 904 905 906 907 908 909 910 911 912 913 914 915 916 917 918 919 920 921 922 923 924 925 926 927 928 929 930 931 932 933 934 935 936 937 938 939 940 941 942 943 944 945 946 947 948 949 950 951 952 953 954 955 956 957 958 959 960 961 962 963 964 965 966 967 968 969 970 971 972 973 974 975 976 977 978 979 980 981 982 983 984 985 986 987 988 989 990 991 992 993 994 995 996 997 998 999 1000 1001 1002 1003 1004 1005 1006 1007 1008 1009 1010 1011 1012 1013 1014 1015 1016 1017 1018 1019 1020 1021 1022 1023 1024 1025 1026 1027 1028 1029 1030 1031 1032 1033 1034 1035 1036 1037 1038 1039 1040 1

*Dalkeenniyo reer Caloo, deyr La kala marshow,*

You were the fence standing between our land, and the descendants of Ali.<sup>4</sup>

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I stated at the beginning of this paper that I would address the larger issue of the theoretical implications of Somali metrics upon a general theory of oral literature.<sup>5</sup> What I would like to do here is to give a lightning survey of what folklorists have thought of as significant in the *texts* they have studied over the last century or so. Over the decades, folklorists have maintained a consistent interest in the text, and the discipline may be described as a text-centered endeavor. Thus I may be able to put into perspective the potential contribution of the study of Somali poetics in this progression of theory in the history of ideas and schools of thought.

To begin, let me state that folkloristics is a discipline which attempts a formal study of what academics and many peoples of the world call *tradition*. Whatever it may be in the real world, a point I will address below, *tradition* is an academic construct with which scholars seek to explain major segments of human behavior and some of the reasons groups of people act in the way they do in specific culturally defined situations. Students of *performance theory* in and out of the discipline also argue that tradition is a process and not merely the product or products of that process. I will have more to say about performance theory in the final section of this essay.

Tradition is also a construct among the people who practice it as well as among the scholars who study it. In a word, it is the *lore* of the *folk*, the latter being defined by the American folklorist Alan Dundes (1980) as « ... *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor ». It has been a long time since American folklorists have defined the *folk* as the peasant class of society, a view more common in Europe. In American academics, the *folk* can be any segment of society, any group of people who define themselves as a group by practicing tradition together. If we were to give a new name to the discipline of folklore today, we might call it *group-lore*, or even *group-tradition*.

Returning to my earlier point, the *folk* who practice the *lore* may not call it *tradition*. They may call it *inheritance* or something else, but there is often a word to represent the concept in the metalanguage the group uses for describing its own culture. In this sense, tradition is often thought of by its users — as it indeed has been by many folklorists — as an inherited body of knowledge from which the group may, but does not necessarily have to, draw models for its cultural institutions and ways of behavior.

<sup>4</sup> This line of *buraambur* is reprinted from Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964: 138-39.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to a number of my colleagues and students at the Folklore Institute, Indiana University, particularly Roger Janelli and Sandra Dolby-Stahl, who have participated in a seminar I conduct on the topic of the concept of *tradition* in folklore. These friends have called my attention to many of the ideas and readings which form the background to this part of my paper.

To be more precise, this body of knowledge is stored in the memory until it is needed. But in the real world, groups do not have memories. Only individuals have memories. The social process of tradition, thus results from each member relying upon his or her own memory and discussing and debating each given situation as it arises. This process constitutes the process of tradition and the resulting products produced by it. In the real world, then, tradition represents not so much an actual body of knowledge, but instead a form of group behavior, including not only its members' agreements but also their disagreements and the resulting compromises. This process invariably leads to an unstandardized multiple variation in the products produced by the process of tradition. It is during the performance of folklore (or its rehearsal) <sup>6</sup> that these debates and agreements take place, but I am getting ahead of myself. I will have more to say about performance theory at the conclusion of this essay.

An important part of this thesis is that tradition exhibits two major characteristics, those of continuity and change. In much of academic thought in the past, scholarly studies concentrated on continuity and sometimes completely ignored change. Indeed, older views of tradition in the Historical-Geographical School of folkloristics considered change to be a negative and corrupting influence on tradition, the deterioration of an older, purer form. Continuity was seen not only as the most important aspect of tradition but the only legitimate aspect of it. Change was described with negative concepts, such as forgetfulness and misunderstanding during the diffusion of tradition.

The dominant view of human creative abilities at the time held that people were not very creative. They were only capable of carrying on, not creating, traditions. Any change which occurred was the result of deterioration in the original text. The text was seen as a once-created, often-repeated, and above all *old* form. If these conditions were not met by the text, it was considered recent and not a part of the authentic traditional lore of the group.

From ballad scholarship within the discipline came an idea first proposed by Philips Barry and later perfected by Gordon Gerould. These scholars proposed the *theory of communal recreation*,<sup>7</sup> stating that a ballad text did indeed have a single origin but was « recomposed », and thereby possibly changed, even if only slightly, by each singer who became involved in its diffusion. What the folklorist collected at any point in the life of a ballad was a composite text of communal composition up to that point in time, a collective product of the folk. While the folk were not all that creative, they were considered at least a bit more creative than had been earlier postulated by the Historical-Geographical scholars.

An early challenge to the view that change was negative came from Carl von Sydow, whose theory of the *oikotyping* of folktales argued that, although there might be single origins of folk tales, change was not so much negative as it was a reconstruction for local cultural consumption.<sup>8</sup> Germans might tell the story of Cinderella in a way more meaningful to a German audience, and the French and others would do likewise. A quick example is the contention that the French,

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<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion on the role of rehearsal on the interpretation of the past with regard to the nature of performance in tradition, see: Schechner, especially chapter two.

<sup>7</sup> For a description of this theory, see: Gerould 1932.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of oikotype (also spelled oicotype) was first described by the Swedish folklorist Carl W. von Sydow. For a full description of the idea, see his two articles, 1948a and 1948b.

who apparently had great difficulties in the Middle Ages feeding themselves, might reward the heroes and heroines at the end of a tale with a great feast, while the German variant of the same *marchen* might end in a wedding, where the lowly peasant gets the royal prince or princess as a reward for valor.<sup>9</sup> Von Sydow's view, then, was one of cultural retranslation, but he still agreed that these regional types would maintain their continuity once they had been conditioned to the regional culture.

What has become known as the *Parry/Lord thesis*, or the *oral-formulaic thesis* is the next important concept contributing to this century long debate over the nature of the text and its human creator. Milman Parry and later Albert Lord, dealing with the recorded epic poetry of Homer and the living epic of southern Yugoslavia, postulated that each time the poem was sung, even by the same bard, it was completely recreated.<sup>10</sup> texts were never merely passed on. They were always recreated. Using a complex methodology of morpheme by morpheme and line by line comparison of variants of the same poem composed by the same bard at different times and by different bards singing the same poem, these scholars have shown that epic poetry is indeed recreated each time it is recited.

Scholars through the years, then, have changed their minds about the nature of the text and its reciter in folklore. A shift has occurred beginning with the theory that the text is created once and diffused to others in the same society, to other societies, and to other generations, in basically the same form. More recent views hold that the text is recreated each time it is recited and that change is due not so much to the negative reasons of forgetfulness and misunderstanding but to new situations in which the text is recited. Change is seen as a deliberate way of making the text more relevant to the audience for which it is intended. It is here that studies of Somali poetry can contribute very significantly to the progression of these theories in oral literary composition, because the Somali case is somewhat of an enigma in the progression of these theories over the decades.

Somalis and Somalists have claimed for years that Somalis memorize their poetry verbatim. Over the years more and more evidence has accumulated to support this hypothesis. The fact that poet and reciter are separate skills in Somalia indicate that single origins in creativity occur. In oral formulaic poetry, poet and reciter are represented by a single skill. Studies on the structure of Somali prosody which have led to such theories as the *set theory* presented earlier in this paper further support the *possibility* of verbatim memorization because of the extreme complexity of its metrics. A specific study which Cabdullaahi and I conducted on variants of one poem, namely the *gabay Koofil* by the Sayid Maxammed Cabdille Xasan, indicates that verbatim memorization is no idle claim. Other studies by Andrzejewski describing how and why verbatim memorization is praised and prized in Somalia point to social reasons for this practice (Andrzejewski 1981).

The important theoretical question here is this: is the Somali poem a once-created, often-repeated text, or is it recreated each time it is recited? All the evidence points to the former view, a view which is not only out-of-date in folkloristics, but extremely unpopular. Obviously, each time a Somali poem is recited, it is physically recreated, but the seminal question is this: *is it recomposed?* Our study

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of the contention that the French often ended their folk tales with great feasts, see: Darnton, 1984, especially chapter one.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough description of the oral-formulaic thesis, see, Lord, 1971.



of *Koofil* indicates that portions of that poem have indeed been changed. Dialect differences exist, but are not important to our question of recomposition. Some differences in grammatical use exist. Minor morphological differences exist, but all changes which are made scan within the extremely tight rules of Somali metrics. Conclusions to date may be represented by Andrzejewski's theory of the *goal of verbatim memorization*, which again clearly argues for the intent of reproduction and not of recomposition. I put it to you that this problem is not yet solved.

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I should like to conclude this essay with a brief look at the second issue mentioned at the beginning, namely the relationship between the structure of Somali poetry and its actual use in real performance situations. Performance theory, one of the current schools of thought both inside and outside of folkloristics, is concerned with the performance context of artistic forms. It is a departure from some of the earlier theories and methodologies, in that interest swings from the text as the central focus to the performance of the text. This is not to say that the text is or should be neglected. What is important in this approach is that there are many aspects of any society that influence the structure, content, and function of a text, and performance theory attempts to take into account all of this information to arrive at a more holistic view of continuity and change in tradition.

To determine the actual abilities and practice of verbatim memorization of poetry in Somalia, I would propose two methodologies suggested to me by Professor Albert Lord. One would involve tests on the abilities of reciters to memorize poetry, the other would involve the observing of actual performances of Somali poetry in their natural contexts. First, a laboratory test situation will enable the researcher to determine if Somalis are capable of verbatim memorization. A collection of the entire repertoire of several reciters in the company of each other could be attempted. Later one could attempt to get a reciter who did not know one of the poems recited by one of the other reciters to attempt to sing it into a tape recorder. In this manner a test can be made of the Somali claim that some reciters can repeat a poem they have heard only once. After some months these tests can be repeated and a comparison made of the same poems sung by the same reciters with a time depth allowed for possible forgetfulness. It is important that some of these repertoires be overlapping, so that a comparison of the same poems recited by different reciters can be made. In this manner, Somali claims can be tested under controlled conditions.

It is one thing to be able to memorize poems. But it is another thing to recite them word for word in actual performance situations. The other method I propose is to attempt to collect as much poetry in actual performance situations as possible, hopefully coming across some of the same poems encountered in the laboratory situation. A comparison of poems collected from actual performance contexts and those from controlled contexts should reveal some interesting insights into Somali claims and actual practices. The ultimate goal of these twin methodologies is eventually to answer the question, is Somali poetry merely repeated or is it actually recomposed? The answer should have significant impact on text-centered and performance-centered folklore theory.

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