

Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism

The case of Sayyid Maḥammad 'Abdille Hasan

Said S. Samatar



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Note on Transcription of Somali Words

In transcribing Somali words, I have adopted the official Somali orthography which has been in use in the Somali Republic since 1972. This orthography uses Latin characters with minor adjustments designed to accommodate Somali phonetic sounds. There are, however, three consonants which do not conform to the new system of Somali spelling: the aspirate 'h', the palatal 'd' and the 'ayn'.

In the new Somali orthography, the letters 'x', 'dh' and 'c' are used respectively to render these consonants. In this book, by contrast, I retain the conventional symbols used to denote them. Thus I adopt:

h instead of x

ḍ instead of dh

ʿ instead of c

This measure is taken to meet the needs of the English reader who is unacquainted with the official Somali orthography or with Somali phonetic sounds. Where any of the three consonants appear in a Somali author's name or book title, however, I use the official orthography. Bibliographic entries of Arabic names are rendered in Westernized form, while those of Somali ones conform to indigenous designation, i.e. first name comes first.

The glottal stop or Arabic *hamza* is rendered by a closing inverted comma. The cities of Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Merca and Brava retain their conventional spelling.

Preface

This is a study of the use of oratory and oratorical techniques as a tool to obtain political power in a traditional African society. In an attempt to bring forth the causal linkages between oral poetry, politics and power in Somali society, I have chosen to focus on the political oratory of Sayyid Maḥammad ‘Abdille Ḥasan, the poet, mystic and warrior leader of the Somali anti-colonial movement at the turn of the century. In selecting the political verse of the Somali leader as a case study, my efforts here aim at several interconnected objectives. One is to investigate the Sayyid’s poetic oratory which, aside from its relevance to the politics and strategy of creating a large-scale resistance movement, possesses an intrinsic literary and philosophical interest, and therefore deserves to be studied on its own merits. Another emanates from the need to enquire into the ways and means by which an African resister of imperialism harnessed a remarkable indigenous resource in order to mobilize the public in his favor and against his opponents. Finally, by demonstrating the intimate correlation between the Sayyid’s oratorical powers, which he used consciously – and consummately – to achieve political ends, and the progress (or lack of progress) of the Somali resistance struggle, I hope to add a new element to the study of African resistance in general.

More specifically, it is hoped that the elucidation in this book of the Sayyid’s use of oral poetry as a weapon to rid his country of alien rule will encourage others to investigate the indigenous weapons of African resisters of imperialism elsewhere. Such efforts may help to enrich – perhaps revolutionize in some cases – our perceptions of the question of European intrusion and African response.

Though the Sayyid and the Somali Dervishes occupy its central stage, this study seeks to illuminate the quality, extent and influence of oral poetry in Somali life and lore. To facilitate the reader’s appreciation of my approach and quirks of style, it may be helpful to interject here an autobiographical note. I was born and raised as a pastoralist in the west

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central part of the Somali peninsula, an area which – with the advent of colonialism and the consequent introduction of European notions of fixed boundaries – was to be split into the Mudug province of the Somali Republic and the disputed Ogaadeen region.

Growing up a herdsman in the vast, scorching plains of Africa's Horn presented challenges and opportunities as well as peculiarities of life which it will not do to go into here. I will just mention one feature of my early life which bears on this book. This is that literacy was unknown in the culture of my youth, except to a few roving holy men (*wadaads*) who boasted a rudimentary knowledge of Arabic and sacred law. These taught the Qur'an and basics of religious sciences, and conducted marriage ceremonies. However, the *wadaads'* literacy, such as it was, had no appreciable impact on the population at large, whose native tongue, Somali, was unwritten and in fact remained so, to all intents and purposes, until 1972. This meant that public and private life was conducted by oral means, a notable medium being oral poetry. Like nearly all of my fellow herdsmen, I aspired to acquire skill in this coveted craft, received informal instruction in the art of verbal composition from established poets, and even myself attempted a few versifications which, I confess, earned their author no notable distinction as an oral poet. Perhaps I quit pastoralism too early – at fifteen I migrated to sedentary culture where I learned to read and write – to witness the blooming of whatever latent talent I may have had in the field.

If the artistic gains of my early association with pastoral poets and reciters remain dubious, the impression they made on me has been quite indelible. In this connection the name of 'Abdille 'Ali Siigo stands out in my memory. He was a venerable elder who almost every evening after the camels had been milked and secured in the kraal would, by the fireside, chant the poetry of Sayyid Maḥammad late into the night before a captivated audience of men, women and children. He was a dramatic chanter who seemed to command even the attention of the camels which sat nearby, lazily chewing their cuds. So the fire crackled, its red flames casting a hazy glow over his silvery beard, giving the elder's expression a pale, ghostly aspect. Outside the kraal fence the winds howled monotonously, pierced by the occasional roar of a hungry lion. Every now and then this would stir the camels from their dreamy drowsing, causing them to stop chewing and prick their ears, alarmed by the danger outside. Meantime, elder 'Abdille chanted ecstatically, seemingly oblivious of everything but his rhymes.

Sayyid Maḥammad's verse – which always has a forceful appeal to a Somali – when dramatized by this elder generated an emotional atmosphere which, needless to say, impressed my adolescent mind. I hope I

have succeeded in drawing on something of that experience for the benefit of this book.

The core of the work resulted from a doctoral dissertation submitted to Northwestern University's Graduate School in 1979. The dissertation itself was based on a 12-month research sponsored jointly by the Social Science Research Council and the Graduate School of Northwestern.

It is not possible to thank all the people to whom credit is due for the writing of this book. Naturally, I am grateful to my advisor, Professor John A. Rowe, for his critical advice, moral support and patient interest in the progress of my work; to Carl Petry and Abraham Demoz of Northwestern University who, as members of the examining committee of my doctoral defense, read the dissertation and gave me much critical insight which helped to refine my focus of the subject and to pinpoint the methodological concerns of my research efforts; I also owe a special debt to the staff of Northwestern's Africana Library, in particular to Hans Panofsky, Daniel Britz and Barbara Rivers for their help in tracing obscure materials needed for my work.

In London, I owe a debt of gratitude to the two 'elder statesmen' of Somali studies, B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, who not only gave advice and encouragement during my four months of archival research in England, but read the typescript critically and suggested improvements; I am indebted also to Richard Greenfield of St Anthony's College who gave similar advice.

In the Somali Democratic Republic, I am similarly indebted to numerous individuals for their advice, kindness and encouragement. Among these I must mention Mr. I. M. Abyan, then the Director General of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, who helped secure research clearance for me and asked stimulating questions about my work. I must also acknowledge the assistance of Dr Shariif Saalah and Dr Maḥammad Aadan, both at that time high-ranking officers of the Somali Socialist Revolutionary Party, who provided me with the necessary authority to move freely about the country and to ask my informants questions of a sensitive nature without bureaucratic and security impediments. Again in Somalia, I am obliged to acknowledge the help of members of the Somali Academy, especially Aḥmad F. 'Alī Idaajaa, Sheikh Jaama' 'Umar 'Iise, Yaasiin 'Ismaan Keenadiid, 'Abdullahi Ḥ. 'A Suuryaan, Yuusuf Meygaag Samatar, M. Ḥ. H. Sheeka-Ḥariir, who not only adopted me as an honorary member of the Academy but also shared with me their immense knowledge of my topic.

In addition to scholars, other persons have been especially helpful. 'Alī Samatar Maḥammad, M. K. Salaad, M. M. Yaḥya and my brother, Ismaa'iil, gave me much practical assistance while in the field. Their

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Introduction

The distinguishing mark of 'real art', Leo Tolstoy wrote in his much debated essay, 'What Is Art?', lies in its 'infectiousness'¹ – a potent property, in Tolstoy's view peculiar to art. This property enables the artist to infect others with his feelings 'compelling [them] to rejoice in another's gladness, to sorrow at another's grief and to mingle souls . . . which is the very essence of art'. Whatever their merits in the context of Western literary/artistic traditions, Tolstoy's views of the infectious and invading power of art would probably have been shared by Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan, who may have expressed a similar sentiment regarding the power of art when he spoke of his poetry as 'issuing forth with the blinding flash of a thunderbolt', or, to vary the metaphor, 'the engulfing darkness of gale winds'.² For a poet to attribute an irresistible, almost mystical power to his own creations, as the Sayyid often does, may sound somewhat immodest to a Western audience, but such a claim is permissible in Somali pastoral/literary conventions where the talented poet is viewed with something akin to superstitious awe. Through the power of his poetic orations, the Sayyid, as we shall see, was thought to 'inflict wounds' on his enemies, and indeed those who were attacked by his literary barbs often responded as if they had received physical wounds.

The Sayyid, moreover, took pains to ascribe the power of his verse to the 'strengthening' hand of 'Divine Truth',³ and to a sense of mission which he claimed to have sustained not only his poetry but his person, enabling him to weather the many dangers which his stormy career exposed him to. The mission – with which he gradually became imbued – was to rid his country of alien Christian rule. Thus he sang with evident conviction: 'I have sought and found the Prophetic guidance / [which appointed me] to tell the unbelieving white invaders: / "This land is not yours."' ⁴ It must be said at the outset, therefore, that the standard of truth or of excellence by which the Sayyid wished his poetry to be judged

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was a religious (Islamic) truth, a circumstance which again seems to have the peculiar ring of Tolstoy's controversial proposition that 'In every period of history . . . it is by the standard of [a] religious perception that the feelings transmitted by art have always been appraised.'⁵

Elsewhere in his essay, Tolstoy argued that art is 'one of the indispensable means of communication without which mankind could not exist'⁶ – its principal function being to convey the feelings of one man to others. This too would hardly sound strange to Somali ears long accustomed to the use of oral poetry, not only as an important means of communication but also as the principal medium by which Somalis ask the abiding questions: Whence come we? What are we? Whither go we?

In dealing with a historical subject from the standpoint of oratory and rhetoric, this study may be said to have taken an unorthodox approach in historical methodology, for in essence it relies on a branch of literature, notably poetry, as the core of its source materials. What may be unorthodox is not that we seek to utilize literature in order to investigate a historical question – history and literature are known to illuminate each other – but that the type of literature employed for the task should be an oral literature, and an oral verse at that, with its bent to the lyrical and the transient rather than the historical and the permanent. Hence, our reliance on such oral data to explore a historical phenomenon may raise, methodologically, a few eyebrows, in view of the historians' conventional bias in favor of documents and documentary sources for the reconstruction and the interpretation of the past. Yet our recourse to a strong utilization of oral verse in the attempt to chronicle and interpret the history of the Somali anti-colonial movement was not motivated by any flair for whimsical experimentation in historiographical method. Rather, it was born out of necessity.

Those acquainted with the language and culture of the pastoral Somalis will have appreciated the pre-eminent, sometimes sinister, role which poetry plays in Somali life and thought. Whereas in the industrialized West, poetry – and especially what is regarded as serious poetry – seems to be increasingly relegated to a marginal place in society, Somali oral verse is central to Somali life, involved as it is in the intimate workings of people's lives. For reasons which we hope to elucidate in this study, the pastoral Somalis attach great value to their oral verse and cultivate it with an undying interest. Indeed the one feature which unfailingly emerges even from a casual observation of Somali society is the remarkable influence of the poetic word in the Somali cultural and political scene. The Somalis are often described as a 'nation of bards'⁷ whose poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life.

In seeking to account for the unusual hold of the poetic art on the Somalis, some scholars would look to environmental factors for clues. The life of Somali nomads, it is said, is a life of wandering and danger, devoted as it is to eking out a living in a demanding environment. In the great boredom and bleakness of their surroundings, the theory goes, the Somali nomads turn to their poetry, the one thing which does not cost them anything and provides them with drama and entertainment.⁸ According to this view, without the twin inspiration of their faith and verse, the Somalis would waste themselves in fury and desperation.⁹

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

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

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

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

While I have not proposed an explicit theory or model of the relation between political power and oral poetry in Somali traditional (non-literate) society, the general approach of this study – with regard, for example, to the kinds of questions raised, the data presented, the narrative constructed and the conclusions drawn – would seem to entail theoretical implications. Insofar as these may be of interest to students of non-literate societies dealing with questions of power and political communication, they may be expressed as follows: 1) In Somali pastoral sanctions, the power and prestige of the poetic craft must possess universal recognition and acceptance in the community; 2) such power and prestige derive from the monopolistic conditions surrounding the composition and utilization of oral poetry; and 3) in the transmission of ideas, the poetic medium must be persuasive, efficient and easy to grasp and memorize.

The widespread community acceptance of the validity and efficacy of the poetic medium in social relations seems to stem from pastoral notions of feud and vendetta, especially the institution of *godob* discussed in chapter 1. Among the various components which comprise the *godob* institution is the concept of speech vendetta – the notion that certain kinds of oratorical forms can be used for slander. To borrow a pastoralist phrase, poetic orations serve the potent task of either ‘violating or ennobling the soul’ of a person or a group. When poetic formulations are used to wound someone’s honor, a case of *godob* has been generated. The resulting grievance, if it is not redressed or offset by a counter poetic formulation, becomes grounds for violent hostility between persons or groups. Indeed poetic slander has been the source of many a lethal inter-clan feud, for an insult or slander in poetry is considered in pastoral sanctions to have the same effect on the victim as a physical assault.

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

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

of the clan, he is envied by his less endowed kinsmen. It is his coveted task to articulate and register in verse the concerns of the community and the noteworthy deeds of his people.

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

Owing to the power of their talents in social relations, Somali poets tend to be political manipulators *par excellence*, using their potent craft to make and unmake politicians and public men. Magicians of words, they have the wherewithal to inform and persuade the public effectively. Consequently, they are respected and feared, the pride of their clans whose panegyrics they sing and the bane of their enemies whom they slander and discredit through the artful marshaling of their sinister rhymes.

Sayyid Maḥammad ‘Abdille Ḥasan was, or at least perceived himself to be, one such magician of words. Rooted in the pastoral tradition and gifted in the art of political versification, he sought to utilize his oratorical resource as a political weapon in his protracted campaign against three colonial powers and their Somali collaborators. Our aim in this study is to examine what the Sayyid made of his poetic talent and to assess the nature of the impact (if any) of his political verse on the course of the resistance struggle.

Chapter 1 discusses the environment of the pastoral Somalis and the peculiar factors which predispose the society to the pursuit of oratory and eloquence, and goes on to a discussion of examples of prose oratory. Chapter 2 attempts to put forth a modest analysis of Somali oral poetry with emphasis on poetic oratory, its principles and uses. We provide examples of political poets who strove – with notable success – to leave their imprint on society through the eloquence of their words.

Chapter 3 is a ‘straight’ history, enunciating the onset of colonialism in the Horn of Africa and tracing the origins and growth of the Somali Dervish resistance movement. In this chapter we present evidence that the early phases of the Dervish resistance constituted an indigenous

response of the Ogaadeen Somalis to the imposition of Ethiopian rule in western Somalia, and that the British, who were to bear the brunt of Dervish fighting, became unwittingly enmeshed in what was essentially an Ethio-Somali problem.

Chapter 4 attempts to present an extensive analysis of the Sayyid's verse with a view to relating it to the ebb and flow of Dervish fortunes. The Sayyid is shown to have deliberately put to use the power of 'my mighty tongue' in his long-lasting efforts to capture the hearts and minds of the Somalis for the Dervish cause. The extent of his success is assessed.

The last chapter begins with a critical review of the literature on the Somali Dervishes and proceeds to a discussion of the multifarious personality of the Sayyid – as a political poet striving with 'utmost sincerity' to present the 'truth' of his case to the people, as a Muslim mystic (Sufi), yearning for the quiet and contemplative life, and as a warrior chieftain of a highly militarist organization. The contradictory demands, it is argued, of these 'inner obligations' were responsible for the stormy, at times erratic, behavior that was to mark the later phases of his career.

As well as to historians, this study may be of interest to anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, and perhaps even more to students of oral literature, communication, oratory and related disciplines with interest in discussions of the organic linkage between language and socio-political power. Students of oral literature may, for example, be interested in the discussion of the composition, transmission and distribution of Somali oral poetry, while the place of the poet, especially his influence in group decision-making, may be of relevance to sociologists, and his powers to inform and persuade the public to studies of communication as well as oratory and rhetoric.

The principal focus of this book is however directed to African historians, in particular those interested in what Professor T. O. Ranger has called African 'primary resistance'¹⁰ to European occupation. The example of the versatility of Somali pastoral poetry and the Sayyid's utilization of it as a weapon in the resistance struggle may shed some light on other manifestations of African resistance to imperialism. The Sayyid's verse, as we shall have occasion to witness, represented a deliberate effort to influence opinion and action through the clever fusion of the aesthetic with the didactic. Aware of the importance of public opinion in an egalitarian society, he used his verse as a forum to inform and persuade the public and to propagate the Dervish cause.

The challenge of winning the support and cooperation of others must have been part of the tasks of every leader of African resistance. In societies with hierarchical institutions where the leader could build on