

A Nation of Poets

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Americans know Somalia as a land of gaunt children and marauding gunmen. But for centuries, those familiar with the wedge-shaped piece of land jutting into the Indian Ocean have called it "A Nation of Poets."

Somalia's poetic tradition differs markedly from Western practice. Somali scholar Said Sheikh Samatar, in an essay to accompany a 1986 exhibit at the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art, wrote that it is difficult for Westerners to appreciate the role of poetry in Somali culture. "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," he said, "Somali oral verse is central to Somali life."

Samatar wrote that "even a casual observation" of Somali society reveals "the remarkable influence of the poetic in the Somali cultural and political scene."

English explorer Richard Burton, who traveled through Somalia in 1854, noted the prevalence of the art. "The country teems," he wrote, "with 'poets, poetasters, poetitoes, poetaccios': every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines - the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions, whereas a false quantity or a prosaic phrase excite their violent indignation."

Somali poetry has been the country's chief means of mass communication, substituting for history books, broadcasting and newspapers. In recent decades, after the Somali language was written for the first time, and cheap radios and tape recorders began to spread into rural as well as urban areas, there was an expectation that oral poetry might decline as a societal force.

In fact, modern communications and transportation have spread the art more efficiently from one area to another. Distinguished poets began to travel from area to area, leaving behind tapes of their work to be passed around and evaluated. After World War II, literary productions on Somali national radio and the Africa Service of the BBC attracted huge audiences.

"Thus, it is a common, if amusing, thing," Samatar wrote, "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."

But to say that poetry permeates Somali society is not to say that everyone is a poet. Somalia is no exception to the rule that artistic genius is a scarce commodity anywhere. There is keen competition among talented poets, and a nation of poetry connoisseurs demands a high level of skill and persuasiveness from its practitioners.

Poets who win public favor are a privileged class, socially and politically. At the same time, though, they assume the burden and responsibility of preserving history and shaping current events. Historically, Somali bards have mobilized public opinion in support of war or peace, as they saw the need.

Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan - who was immortalized in British history as the "Mad Mullah" - used his verse to unify Somalis in the fight against British colonialism.

And the Somali Dervish Movement, a religious-based resistance to foreign domination in the first two decades of this century, produced a body of work that pitted the Dervishes not only against the European powers who were carving up the country, but also against their Somali collaborators. Since the Somalis on both sides were skilled poetic gladiators, the verse of the period is filled with appeals to opponents to change sides and with pleas to neutrals to join the battle.

"Although most of the poets, on both sides of the conflict, were concerned mainly with the conduct of the war," writes B.W. Andrzejewski in an essay for the Smithsonian exhibit, "they remained faithful to their calling as artists." The formal skills and devices, such as poetic diction and figurative

language, continued to be cultivated. Even the most practical of poems, such as those designed to communicate military strategy, were full of lyrical passages.

Dervish leader Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan, whose rise to power depended heavily on his talent as an epic poet, was a master of the genre. In a poem warning his followers about the perfidy of an ally who changed sides when threatened by enemy reprisals, there is a preamble about the loyalty and bravery of the Dervish "reciter," who carries the poetic message and transmits it to others. Although the alliteration - a key component of Somali verse - is lost in translation, the evocative images remain.

You did not leave me when the ignorant stampeded ...

You loaded your camels and came over to me when they
defected
to the British generals ...

And I count on you during the dry season of the year.

A rosy cloud, a scud of white vapor, precipices of cloud
flashing
with lightning,

Resounding thunder, flood water running over the parched
earth,

The past night's repeated showers, noisy as the jibin bird

The heavy rain which fell, the longed-for rain of the
spring,

Ponds brimming over, old campsites luxuriant,

Thorns become as tall as grass, thick undergrowth crackling-

I shall satisfy your needs as when one pours out salty water
for a
she-camel

And I shall entertain you with a poem as precious as a
jewel.

The poetry of Salaan Arrabay, on the other hand, became an anti-war weapon. His best-known work, "O Kinsman, Stop the War," was an appeal to end a long-standing feud between two rival sections of the Isaaq clan in northern Somalia. "Tradition has it," says Samatar, "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."

The collapse of the Dervish resistance in 1921 set the stage for Somalia's current tragedy. The legacy of the conflict was poverty and destruction among the vanquished Somalis. "The situation was made worse," says Andrzejewski, "by the fact that large quantities of firearms had found their way into the nomadic interior and were now used in fratricidal warfare devoid of any ideological aspect." Poetry again played a role, whether inciting local feuds "or counseling peace and appealing to the sentiments of a common culture and religion."

The colonial and post-colonial period saw a change in Somali poetic traditions. The 1940s gave birth to a romantic species of verse that avoided the hazards of political and social commentary. But politics continued to intrude, sometimes covertly. "The metaphoric and allusive language," says Andrzejewski, "was well suited to fooling the foreign censors who at that time were trying to check the activities of those Somalis who were working toward independence, and it sometimes happened that an apparently harmless love lyric was easily decoded by Somali listeners into an attack on the authorities."

During the two-decade dictatorship of Mohamed Siad Barre, who ruled Somalia from 1970 to 1991, poetry became a tool of an authoritarian regime. While verse helped mobilize the population for such social programs as national immunization and literacy campaigns, it also was employed to consolidate Siad Barre's power.

At the same time, Somali writers began to explore prose fiction. But the poetic tradition infused the new form, as in a 1981 serialized story by Cismaan Caliguul. The tale of two young lovers, whose relationship is opposed by their families, glows with poetic imagery in the heroine's accounts of her elopement.

We rode on and on through the night in complete darkness - darkness which knew nothing of our troubles. I turned my head and there was the dawn pursuing us. We listened and the birds were chirping and twittering - they were pleased with the new day that was running toward them. How different was their situation from ours! They wanted the dawn to break quickly so that they could begin picking berries, and we wanted the dawn to linger behind so that we could escape beyond the territory of my clan under the cover of night. ...

The grass on which the rain had fallen the night before now spread its blades towards the sun for which it had been waiting, and the dew resting on the leaves of the trees took on the color of gold. The trees were pleased with the growing warmth and the sunshine, but all this was of no benefit to us, travelers who were passing by.

Now, in a break with centuries of history, Somalia's poets have fallen silent.

Before Siad Barre's overthrow last year in a mass uprising, oral traditions were already in decline. The combined pressures of increasing poverty and political repression sapped energies, dampened creativity and curbed the free expression upon which poetry had thrived.

Andrzejewski predicts that in the future, poetry as a living art will be confined mainly to texts of work and dance songs, anecdotal narratives, and children's lore. But in a more optimistic mood, he believes that an improvement in Somalia's material situation will permit a flowering of written literature, including poems, short stories, novels and literary scholarship.

For the moment, though, Somalia's rich civilization is obscured by images of human suffering. In the language of modern media, Somalis are either victims or thugs, passive or drug-crazed. And the exquisite sound of poetry has been drowned by the vulgar thunder of guns.

Pierce the Sky

Somalis have long debated the merits of a nomadic, pastoral existence versus those of a settled agricultural community. In this excerpt from a

Somali poem, a nomad explains his decision to return to his herds after a brief try at farming:

It is said that one cannot pierce the sky to get rain for one's garden,

Nor can one drive the farm, as one drives animals, to the place where the rain is falling.

Worst of all, one cannot abandon one's farm, even though barren, because all one's efforts are invested in it.

The farmer, in counter argument, replies:

A man with no fixed place in this world cannot claim one in heaven.

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