

The Study of Somali Music: Present State

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This is the first time that at an international meeting a paper on Somali music, fruit of specific and extensive fieldwork, is presented. This will necessarily be a broad introduction attempting to give a general picture of the present state of research into this particular field.

There are several reasons why Somali music has not been examined before: Somalia's peculiar history and the fragmentary and often circumstantial character (especially during the colonial period) of anthropological studies in this country; to these may be added, as far as the Italian contribution is concerned, the fact that ethnomusicology as a specific discipline has only emerged very recently in Italy (in the fifties) and that it privileged for a long period research on national territory rather than abroad. The lack of some documentation on Somali music, even after the important African ethnomusicological surveys of the fifties/seventies led many, including ethnomusicologists, to the misconception that Somalia is essentially a non-musical country.

The only note on Somali music published to date by an ethnomusicologist, the late Klaus Wachsmann — the entry « Somali » in the German musical encyclopedia *M.G.G.* (1965) — frequently uses expressions like « it is said », « it seems », « one may presume », as it was based essentially upon the testimonies and observations of travellers and explorers of the last century (like Swayne or Powell-Cotton), of ethnologists (from Burton and Paulitschke to Grottanelli and Lewis) and of some European musicologist or music-lover (such as Barblan or Pesenti, as far as Italy is concerned): all data gathered more or less incidentally and in any case the outcome of observations that did not aim at strictly ethnomusicological goals.

The entry « Somalia » drawn up more recently for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980) by the folklorist John W. Johnson, an eminent scholar on Somali poetry, deserves credit for the wealth of first-hand documentation it offers concerning the various genres of sung poetry, even if, unfortunately it is devoid of any kind of reference to the musical patterns and structure. Nevertheless, although Johnson has been among the first to foresee an ethnomusicological study of the melodies and rhythms of Somali poetry (Johnson 1974: xv-xvi), he ends up in *Grove* by sustaining the idea of a « secondary role of music » on account of « the paucity of musical instruments in Somali culture ». The fact that he adds that « in the period just after World War II, Somali musical life underwent a drastic change » only further amplifies the misconception, which is

shared also by many Somalis themselves, according to which music appeared in the country only as recently as the forties, with the birth of the national song (the introduction of the Yemenite lute and the spread of the new poetical-musical genre *heello*). What about traditional songs, instruments and dances of the Somali postoralists and peasants?

On the whole, texts giving more or less detailed information about traditional Somali music are very few¹ and in those texts extremely rare — and often questionable — are the staff transcription available.² As regards to recorded sound material this is limited to very few recordings carried out during the Colonial Expo of Paris in 1931,³ some recordings of two possession cult rites (*Mingis and Nuumbi*) I made during my first survey in 1982, as well as one sole LP published to consecrate two interpreters of the new *heello* song genre (Cabdullaahi Qarshe and Axmed Shariif).⁴

In November 1984 I began a systematic research on Somali music within the framework of the « Language Development Project » promoted by the Linguistic Technical Committee for the Somali National University in co-operation with the Somali Arts and Science Academy. For six months, with Aweys Maxamed « Waasuge », a theatrical director of the National Theatre who helped me in the work, I carried out numerous surveys, interviews and recordings of traditional music, both within its actual context (feasts, gatherings and domestic or village ceremonies) as well as in set up meetings (with musicians, singers and other informants). The aim, at this stage, was to create a basic picture as reference for the data collected along the way and to establish an initial classification of genres, forms, and styles, both vocal and/or instrumental, in connection with the various functions and occasions.

Our starting point were the musicians and folklorists who work for, or centre about, the National Theatre, such as Cabdullaahi Qarshe, Maclow Nuur, Aweys Khamiis Cabdalla, Axmadey Cabdi Gashaan, and the poet and singer Xaji Baalbaal, an endless source of knowledge regarding vocal techniques and repertoires of the Northern regions. Muqdisho turned out to be an important observation point for the definition of an overall musical picture of the country as it allowed us to come into contact simultaneously with informants from different regions. For instance, it was possible, by means of a questionnaire handed out to the students at the University, to gather a first idea of the regional distribution of musical instruments, dances and about the chief occasions in which music plays an important role. Naturally, it was necessary to keep in mind a certain degree of decontextualisation and therefore of transformation of data, implicit and inevitable in an urban context, substantially different from the areas of origin. For example, the « camel songs » become the « bricklayer working songs » in the city. So, the important work of reunification and reproposal of the various musical and choreutic

¹ The *References* include just texts which are not mentioned in the bibliographies of the two encyclopaedia entries by Wachsmann and Johnson and in the « Folklore » and « Musica » sections of *Bibliografia Somalia* by Fabio Carboni (1985).

² Cfr., for example, Berghold 1899, Pesenti (4540-4542 in Carboni 1985) and Revoil 1982: 34.

³ These recordings are kept on 78 rpm not-on-sale records (n. 3448/9 and 3450/51) at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. One of these, a camel-song, also takes place in the LP record *French Africa II*, edited by André Scaeffner and Gilbert Rouget, Columbia KL 205.

⁴ *The Freedom Songs of the Somali Republic*, collected by Chet Williams with Hassan Hussein and Mussa Galaal, Folkways Records FD 5433.

repertoires carried out by the artists of the National Theatre hypostatizes and inevitably transforms, in their function and use, the expressive forms and contents of musical performance belonging to the villages and camps. At this stage of the research, the verification and the comparison with the original models has only been carried out in part (especially in a number of localities along the coast in the Banaadir region and the agricultural area of Shabelle), but it is clear that future investigation must be oriented towards a deeper analysis of the different local musical realities. However, today it is possible to draw a general outline of Somali music, whose outline, I hope, may constitute a framework for further research.

General Outline of Somali Music

The variety of musical tradition to be found in Somalia reflects the cultural and geographical reality of the country. The music of the nomadic shepherds is essentially vocal in character and, apart from those songs dealing with every day life and travel, the repertoires are connected with the poetry and dance that mark the most important social and ceremonial occasions characterizing the moments when the communities stop to rest.

The sedentary nature of the communities living in the agricultural areas and along the coast has, on the other hand, favoured a greater development of instrumental music and the consolidation of musical traditions that in part derive from interaction with other cultures from the inner regions of Eastern Africa as well as from contact with overseas cultures.

The following types of music can be distinguished within the present day Somali musical picture:

1. Purely Somali traditional music — which for many aspects may be compared to that of other contact Cushitic cultures such as the Oromo culture, for example — including:

- a) sung poetry treating lyrical or social subjects;
- b) monodic and multivocal songs connected with the nomadic life cycle (camel songs, songs for the construction of the *aqal*, etc.);
- c) celebration, ritual, and ritual-therapeutical songs (such as those of the various *saar* cults) linked with the dance.

These songs are multivocal and often accompanied by some kind of underlining of the rhythmical aspect (clapping, stamping, drums and/or other percussion instruments).

2. Traditional music from the coastal urban areas (for instance the music of the Reer Xamar in Muqdisho) with various specific innovative traits and a variety of influences (Arabic, Azanian culture, and Asiatic cultures).

3. Music from the agricultural regions with noticeable Bantu influence, used on specific occasions, with a variety of repertoires and musical instruments including the *shareero*, the Somali version of the lyre widespread throughout Eastern Africa.

4. Islamic religious « music » of Arabian influence, especially that of the *sufi* religious orders; it is a multivocal music and in some cases there is a simple instrumental accompaniment (drums).

5. Music of particular ethnic and/or social minority groups (for example that of the Bajuni fishermen).

6. National-traditional music which has developed after the 1969 Revolution. This music derives from the re-elaboration of different traditional forms and genres carried out by musicians from the National Theatre; it is re-transmitted throughout the country by means of public performances, radio broadcasts, and music cassettes.

7. New urban music using modern instruments and with a notable presence of Arab, Indian and European influence, which is principally produced and spread by the National Theatre and by the radio. This music owes much to the adoption of the Yemenite keyboard lute (*kaban*) which gave a new musical structure to the metrical pattern of some « minor » poetical genres (*hirwo*, *dhaanto*, *wiglo*, *belwo*) and thus gave birth to a new genre called *heello*. The new Somali song has evolved from the *heello*.

Several distinctive traits of the Somali musical system should be viewed within this framework, such as:

- a scalar system that is mostly *anemitonic pentatonic* (the melodies are constructed on a scale of five tones which lack semitones, for example C-D-F-G-A);

- predominance of binary rhythm in the pastoral repertoires and of ternary and cross-rhythm in the peasant context;

- predominance of antiphonal (in alternative chorus) or responsorial (enunciation of the theme by a soloist vs. choral response) multivocality.

There are many instances of interaction between Somali music and that of the nearby Cushitic, Arab and Bantu cultures, and also evidence of possible influence of Asian cultures across the Indian Ocean from Somalia. This fact appears to be confirmed by several types and names of musical instruments.

For a detailed photographic description of the Somali instruments I here refer to the imminent catalogue of the exhibition « Aspects of artistic expression in Somalia » set up as part of the present meeting.

Somali Musical Terms and Taxonomies

About 350 terms relating to music were gathered in the research: from those used to indicate repertoires and instruments, to those connected with the modalities and techniques of performance and enjoyment. This lexical repertoire, besides representing a deepening of the knowledge of the Somali language, allows us to penetrate into some of the musical conceptions proper to the Somali culture. According to the recent « ethnoscientific » methodology it is possible to infer from linguistic data some implicit criteria of classification of genres, performing modalities and musical instruments: criteria which, after discussion and confrontation with various musicians, prove to be peculiar to the Somali culture, and different from those of Western musical thinking.

Musical genres

In Somalia, as in great part of those cultures which are based upon the oral tradition without an explicit musical theory, the omnicomprehensive concept, however ambiguous, of music is a rather recent one. It is no mere case that the term *muusika* refers principally to modern musical production performed with imported instruments (*kaban*, saxophone, guitar etc.).⁵ Poetry (*gabay*) is tradi-

⁵ The idea that Somali music was born in the forties might well depend therefore upon a linguistic misunderstanding.

tionally considered as a creative form completely distinct from the « musical » ones, even if a very particular value is attributed to its sung form.⁶ As far as the vocal and instrumental accompaniment of the dance is concerned, it is difficult to conceive it separately from the overall action of *ciyaarid* (to play, to dance). Completely extraneous from the idea of music are the chants of the *digri*, i.e. the intoned and rhythmically cadenced (and accompanied by the movement of the body) recitation of prayers that characterize the religious ceremonies of the Islamic orders: for these chants (*qasiidooyin*) it would be inappropriate to use verbs such as *qaadid* (to sing) or *heesid* (to sing).⁷

To obtain an overall picture of those activities and behaviours that might be called « musical » it is necessary, therefore, to refer to three distinct performing practices: *gabyid* (to compose and perform poetry), *heesid* (to sing songs) and *ciyaarid* (to play-dance). As Fig. 1 shows, the whole of Somali musical practice can be collocated into these three categories, even if the lists given here do not claim to be exhaustive, but aim only at making the principle of classification clear.⁸

Gabay indicates the chief type of Somali poetry, but also, by extension, the various traditional poetical genres: from *gabay* to *buraanbur* (female poetry) to *masafo* (religious poetry).

By *hees* (song) are meant the different folk-songs connected with the life cycle (lullabies, *hoobeeya*; working songs, *heeso howleed*; etc.), all forms of minor poetry (*wiglo*, *hirwo*, *dhaanto* and *belwo*) that, on account of their short form and their circumstantial and often frivolous content, Johnson (1974: 11) has defined « the Family of Miniature Genres », and finally the new national song (*heello*) which is a modern rendering of the minor genres (see Johnson 1974).⁹

Under the definition *ciyaar* (dance) fall all those different kinds of vocal and/or instrumental music accompanying dances, both of the ludic-community kind (*beer-rey*, *bullo* etc.) and of possession ritual type (belonging to the different « spiritual » cults and by extension classified as *Saar*).¹⁰

A special place apart is occupied by the chants of *digri*, considered « non-musical »; in the figure, the arrow placed in the top right side of the word indicates a certain attraction that the practices of the *sufi* order have for those of the possession, as an indication of their gradual « Islamisation » (take for example some forms of *boorane* and of *xayaad*).

The classification according to genres given in Fig. 1 is not rigidly normative. The two-way arrows indicate a partial osmosis between contiguous classes (for

⁶ The expression « *shimbirtu waa gabyaysaa* » (« the bird is singing ») is meaningful.

⁷ *Qaadid*, more than « to sing », means « to perform a song » (an already known piece).

⁸ At present, the only type of piece that is difficult to collocate in this classification is the « musical riddle » with the *shareero*, given by Aweys Khamiis, as typical of the riverine areas. The game consists in hiding an object that the persons present must find, guided by the different sounds of the instrument.

⁹ The « Miniature Genres » are in reality astride of two classes, the *gabay* and the *hees*. The prevalent use of the second term with reference to this type of composition, and the importance given to the musical structure, have been decisive to their collocation. In particular, as far as *heello* is concerned, the doubt as to whether they are songs or poems (expressed by Johnson *ibid*: XVI) seems to be definitively solved.

¹⁰ The English adjective « spiritual » is used by the Somali with the meaning of « spiritual » and concerns the presence of spirits (*jiinniyo*).

instance, it is not totally inadmissible to speak of *heeso ciyaareed*, that is of dance songs). It must be pointed out, besides, that there is a certain tendency to include « hierarchically » (or in order of seniority?) the secondary in the principal (evident in the extensive use of *gabay* and *saar*).

GABAY ↔	HEES ↔	CIYAAR
Gabay Geeraar Guuraw Buraanbur Jiifto Masafu etc.	"Hoobeeyaa" h.carruureed h.howleed: a) xoolaad b) kebdeed c) beereed d) badeed Wiglo Hirwo Dhaanto Belwo Heello	Beerrey Kabeebey Bullo Shirib etc. Saar: a) Saar b) Nuumbi c) Mingis d) Xayaad etc.

DIGRI

Fig. 1

HEESID	VEERIN	TUMID	
cod foori shimbir	buun turumbo siimbaar sagsoofan etc. koor	shareero kaban fiyooliin organ biyaano fiisarmooniyo koox m.	JIIB JOO JAN
		shanbal sharaq durbaanno jaan sacab	

Fig. 2

Performing Techniques and Musical Instruments

The taxonomical criteria for Western organology (the study of musical instruments) are based primarily upon the modality of sound production and the acoustic principles they imply, thus dividing all musical instruments into four great families: aerophones (wind instruments), membranophones (instruments using membranes), chordophones (strings) and idiophones (instruments whose sound is produced by the vibration of the instrument itself).

As Fig. 2 shows, the implicit criterion of classification of the instruments in Somali music seems essentially based on the modality of performance.

The general term for « to play » is *yeerin*; this term may be used with reference to all musical instruments, but only with the meaning of making the instrument « emit its own sound », « to give voice to »: for example « *organka yeeri* » means « let the sound of the organ be heard ». As « to perform by playing », *yeerin* may be used appropriately only in the case of a few types of instrument, such as wind instruments (*buun*, shell trumpet; *simbaar*, a kind of trumpet; *malkad*, horn etc.), where manual action is not involved in the production of sound but only in its possible modulation (*luuq*). The organ, on the other hand, does not produce sound unless its keys are pressed by the fingers. If one wants to say « play that song on the organ » one must use another verb, *tumid* (beat, strike) and say « *heeskan organka ku tun* ». ¹¹

Tumid is used for string instruments (*shareero*, lyre; *kaban*, lute; etc.), for membrane instruments (*durbanno*, drums), for mechanical aerophones (like the accordion and the organ), for the clapping of hands (*sacab*) or the stamping of feet (*jaan*), and for idiophones (*shanbal*, wood-clappers; *sharaq*, metal-clappers; etc.). Among this latter category the wooden bell (*koor*) is an exception: it plays hung around the camel's neck, but it may also be « given voice to » by shaking it (and in any case not by striking it).

Thus all instruments fall into two classes only. In order to complete the picture of the sound sources, one might add that of « singing » (*heesid*) to which the voice (*cod*) and the whistle (*foori*), both of men and birds (*shimbiro*), belong. One must note, besides, that from the musical practice of the nomads the terms *jiib* (multivocal singing) and *jaan* (stamping) have been transferred even to modern instrumental groups to distinguish the melodic from the rhythmic sections.

Prospects and Aims of the Study of Somali Music

A few months of field research were sufficient to show the inconsistency of the theories about the scarcity of musicality among the Somali's. The collection of documents gathered would already make it possible to give a first systematic panorama of traditional Somali music, while the sound material, although not at all exhaustive, would testify the variety of form and style: from lullabies to funeral commemoration chants, from the monodies to the more complex multivocal and instrumental performances. While awaiting the publication of all this in one of the forthcoming numbers of *Studi Somali*, I should like to conclude by concentrating briefly upon some questions concerning the prospects and the methods of research.

¹¹ Sometimes the verb *garaacid* is used instead of *tumid*.

One might well ask, and rightly so, what role a deep study of music may have at the present state of development of Somali culture. I think that the answer is easy if we refer:

1) to the specific characteristics of its culture, that has been entirely traditional and oral in its « outlook » up to a few years ago;

2) to the present process of formation and consolidation in the country of didactic and scientific structures and institutions.

1. With regard to the first point, a systematic and comparative study of the musical forms and structures as well as a study of the instruments (their etymology, organology, modality of construction and performance, regional distribution) might lead to the identification of particular procedures of the tradition and of specific traits of the Somali culture, as well as setting down the relations and interconnections with other cultures (especially those of the Cushitic family) of East Africa. To give a concrete example, an integrated analysis of the verbal and musical structures of poetry might lead to the individuation of those metrical models and « rules of scansion » that still resist a purely linguistic examination (see Johnson 1974: xv). As it has been widely demonstrated in several ethnomusicological studies on traditional poetry, the musical structures are not simple containers of the verbal ones, but they interact with them on various levels: rhythm, intonation, accent, segmentation etc. This can be clearly seen in a musical fragment for dance from the Ceerigaabo region (example 1):

Tuma dheh, taa cusub dheh
 Beat, that new one (dance),
taan aqiin dheh, taageney rax (dheh)
 the one that I know, you standing up, turn and stop.
Tuma dheh, talada lama waayee
 Beat, there is always something to be done,
tanu waa taayadii Bari
 this one belongs us from Bari.

Example 1

♩ = 205 ca.

The musical notation consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It begins with a tempo marking '♩ = 205 ca.' and a '8va' marking below the first few notes. The notes are eighth notes, mostly on the G line (G4), with some descending to F#4 and E4. The lyrics 'TU-MA DHEH TAA CU-SUB DHEH TAAN' are written below the staff. The second staff also has a treble clef and one sharp. It continues the melody with eighth notes, ending with a pair of beamed eighth notes. The lyrics 'A-QIIN DHEH TAA — GA-NEY RAX (DHEH)' are written below this staff.

TU-MA DHEH TAA CU-SUB DHEH TAAN

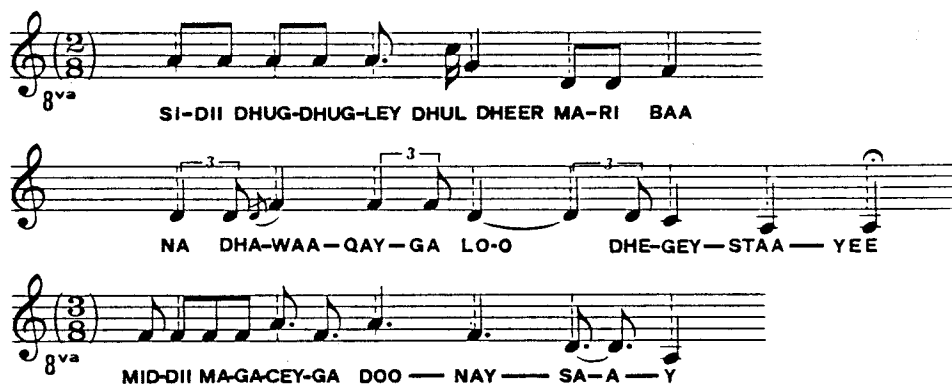
A-QIIN DHEH TAA — GA-NEY RAX (DHEH)



Equally indicative of the relations existing between the verbal and musical texts is the variety of realisations (both phonic and phonological) that can be found in three salutation couplets that, according to the poet Xaji Baalbaal, are specific of three different singers of *dhaanto* of the Jigjiiga area (example 2):

- Dhugdhugley:* *Sidii dhugdhugley dhul dheer mari baa*
 Like a motorbike that passes in the distance
Na dhawaaqayga loo dhegeystaayee
 my shout is heard.
- Meytinaar:* *Middii magaceyga dooneysaa-y*
 Oh you who want to know my name
malyuun dile Meytinaar i dheh-eeey
 call me Meytinaar, who kills millions.
- Cawdubille:* *Cayar anan joogin, Cawdubilla-hee*
 A dance I don't take part in, « God, preserve us
 from it »
miyaay carfiyoo hoodo leedahay-eeey
 can it have savor and success?

Example 2



MAL-YUUN DI-LE MĒ — Y — TI-NAAR I DHEH — E — EY

CAY-AAR AN-AN JOO-GIN CA-W-DU-BIL-LA-HEE

MI-YAA-Y CAR-FI-YOO HOO-DO LEE — DA — HA — Y-E — EY

From these examples one gets an idea of the importance that an integrated analysis of linguistic and musicological aspects could have in the study of traditional poetry.

But many other aspects might become the subject of specific and multidisciplinary studies. Among others: the dances, that are an important expression of Somali sociality and ritual (of which, for example, a basic audiovisual documentation is lacking); the music and dance of the possession cults, connected with the therapeutical-ritual trance (*burur*) phenomenon and therefore a relevant element of traditional therapeutical practice; the liturgical chants of the *digri*, that, besides giving rise to some of the most interesting Somali multivocal performances, play an indispensable supporting role in the manifestation of mystical ecstasy (*jibdo*).

2. Somalia is still lacking in any institutional form of study or teaching of music. This question would require a deeper treatment. Hoping to re-examine this point as soon as possible, I would like just to state that, if on the one hand this problem must be faced fairly urgently, on the other hand there is a danger of importing in an uncritical fashion foreign music-practice and music-teaching models, thus giving a neocolonial and ethnocentric solution to the problem. It is only through the development of a field of Somali musical studies that this can be avoided.

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