

RURAL IMAGERY IN CONTEMPORARY SOMALI URBAN POETRY: A DEBILITATING CARRYOVER IN TRANSITIONAL VERBAL ART

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It may be of interest to students of comparative literature that, contrary to the universally accepted view that literature draws its imagery from the environment that has given rise to it, Somali modern poetry produced in an urban setting draws much of its imagery from the rural environment an established practice inherited from traditional poetry, but not without problems for a contemporary audience. Several scholars have noticed and touched upon the use of pastoral images in modern Somali verse (Andrzejewski 1974; Johnson 1996). Describing some of the characteristics of the kind of poetry used as an essential part of dialogue in modern Somali plays, Professor Andrzejewski writes:

It is interesting to note that even in plays, which are a product of the urban environment, almost all the imagery [in poetic parts] is taken from the life and scenes of the countryside. Even among the educated elite there is a great respect for their traditional way of life and culture, which still thrives in the rural environment [...]. The speech of the country folk, especially that of the nomads, is universally regarded as the highest form of Somali, and some educated townsmen involved in public life have felt it necessary to spend a certain time learning the arts of oratory from old men in the interior (Andrzejewski 1974: 23).

What has hitherto escaped scholarly observation, however, is the debilitating effect of such a traditional technique in modern poetic discourse created by and meant for the new society of the town dweller in Africa today. This article highlights this problem, exploring how the utilization of pastoral images was useful in the context of traditional/rural Somali poetry, but is not relevant to

modern poetry associated with the contemporary urban environment, both in terms of theme and audience.

Pastoral imagery in traditional poetry

In pre-colonial times, pastoralism was the predominant way of life for the majority of the Somali population, and this features prominently in the imagery of all forms of Somali oral literature created over the ages. In proverbs, for instance, most well-known sayings are laden with pastoral images. For example:

Geelow daaq, daaq, daaq, laakiin maalintaad 'ciin' daaqdo ayaa laguu yaabaa!

O camels, graze, graze, graze, but one fears for you[r life] on the day when you graze on [the plant of] 'ciin' !

'Ciin' is a poisonous plant deadly to camels. The saying suggests that camels can eat many kinds of plants, which are too rough for other livestock, but they have to take care not to be too greedy and lose sight of the dangers that may be involved. The proverb is used to warn those people who indulge in wrongdoing because they are too privileged to consider the deadly consequences of their actions. In the following proverb, the branches referred to are those used to seal off the entrance to the kraal where sheep and goats are kept at night. In the morning, the branches must be removed one by one very carefully in the reverse order to which they were laid, as they are so thorny and heavy. The proverb thus instructs one to tackle matters one at a time according to their importance:

Oodo dhacameed siday u kala sarreeyaan baa loo guraa.

One picks up the branches of the outer gate barrier of a kraal in the order in which they lie on top of one another.

The presence of rural imagery in Somali traditional poetry is equally profound and even more conspicuous:

*Baadida nin baa kula daydaya
daalna kaa badane
Oon doonahayn inaad heshana
daayin abedkaaye*

[Sometimes] a man comes out with you to look for lost animals,
and gets [even] more tired than you,
But without wanting you to find them at all.
(Andrzejewski and Galaal 1963: 96)

This couplet comes from a poem by a well-known early twentieth-century pastoral poet, Qamaan Bulxan, in rejoinder to another poet, Cali Dhuux, in a famous series of poetic contests between a number of pastoral poets, each of them acting as the spokesman of his clan.¹ It would not only have been relevant but very useful for Qamaan Bulxan to utilize the image of a man looking for lost animals; this would augment his poetic point in the eyes of his audience of camel herders and cowboys who are certain to have enjoyed and appreciated the piece because it vividly depicted an experience they shared with the poet. That is presumably why the poem has been widely circulated and preserved in the oral memory of thousands of Somalis to date.

It is widely recognized that good literature represents the experience of its time and society. As Wole Soyinka puts it, poets act ‘as the record of the mores and experiences of society and as the voice of vision in [their] own time’ (Soyinka 1968: 21). Similarly, the noted poet and literary scholar, Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac Gaarriye, asserts that

The main reason why we use imagery is to facilitate the audience’s easier acquaintance with whatever the poet wishes to convey, by

portraying it in a picture closely familiar to the recipient (Maxamed Gaarriye 1998).

This is precisely the case in the work of Raage Ugaas, another Somali pastoral poet of singular stature. Sometime in the early nineteenth century, Raage composed a famous lament on the death of his beloved wife. The opening lines of the moving poem are as follows:

*Sida koorta yucub oo la suray,
koromo buubaal ah
Ama geel ka-reeb ah oo nirgaha,
laga kaxaynaayo
Ama beelo kaynaan aho,
kor u hayaamaaya
Ama ceel karkaarrada jebshiyo,
webi karaar dhaafay
Ama habar kurkeedii wadnaha,
lagaga kaw siiyey
Ama kaal danley qaybsatiyo,
kur iyo dhaal yaabis
Shinni kaaluf galay ama sidii,
koronkorroo oomi
Xalay kololo'aygii ma ladin,
kaamil reeruhu e.*

Like the 'yucub' wood bell tied to gelded camels that are running away,
Or like suckling she-camels being separated from their calves,
Or like communities setting off for a desert trek,
Or like a well which has broken its sides or river which has overflowed its banks,
Or like an old woman whose only son was killed,
Or like the poor, dividing the scraps for their frugal meal,
Or like the bee entering their hive, or food crackling in the fry,
Yesterday my lamenting roar drove sleep from all the camps.
(cf. Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964: 64-65)

To make his audience comprehend the magnitude of his pain caused by the unexpected death of his life-partner, the poet summons a multitude of well-chosen word-pictures and familiar situations, using highly powerful poetic diction (largely lost in the attempted translation). He has depicted a legion of pastoral situations and their familiar tragic sounds and collected them together in a single dark frame. They thus amplify his utmost grief which is expressed in the form of an uncontrollable, lamenting roar that continues the whole night and keeps the entire neighbourhood awake. Being closely acquainted with these well-drawn images, Raage's audience is certain to have been utterly moved by his heartrending account.

Commenting on this poem, Maxamed Gaarriye is not way of the mark to argue that one of the main reasons why so many Somalis still memorise this poetic piece a century later is the poet's complete mastery of these penetrating images (Maxamed Gaarriye 1998). But if the same piece was recited to a present-day Somali city lad, it would almost certainly sound like an alien language which, rather than gain immediate appreciation, would at best cry for translation.

However, it is not such a city lad that has to be blamed or accused of being ignorant or having bad taste; he simply has no idea about how camels behave. He has never been exposed to the experience of a nomad community trekking in the desert, nor has he seen 'gelded camels [...] running away'. In my view, it is the poet who continues to speak the wrong language to the wrong audience, and is thus responsible for this kind of communication breakdown.

An old shoe on new feet

Many Somali contemporary poets or composers of modern songs must have suffered such a communication breakdown in their unsuccessful attempt to impress young town dwellers by using the wrong tools. Habitually, they aim to

show their poetic competence by using ‘high standard’ language and highly stylised techniques from the past, such as symbolism (*dedan*), allusion (*sarbeeb*) and rural imagery. This may be relatively tolerable in the case of what we call the poetry of public forum (*maanso-goleed*), that is the serious poetic genres used chiefly to address sophisticated issues of a political and social nature.² The use of traditional features in the public forum poetry might well be comprehensible, even desirable, to members of the older generation with some rural background who constitute the main audience for this type of poetry. I have argued elsewhere³ that the skilful and conscious use of certain elements of tradition – legendary characters in this case – could be useful in terms of linking the past and present, especially in the case of a society experiencing the transition from a traditional to a modern way of life.

In the mid-1960s, a Somali poet, Saxardiid Axmed, expressed in the following poem the growing concern of the general public who felt disappointed after several years of unfulfilling independence:

Hashaan toban sano u heesaayey
Hruubkiyo heeryadiiba cuntaye
Lixdankaan haybin jiray maxaa helay?

The she-camel I’ve been singing about for ten years
Has eaten both the milking vessel and the saddle
What happened to the [year of] sixty I so much longed for?
(Maxamed Afrax 1994: 242)

Like many others at the time, the poet depicts the independent Somali state as a suckling she-camel by the name of ‘*maandeeq*’, a well-known image created to symbolise the country, the state and the sovereignty. The poet wished to convey the message that independence, which was gained in 1960, was beginning to fail the expectations of the people who struggled for it.

In this particular case, although he uses pastoral imagery for modern urban communication, one can assume that the poet’s employment of the image

of a ‘she-camel’ eating its ‘saddle and milking vessel’ (which alludes to a popular Somali saying), posed no remarkable problem then, given the nature of both the audience of the time (closer to tradition) and the seriousness of the theme. However, when such techniques from the past are used in today’s modern songs, targeted at a younger audience with no rural background at all, we are confronted with an entirely different situation.

The modern song is one form of Somali modern poetry where the use of rural imagery is most irrelevant. Indeed, it is paradoxical that this art form, which still uses pastoral images extensively, is meant for the consumption of the younger generation of town dwellers and that its theme is predominantly romantic love – a modern theme almost exclusively associated with the said segment of Somali society. The question then arises of how the use of images drawn from the pastoral setting, at odds with the central theme, is relevant to the audience in this entirely new environment?

If the main purpose of deploying imagery is ‘to facilitate the recipient’s acquaintance’ with the content, using alien images would inevitably have the opposite effect. The following song by an acclaimed contemporary poet and playwright, Xasan Shiikh Muumin, illustrates this point. Xasan is by no means less skilful than Raage Ugaas in his competent use of pastoral imagery in a somewhat similar situation, i.e. to express a moment of intense grief (this time felt by a fictional character, an inexperienced schoolgirl ruined by a heartless playboy who traps her by false marriage and false promises). Trying to appeal to his non-existent sense of humanity, she depicts her plight:

*Nin geel badan lahaayoo
Guluf kala carraabay
Gallad wixii uu haystiyo
Gadhoodhkii uu dhamaayey
Gego madhan ka joogoo
Dhallaan gaajo haysiyo
Nirgihii ku gooheen*

Ganuunsaday sidiisii
Adaa garan waxay gubee
Garwaaqso waad igu geftee!

Like a man who once had many camels
But one afternoon they were taken by raiders,
His prosperity, and the sour milk he used to enjoy, all gone,
And who sits in an empty corral, his children hungry
And his camel-calves orphaned thus am I ill with bitter grief.
You know what seared me then judge it fairly, for you have
wronged me!
(Hassan 1974: 112-13)

If ‘every historical epoch writes its own poetry or rather expresses itself in appropriate idiom in the poetry of its most committed and sensitive minds’ (Amatu 1989: 176), every artistic theme requires an appropriate idiomatic structure through which it can be most effectively expressed a structure which does not obstruct the development of the new art or debilitate its effect. As Abdulfateh Al-Hakeemi argues, old aspects of form have to either adjust themselves to fit ‘the measurements of the time’ or give way to new aspects (Al-Hakeemi 1986: 88).

In this light, the main subject matter of the sung verse cited above is closely familiar to its target audience; the theme, the characters and the overall situation all truthfully represent the everyday experience of the young urban Somalis of the time. Shallaayo, the victimized young lady who tearfully sings the poem, represents not only herself but also every girl of her age group and society, and this effectively reinforces the poem’s appeal to its recipients.

On the other hand, however, aspects of form the language, imagery and other traditional techniques are far from familiar to the main target audience. To them, such lines as ‘*Guluf kala carraabay*’ (Looted in an afternoon raid) and ‘*Nirgihii ku gooheen*’ (His starving baby-camels howling in his ears), would be as difficult to appreciate as poetry in a foreign language. In this respect. not only are these difficult for the audience to internalise or even

visualize, but the language as a whole is too archaic to cope with. Words such as ‘*guluf*’,⁴ ‘*carraabay*’⁵ and ‘*nirgihii gooheen*’⁶ are not only absent from the present-day vocabulary of the young urban Somali, but have generally faded into lexical archaism.

To an audience of pastoral nomads and probably some older people with a rural background, the poem would appear to be an utterly beautiful piece of verbal art; it unmistakably reflects the great talent of its creator, Xasan Shiikh Muumin. To this kind of audience, the continuity of tradition in contemporary literature is desirable. Furthermore, if used selectively with a combination of competence and care, the use of some selected traditional elements in treating modern themes can be highly effective, as stated earlier. Yet, to achieve the best of both worlds, the poet needs to strike a delicate balance – he or she has to be aware of ‘tradition as a double-edged sword’ (Wright 1994: 15).

To members of the younger generations in towns, the targeted segment of society in this case, the beauty of the above piece has, as already delineated, been substantially disabled by the use of the wrong elements of form. While Shallaayo, the protagonist, realistically represents the experience of the audience, the language she speaks to them in is not theirs, nor indeed is it hers. It is uncharacteristic of a townsgirl of Shallaayo's age and time to use such language and style, which in fact belongs to the author who has imposed it on the wrong character. The actress/singer (Mariam Mursal), who at the time was as young as Shallaayo, apparently learnt the text by heart without fully understanding the meaning of the words she uttered.

This obvious gulf between the form of the poem on the one hand and its content and context (including the audience) on the other, is highly problematic. The obvious communication breakdown could have been avoided had the author taken this problem into consideration and moulded his artistic devices into a form more relevant to the setting of his poem – the city environment which has given the poem (or the play it comes from) its theme

and characters. This could have been achieved with a relatively slight adjustment in wording and imagery. To portray Shallaayo's plight abandoned, pregnant and disowned by her family in such a way as to make it appeal to the audience's sense of tragedy, the poet likens it to the agony of the ex-camel-lord described in the extract cited above. However, the imagery would have been more effective in the modern urban context if the ex-camel-lord had been replaced, for example, by an ex-landlord/merchant, suddenly robbed of his property and thrown out into the city streets.

Contemporary Somali poetry, which is a product of urban society, represents the experience of a society in transition from a traditional to modern way of life. The poetry itself is in the process of transformation from 'purely' oral methods of composition and transmission to a new form a mixture of orality, techno-orality (the use of audio and video recording) and written alternatives.

Due to this transitional status, the new form still hovers between having to adjust itself to the pressures of modern times and being unable to venture a break with the established poetic devices carried over from traditional oral poetry. Pastoral imagery is one of the three most pre-eminent devices inherent in this tradition, the other two being alliteration (*xarafraac*) and metrical scansion (*miisaan*). The rigid rules of the latter two features regulate the structural patterns of almost all types of Somali verse,⁷ thus imposing on the new poem some serious 'restricting, and hence, debilitating effects' (Samatar 1982: 60). While the restraining effect of these latter two devices, particularly the *miisaan*, have attracted the attention of several students of Somali literature, the limitations posed by pastoral imagery is yet to be observed in scholarly work. In this article I have attempted to highlight this aspect of Somali literature which, perhaps, has parallels in the experiences of other cultures. Despite the general tendency towards 'conservatism' universally found in oral and semi-oral cultural forms (cf. Ong 1982), one can assume

that, as time goes by, time-honoured features, including pastoral imagery in Somali urban poetry, will inevitably adhere to the pursuing winds of change.

Works Cited

All Somali names are given in the official Somali orthography except where they occur differently on the title page. In the Somali naming tradition, surnames are not normally used. Persons are identified by their given name followed by that of their father and grandfather. Libraries with substantial holdings in the Somali field have adopted a system for Somali entries recommended by the late Professor Andrzejewski (1980). This is based on the official Somali script and the order of Somali customary naming. In accordance with this, names of Somali authors in this references list are not inverted.

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¹ Poetic contest (*gabay-ku-dood*) is an established Somali poetic tradition which takes place frequently, every couple of years or so. It either takes the form of poetic exchanges which are conducted directly at an assembly, with the contestants present, or consists of a series of polemical poems, recited on different occasions, in different places; in the latter case, they are carried by messengers and travellers who learn them by heart. For further details about this poetic combat and the full text of this poem with English translation, see Andrzejewski and Galaal (1963).

² For information about the unusually important role of poetry in Somali society and the many functions it performs, see Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964); Samatar, 1982; Johnson (1996); Maxamed Afrax (1994).

³ Maxamed Afrax (1987).

⁴ Aggressive raiders of tribesmen.

⁵ Set off in the heat of early afternoon to begin a long desert journey on foot.

⁶ Baby-camels producing such a painful continuous sound in hunger to attract the herder's attention for milk.

⁷ For a detailed discussion on these features with ample illustrations see Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964); Andrzejewski (1982); Abdillahi (1980); Samatar (1982); Johnson (1996b).