

## SOMALI POETRY

-- Ibrahim Awed "Kholi"

### The key to transcription:

In the transcription of Somali words and names in the general text, I have used the Somali script which uses Latin characters with the following adjustments intended to accommodate Somali phonetic sounds. The aspirate "h", the palatal "d", the "ayn" and the glottal stop known as "hamza" in Arabic, are represented by "x", "dh", "c" and "'" (an apostrophe) respectively. Also doubling any vowel renders it long.

There are two exceptions to this rule: i.e. in cases relating to quotations or reference materials the original spelling is retained, while in names of wellknown places found on most maps, the standard English spelling is adopted.

### Preface:

This paper is the first part of an on-going study in which I will attempt to look into the development of Somali poetry. Hopefully, the whole study will be presented at the 5th Congress of the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA).

In this chapter, I will discuss questions pertaining to the age and the origin of Somali poetry. In the other chapters, I will have to cover some questions relating to the genres and the themes of poetry, the fate of the classics and whether oral poetry is on the decline.

### The origin:

The absence of a national orthography until October 1972 renders any attempt to date the origin of the Somali poetry more difficult than trying to establish the origin of the Somali people and their language, or indeed, to trace the etymology of their ethnic name Somali. For the etymology of the name alone, there exist as many as six different popular versions.

In his dissertation, Ali Abdirahman Hersi<sup>1</sup> had reported five versions, attributing to Richard Burton's First Footsteps in East Africa, R. Drake-Brockman's British Somaliland, I.M. Lewis's Peoples, I.M. Lewis's Peoples of the Horn of Africa, and Charles Johnston's Travels in Southern Abyssinia. The sixth version which is a slight variation of one of the five versions was reported by Said S. Samater.<sup>2</sup>

That the people are Hamites ethnically and their language belongs to the Cushitic group spoken in the wider region of the Horn of Africa, appears to have been accepted almost universally. But to enquire them beyond this is surely bound to lead one to a deep sea of speculations, if not hot contravercies.

Despite the fact that many of the main Somali clans claim to have ultimately traced their genealogy to Arabian ancestors<sup>3</sup> as far back as only fourteen centuries ago or so, many scholars subscribe themselves

1. The Arab Factor in Somali History, pp.26-27, UCLA, USA, 1977.
2. Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism, p.10, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
3. I.M. Lewis, A Modern History of Somalia, pp.14-15, Longman, London, 1980. (Note that Dir claims to be as old as the grass; when tracing their ancestors, they say: Dir dureemo la fil — literally meaning: Dir who is as old as the grass).

to Kevin M. Cahill's view that "the Somalis from time immemorial have lived on the east coast of Africa ... (well) before Queen Hatshepsut (of Egypt) sent her expedition to the then Land of Punt 3500 years ago to obtain frankincense trees"<sup>4</sup>

If we want to enquire the origin of the Somali poetry, in the absence of a written tradition in the country, we will be left with no option other than to study oral heritage. Perhaps, there is no dispute that the Somalis were endowed by nature with great talent for poetry. This fact is not only felt by the Somalis themselves, but was also noted by early European explorers.

In the Preface of "The Somali Peninsula" late President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke once stated that "limitations of our material well-being were ..... compensated for.... a spiritual and cultural prosperity of inestimable value: the teaching of Islam on the one hand and lyric poetry on the other"<sup>5</sup>

About one century and a decade earlier, Richard Burton noted, with a great measure of surprise, that despite lacking a written language "the country teems with poets.... Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan, and the great patronize light literature by keeping a poet"<sup>6</sup>

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4. Somalia - A Perspective ,p.39, State University Plaza, New York, 1980.

5. Somali Government(publication), p.v. London,1962. (Dr. Shermarke was Prime Minister then).

6. First Footsteps in East Africa, Vol.I,pp.81-82, Tylston and Edward, London, 1894.

However, it is very sad to learn that to day virtually all the treasure of classical poems noticed by Burton are lost. With the exception of a few lines of poetry often attributed to (Empress) Arraweelo<sup>7</sup> whose arrogantly anti-male reign left many Somali folktales behind, to Garaad Xirsi<sup>8</sup>, better known as Wiilwaal (mad boy) who ruled a tribal confederacy and lived around Jiggiga in the first half of the last century and to Aadan Guray<sup>8</sup> of Mudug Region, the oldest poems in the memory of contemporary poets go as far back as the end of the nineteenth century. And that is less than a century ago.

Before discussing the poems of Wiilwaal and Arraweelo with a view to putting them in their respective historical frames, I will attempt to deal with some recent gross misconceptions about the origin and the melody of Somali poetry.

The celebrities of the 19th-20th century poets<sup>9</sup> include: "Cali Jaamac Haabiil (1850?-1919), Sayid Maxamed Candille Xasan (1856-1920), Salaan Maxamed 'Carrabey' (1870-1940), Raage Ugaas (1880-1910), Faarax Nuur (1880-1930), Xuseen Dhiqle (1884?-1923), Ismaaciil Mire Cilmi (1884-1950), Cali Aadan Gorayo 'Cali-dhuux' (1890-1950),<sup>10</sup> and Qamaan Bulxan Yuusuf (1890-1950)" to put them in the order of their ages.

7. Shire Jaamac Axmed, Muddaynta Aqoonta, Hiddaha & Dhaqanka Soomaaliyeed (cyclostyled), p.4a, Muqdisho, Maarso 1973.

8. Said S. Samater, Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism, p.88, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

9. Ibid.

10. Some scholars contend that Cali-dhuux was much older than suggested, because his challenges to the Sayid posed a formidable threat to the Dervish Movement as early as 1910s when he couldn't have been a teenager.

It is interesting to note that Raage Ugaas who died much younger than all other other celebrities of poets is often said to have invented the poetic formula:

"hoyalaayey hooyaalayeey, hoyalayeey hooye"

The formula is an indicative sign of gabay the long-meter genre poetry, to the exclusion of all other genres. Letter "b" can be a perfect substitute for the first "y" in all four words of the formula. Hence it is permissible to say:

"hobalaayey hoobaalayeey, hobalayeey hoobe".

In addition, vowels in the first three words are inter-changeable. This is made so in order to have different tunes. For example:

hoyalaayey hooyaalayeey, hoyalaayey hooye  
hobalaayey hoobaalayeey, hobalaayey hoobe

The formula's lacking of any meaning made it possible to re-arrange some of the vowels. This re-arrangement can also affect the second hemistich of the formula. Otherwise, this freedom of movement or re-arrangement would not have been possible without changes in the meaning.

It is not astonishing to see people -- though laymen, of course -- suggesting that it was Raage Ugaas himself who had invented the gabay. We will discuss the question as to whether Raage had indeed invented the gabay or this poetry-meter setting: "hooye" or "hoobe", but first we must see clearly the differences between the following three types of inventions:

27. Books

1970

2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105, 2106, 2107, 2108, 2109, 2110, 2111, 2112, 2113, 2114, 2115, 2116, 2117, 2118, 2119, 2120, 2121, 2122, 2123, 2124, 2125, 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, 2130, 2131, 2132, 2133, 2134, 2135, 2136, 2137, 2138, 2139, 2140, 2141, 2142, 2143, 2144, 2145, 2146, 2147, 2148, 2149, 2150, 2151, 2152, 2153, 2154, 2155, 2156, 2157, 2158, 2159, 2160, 2161, 2162, 2163, 2164, 2165, 2166, 2167, 2168, 2169, 2170, 2171, 2172, 2173, 2174, 2175, 2176, 2177, 2178, 2179, 2180, 2181, 2182, 2183, 2184, 2185, 2186, 2187, 2188, 2189, 2190, 2191, 2192, 2193, 2194, 2195, 2196, 2197, 2198, 2199, 2200, 2201, 2202, 2203, 2204, 2205, 2206, 2207, 2208, 2209, 2210, 2211, 2212, 2213, 2214, 2215, 2216, 2217, 2218, 2219, 2220, 2221, 2222, 2223, 2224, 2225, 2226, 2227, 2228, 2229, 2230, 2231, 2232, 2233, 2234, 2235, 2236, 2237, 2238, 2239, 2240, 2241, 2242, 2243, 2244, 2245, 2246, 2247, 2248, 2249, 2250, 2251, 2252, 2253, 2254, 2255, 2256, 2257, 2258, 2259, 2260, 2261, 2262, 2263, 2264, 2265, 2266, 2267, 2268, 2269, 2270, 2271, 2272, 2273, 2274, 2275, 2276, 2277, 2278, 2279, 2280, 2281, 2282, 2283, 2284, 2285, 2286, 2287, 2288, 2289, 2290, 2291, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2295, 2296, 2297, 2298, 2299, 2300, 2301, 2302, 2303, 2304, 2305, 2306, 2307, 2308, 2309, 2310, 2311, 2312, 2313, 2314, 2315, 2316, 2317, 2318, 2319, 2320, 2321, 2322, 2323, 2324, 2325, 2326, 2327, 2328, 2329, 2330, 2331, 2332, 2333, 2334, 2335, 2336, 2337, 2338, 2339, 2340, 2341, 2342, 2343, 2344, 2345, 2346, 2347, 2348, 2349, 2350, 2351, 2352, 2353, 2354, 2355, 2356, 2357, 2358, 2359, 2360, 2361, 2362, 2363, 2364, 2365, 2366, 2367, 2368, 2369, 2370, 2371, 2372, 2373, 2374, 2375, 2376, 2377, 2378, 2379, 2380, 2381, 2382, 2383, 2384, 2385, 2386, 2387, 2388, 2389, 2390, 2391, 2392, 2393, 2394, 2395, 2396, 2397, 2398, 2399, 2400, 2401, 2402, 2403, 2404, 2405, 2406, 2407, 2408, 2409, 2410, 2411, 2412, 2413, 2414, 2415, 2416, 2417, 2418, 2419, 2420, 2421, 2422, 2423, 2424, 2425, 2426, 2427, 2428, 2429, 2430, 2431, 2432, 2433, 2434, 2435, 2436, 2437, 2438, 2439, 2440, 2441, 2442, 2443, 2444, 2445, 2446, 2447, 2448, 2449, 2450, 2451, 2452, 2453, 2454, 2455, 2456, 2457, 2458, 2459, 2460, 2461, 2462, 2463, 2464, 2465, 2466, 2467, 2468, 2469, 2470, 2471, 2472, 2473, 2474, 2475, 2476, 2477, 2478, 2479, 2480, 2481, 2482, 2483, 2484, 2485, 2486, 2487, 2488, 2489, 2490, 2491, 2492, 2493, 2494, 2495, 2496, 2497, 2498, 2499, 2500, 2501, 2502, 2503, 2504, 2505, 2506, 2507, 2508, 2509, 2510, 2511, 2512, 2513, 2514, 2515, 2516, 2517, 2518, 2519, 2520, 2521, 2522, 2523, 2524, 2525, 2526, 2527, 2528, 2529, 2530, 2531, 2532, 2533, 2534, 2535, 2536, 2537, 2538, 2539, 2540, 2541, 2542, 2543, 2544, 2545, 2546, 2547, 2548, 2549, 2550, 2551, 2552, 2553, 2554, 2555, 2556, 2557, 2558, 2559, 2560, 2561, 2562, 2563, 2564, 2565, 2566, 2567, 2568, 2569, 2570, 2571, 2572, 2573, 2574, 2575, 2576, 2577, 2578, 2579, 2580, 2581, 2582, 2583, 2584, 2585, 2586, 2587, 2588, 2589, 2590, 2591, 2592, 2593, 2594, 2595, 2596, 2597, 2598, 2599, 2600, 2601, 2602, 2603, 2604, 2605, 2606, 2607, 2608, 2609, 2610, 2611, 2612, 2613, 2614, 2615, 2616, 2617, 2618, 2619, 2620, 2621, 2622, 2623, 2624, 2625, 2626, 2627, 2628, 2629, 2630, 2631, 2632, 2633, 2634, 2635, 2636, 2637, 2638, 2639, 2640, 2641, 2642, 2643, 2644, 2645, 2646, 2647, 2648, 2649, 2650, 2651, 2652, 2653, 2654, 2655, 2656, 2657, 2658, 2659, 2660, 2661, 2662, 2663, 2664, 2665, 2666, 2667, 2668, 2669, 2670, 2671, 2672, 2673, 2674, 2675, 2676, 2677, 2678, 2679, 2680, 2681, 26

Y. G. 45. 0. 44

7-20-1977

Abstract

6. What is the purpose of the study?

10.18.1988

1. *U. lutea* (L.)

... (1) ... (2) ... (3) ...

[illegible]

59 2 2 2 2

[illegible]

- a) The invention of poetry: That is the ability to compose -- in the first place -- a set of words that make sense and follow a definite strict rule very different from the ordinary speech.
- b) The invention of melody: That is the ability to make -- in the second place -- a melodic sound out of that particular rhythm in order to give the poem not only a sense for the mind to comprehend but also a pleasant sound for the ear to enjoy.
- c) The invention of a formula: That is the ability to make in the third place -- a formula which does not make any sense at all but satisfies every other point raised in "a" and "b" above.

The root of the formula, many suspect, was derived from "hoy" -- meaning "ay! you (singular)" which becomes "hooya" when intended to mean "you (plural)". Others take the "b" version, suggesting that it was derived from "hoo bal" -- meaning "ay! you (singular) take!" In either case, the main function of the formula is for the poet to draw the attention of his audience so that no one misses even the starting substantive lines of the poem. For the same reason, poets often indulge themselves in self-praise in the preface of their poems as a deliberate attempt to stall for time not only to capture the full attention of the audience present, but also to attract the attention of all those in the proximity.

Now if we study version "b" more closely, we will soon discover that "hoobaalayeey" actually fits into one of the work songs for baby sheep and goats.

The song which is a dialogue between women (usually girls) and baby sheep and goats, goes as follows:-

|                 |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Girls:</u>   | hoobeey hobeey<br>hoobaalayey<br>hoobeey hobeey<br>maqaleey warlaay<br>hoobeey hobeey<br>ma laguu warramay?    | oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>oh hoobaalay<br>oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>oh baby sheep and goats<br>oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>did you get the news?<br>oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>who gave me the news?<br>oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>did my brother<br>oh hoobe, oh hoobe<br>came from Waaleed?" |
| <u>Animals:</u> | hoobeey hobeey<br>yaa ii warramay?<br>hoobeey hobeey<br>ma walaalkay baa<br>hoobeey hobeey<br>Waaleed ka yimi? |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

Apparently, the formula not only sets the tune to lead the coming line or the entire song, but it also serves as a chant for the preceding line. We must also note that there exists a visible relationship between this formula and that of the poetry.

Indeed, at close examination, we will discover that most -- if not all -- work-songs and dance-songs have formulaic lines intended both to introduce the tune and to serve as chant. When watering camels -- the most precious possession of the Somali nomads -- the chanting formula which also precedes the substantive lines goes like this:-

|                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| hobeeya hobeey<br>hobeeyaalayow<br>markay tuban tahay<br>amay kala taal<br>amaan lala tago<br>waa tolleey oo<br>looma kala tago | ay hoobe, ay hoobe<br>ay hoobeyaalay<br>when camel comes for water<br>or when her carcass lies here<br>or when she is looted<br>she possesses tribesmen<br>who share all tasks required |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

11. The name of an unknown place.

A good example of a work-song which plays both roles in no uncertain manner is the song for girls to drive sheep and goats home. The exclamatory word "xee" which literally means "ay sheep!" is the root of the chant. Apparently, the girl prefers "xee" in place of "jii" which means "ay goat!", and thus addresses the sheep, perhaps, because their herd had more sheep than goats. Anyhow, the message is for both. Pitching the tune too high at the end of the line, she sings:-

xeheyaaloow  
xeheya oy xee  
maalintaan go'o  
xeheya oy xee  
aan god dheer galo  
xeheya oy xee  
amaan guursado  
xeheya oy xee  
geel la siiyoow

ay xeheya  
ay xee  
the day I die  
ay xee  
enter I a deep grave  
ay xee  
or when I get married  
ay xee  
you are exchanged for camels.

John W. Hohnson, a distinguished American scholar of Somali poetry had correctly noted that "several genres ... are introduced by a series of rhythmic syllables which serve as an introduction to the poem."<sup>12</sup> In addition to Johnson's list of "miniature family" of poetry, other dance-songs such as Batar and Heello also have introductory formulas:

Batar:

hobeyooy hobeya  
hoobeeyooy  
naa Dhudiyeey  
nin dhalasho huwani  
dhar muxuu ku falayaa?

oh hobeyo, oh hobeyo  
oh hoobeeyo  
ay Dhudi<sup>13</sup>  
why does a man from noble clan  
take interest in dress?

12. Heellooy heelleellooy, pp.31-32, Indiana University USA, 1974.

13. Name of a girl in the dance.



Dhaanto:

hellooy hellellooy hellooy hellellooy  
 helleelli kalaynu leenahayeey  
 sidii dhug-dhugleey dhul-dheer mari baa  
 dhawaadayga loo dhegaystaayeey

oh heello, oh heelleello  
 oh hello, oh helleello  
 we sing another heello  
 like a scooter running afar  
 my call is listened all over

Heello:

Another dance-song which has a close association with the Batar is the classic heello,<sup>14</sup> often played by the girls when alone. When young men come, the dance is turned into Batar, most probably. Here, the girl sings and dances till dawn.

ay hee heellooy hee  
 hobiyaala hoobeeyooy hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee  
 waagii ma daalacayeey hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee  
 xiddigii ma daateeneey hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee  
 Daylo - naysha maw cidayeey hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee  
 hooyaday dagaal badaneey hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee  
 berri ma dilaysaayeey hee  
 ay hee heellooy hee

14. This is different from the modern heello discussed by John W. Johnson in his book: *Heellooy helleellooy*, Indiana University Press, USA, 1974.

oh yee hello, yee  
 oh hobiya, oh hobe yee  
 oh yee hello, yee  
 has dawn rose? yee  
 oh yee hello, yee  
 has the stars fallen? yee  
 oh yee hello, yee  
 has Deylo<sup>15</sup> bleated for the she-calf? yee  
 oh yee hello, yee  
 is my quarrelsome mother, yee  
 oh yee hello, yee  
 to beat me tomorrow? yee  
 oh yee hello, yee.

There is little dispute that well before Man had domesticated animals, mother reared and cared for her loving babies. If that is so, then it is not far wrong to assume that she could have first invented the idea of singing to her babies. And man might have imitated her later than otherwise. Just to see the similarities between the poetic formula and mother's song (lullaby), let us take one example:-

hobeeya hobeey hobeeya  
 hobeey hoobaalayey ya  
 ma geeli baa arooray  
 arooroo oon ku raagay?  
 ma naaskii baa gabloolay  
 gabloolaad guluf ka weyday?  
 oh hobe, oh hobe, oh hobe  
 oh hobe oh hoobeeyaale  
 have camels gone to the well,  
 after a prolonged thirsty?  
 have the breasts dried up  
 so dried that it failed you?

---  
 15. Name of a she-sheep. Bleating suggest that she is in the lactating period.

Generally speaking, the functions of Somali poetry can be classified into three categories: The first category which -- many believe -- is the eldest, is essentially associated with all types of work. This category has many varieties ranging from lullaby to herding livestock. The second category is associated with entertainment. This category, too, has a wide variety ranging from classic poetry to dance-songs. The third category which has much less varieties than any of the other two, belongs to the world of rites in spiritual healings by witch-craft. These include Mingis, Boorane, Saar, and Lumbi, just to name a few.

However, this is not suggest that work-songs and ritual-dances are deprived of entertainment. Far from it, both of them possess as muchh entertainment as those categorized as entertainment proper. The difference lies in the fact that the primary reason for one to be involved in work-songs or in ritual-dances is not for entertainment itself, whereas entertainment songs or dances are sought for pleasure itself: i.e. no motive of work or healing is present here. There is another marked difference between the third category and the other two: the rites category is a vast profit-making business -- an element entirely absent from the first and the second categories.

Many literary scholars believe that Man had invented the work-songs, perhaps, well before the entertainment songs of which the poetry is one. This is to suggest that whoever had invented the poetic formula "hoobaalayeey" might, therefore, have borrowed from the work-songs "hobeeya hobeey hobeeya" for lullaby or alternatively that for the baby sheen and goats "hoobeey hobeey".

However, all agree that whoever invented this formula had actually rendered its function both limited and dispensable. Limited, because it was meant to be recited as the starting line of the long-meter gabay<sup>16</sup> only to the exclusion of all other shorter meter genres to be discussed later. Dispensable,

because it was meant to add no meaning to the substance of the message of the poem it delivers to the audience, as this anonymous couplet aptly asserts:

1. Hooyaalayeey gabayga waa, ugu horraysaaye  
(hooyaalayeey leads the poem)
2. Halna kuma tartee maansadaa, lagu hagaajaaye.  
(but adds not to its meaning, except it sets its tune).

Thus, the poet himself admits that it is dispensable. And in anyway, in reality not all poets use the formula when reciting their poems. If we set this argument aside and examine the structure of the Somali language, we will note that the language is full of alliterative pairs of antonyms and words of associative or complementary functions -- alliteration being one of the distinctive features of the Somali poetry. Let us take some examples.

16. Gabay: the most classic type of Somali verse.

Somali pairs

sabab iyo saan  
 nin iyo naag  
 tix iyo tiraab  
 geeri ama geeddi  
 tiro iyo tayo  
 masruuf iyo marriin  
 bad iyo berri  
 buur iyo bannaan  
 ban iyo buur  
 xilo iyo xoolo  
 dherer iyo dhumuc  
 joog iyo jiif  
 miyi iyo magaalo

English translation

cause and effect  
 man and woman  
 verse and prose  
 death or departure  
 quantity and quality  
 feeding and clothing(us,wives)  
 sea and land  
 mountain and plain  
 plain and mountain  
 wife and wealth  
 length and breadth  
 vertical and horizontal  
 rural and urban

From these examples, one can discern that the poetry is inherently present in the fibre and flesh of the language itself. Therefore, one can argue that poetry is very old -- or nearly as old as the language.

and then  
 land

More often than not, writing any one of the phrases of pairs the other way round results in a rather strange sound and taste. This is more so, when they are in the syntax as a phrase. i.e. whereas "tix iyo tiraab" sound smooth and melodic, "tiraab iyo tix" gives one's tongue a sense of stumbling after the first word. This explains why "buur iyo bannaan" (mountain and plain) have become "ban iyo buur" (plain and mountain). While the meaning remains the same, the re-arrangement takes care of the sound. Thus, "tiraab iyo tix" sounds as odd as writing "moil and toil", "tear and wear" or "means and ways" instead of the usual pattern which is "toil and moil", "wear and tear" and "ways and means". Of course, technically the pattern of these phrases of pairs can be reversed in ordinary prose, but one loses a melodic taste alone.

Not only this. It is also interesting to observe that in all cases, the first word of the pair has either less or the same number of moras<sup>17</sup> as the second word -- but never more. The re-arrangement of "buur and bannaan" is a good example here too. It has become "ban and buur".

The explanation for this phenomenon may be that when we are reciting the phrase, we are inadvertently observing the intrinsic rule of scansion, or miisaanka which literally means "balance". This is yet another important sign to indicate that the Somali language is essentially a poetic language. So unless we are suggesting that the language is only a few centuries old, it would be difficult to imagine that the poetry is a few hundreds of years old.

So far we have dealt with the question as to whether Raage had invented poetry or the poetic formula. Now let us discuss the poems of Wiilwaal and Arraweelo -- two legendary figures whose wits are still alive in our folktales.

17. In a short vowel there is one mora, in a long vowel there are two moras. So it is the basic unit of vowels, according to two Somali scholars: Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac "Gaarriye" and Cabdillaahi Diiriye Guuleed. John W. Johnson also contributed the foot to the study.

Prince Xirsi Garaad Paarax who soon became known as Wiilwaal (mad boy) and then as Garaad Xirsi was born (probably around Jigjiga) in 1801, according to Sheekh Caaqib Sheekh Cabdullaahi, a living relative who has written a small (unpublished) book<sup>18</sup> on him. Wiilwaal was a poet, a warrior and a Garaad who ruled his men first by coercion when he was young and later by cohesion and cooperation when he grew matured.

Though Sheekh Caaqib did not say at what age was the Prince crowned, there is ample evidence in the annals of oral history that he inherited the throne before he married. And oral tradition teaches us that young men -- specially the wealthy -- were expected to marry at early ages if not at puberty.

So if we guess the Prince to be 15-20 years old when he was crowned, following the assassination of his father (Garaad Paarax) by Qayre Shirwac<sup>19</sup>, we may not go far wrong. Our guess could be undermined by the known fact that at the time Wiilwaal had been away in the battle-front commanding a formidable force. But then we can resort to lean on the customary practice that a male youth was expected to assume full responsibility at the age of 12. This practice is best recorded by the following anonymous poem:

18. Wiilwaal iyo Shakhsiyaad kale, p.1,  
(manuscript at SOMAC), Muqdisho 1982.

19. Ibid, p.5

1. wiil labiyo toban jirey hadduu, lali ahaan waayo
2. laystaanta dirireed hadduu, loodin kari waayo
3. muslin layl u soo galay hadduu, luun ka bi'in waayo
4. raganimo luddii kuma jirtoo, liicyaye ogaada.

1. If a boy fails to become an able man at 12
2. If he fails to fight at the deadly wars
3. If he fails to remove hunger from Muslim  
guests who arrived at night
4. Know that he is devoid of manhood and  
is bent to fall.

This quatrain strengthens the supposition that Prince Wiilwaal could have been at his teens when he began commanding men at the battle. When he was sent for to be crowned, he responded in a poem which clearly tells us that he had begun fighting at a very early age:

1. daa'imo anoo aan wax badan, dirir ku foognaaye
2. diric aabbahay bayga dhigay, ina duleed jiife
3. haddii lay dabbaal-dogo anoo, marada dooyeystay
4. dadkii an u halgami jirey hadday, dooxatadu layso
5. oo ay duunyadoodii dhacaan, daa'imada maalin
6. haddaan caydh la dalandoolo sow, dawlad meer maaha?
7. doqonniimadii anan u dhalan, laygu dagi maayo.

1. From childhood I was engaged in warfare
2. my clever father warned me of being a gutter-snipe
3. if I am crowned while just sitting
4. if my people are slaughtered
5. and the enemy loot the livestock one day
6. and if I am reduced to poverty  
isn't it a deprivation of sovereignty?
7. Fool as I was not born  
I shalln't be tricked.



From the oral literature, this poem seems to be the eldest of Wiilwaal's many living short poems. In this poem, Prince Wiilwaal thus decided to remain in the battle-front to be on guard for an impending enemy attack. But at the same time, he had ordered his kinsmen to proceed with the crowning ceremony by putting his turban on a tree and pouring the crowning-milk on it. He did this symbolism in a successful attempt to dispel any vacuum -- even if only technical -- in the continuity of the Bartire leadership.

Wiilwaal's history is full of interesting episodes of bravery, cruelty, generosity and hospitality -- but always with wits and charm. It is also punctuated with poetry and proverbs.

Mostly, Wiilwaal's vengeful wars were to or from the Ogaadeen who seceded from Bartire rule some 5-6 generations earlier. In the following poem, Wiilwaal reported his success at the latest battle for water wells.

1. Ogaadeen Garduur iyo hadduu, webi ka soo gaaso
2. meeshiyo Garloo-gubay hadduu, galawgu aadaamo
3. guntadaye haddaan khaylidii, labada law geeyo
4. oon Weyrax nadigii geshoo, guradu haaroowdo
5. garbidaan ku tiirsaday rag inu, garab maraan sheegtay
6. Golyo maalintaan idhi darkii, inu galaan sheegtay
7. gaaladi ka goor iyo ka goor, reebi nagu gooysey
8. Guray maalintaan dilay colkeed, inu gudhaan sheegtay
9. geeraarsha dheer iyo sagaal, waran galaan sheegtay
10. guubaabo xoogliyo inaan, cadaw ganaan sheegtay.

1. If Ogaadeen comes from Garduur<sup>20</sup> to fight
2. if bustard calls are heard all over  
from her to Garloo-gubay<sup>20</sup>
3. if I gird my loin-cloth  
wearing it not lower than the knees
4. and I mount on (my horse) Weyrax<sup>21</sup>  
leaving scars on its back
5. I claim that men avoided to face me
6. then the day I called for (my cow) Golyo<sup>22</sup>  
I claim she drunk from the well
7. the infidels<sup>23</sup> attacked us time and again
8. the day I killed Guray<sup>24</sup>  
I claim that infidels vanished.
9. I claim to be a great poet,  
whose spear pierced nine men
10. I claim to incite kinsmen strongly  
while shooting the enemy.

Indeed, if he was a great poet as many contend, then (alas!) much of his treasure is lost. All that is remembered is garbled stanzas from a very few short poems. Nevertheless, many proverbs and sayings were preserved from the wisdom of his stories and are used every day.

- 20. Ogaadeen homestead south of Jigjiga.  
 21. His horse's name. (note: in the second hemistich I preferred other people's version for clarity).  
 22. The name of a cow. Note that cattle formed Bartire's economic base.  
 23. Possibly, this refers to earlier wars with the Gallas or Amharas.  
 24. Possibly this refers to earlier wars with Amharas for another version of the line says: "Guray maalintaan dilay Amhaar, inu go'aan sheegtay" (On the day I killed Guray, I claim that Amharas suffered heavy losses).

Wiilwaal was fond of conducting business with enigmatic wits and riddles. He loved to test the wits of his kinsmen. He began this at an early age, too. He is said to have married his first wife<sup>25</sup> only after he had discovered that she solved the secret of some of his potential riddles<sup>26</sup>. He practised these riddles to his wife and his kinsmen alike, and he posed them in prose as much as in verse.

Suspecting that his nephew<sup>27</sup> might have had an affair with his wife, Wiilwaal invited him to a shax<sup>28</sup> and then engaged him into poetic riddles as follows:

Wiilwaal's riddle:

1. sac wanaagsan oo weyl watoo, ceel wahdiya jooga
2. oo yarehe waalwaalan oo, wiilasha eryooda
3. inadan waana naaskiisa qaban, ii mar wacad Eebbe.
1. (If) there is a nice cow with a female-calf,  
near a well
2. and this crazy cow chases the boys
3. that you never touched its teat,  
swear by God!

25. Sheekh Caaqib Sheekh Cabdullaahi, Wiilwaal iyo Shakhsiyaad kale, (manuscript at SOMAC), p.7. Muqdisho 1982. Sheekh Caaqib identified Wiilwaal's first wife as Timiro Caddey, and reported three others one of whom he also attributed to Timiro's wits.
26. He ordered his kinsmen to slaughter a lamb and bring to him "the one piece of meat that accommodates the interests of all men". So was done, and to the amazement of the Garaad, an elderly man of low profile came with the answer by delivering a throat -- an offal! -- with a sign of reluctance and shivering. At Wiilwaal's rage, he was soon to disclose that it was the idea of his daughter, Timiro.
27. Sheekh Caaqib shunned to report this known story, but attributed similar wits to a certain cousin -- Cigaal Guuleed.

Nephew's answer:

1. hal an ku weydiiy
2. hal waraabe cunay oo misana, weli xalaaleeyey
3. waax raro haddii lagu yidhaa, aan wax kugu raacin
4. inadan weel u soo qaadateen, ii mar wacad Eebbe.

1. Oh uncle you gave me an advice,  
let me ask you a question.
2. (if) a she-camel is killed by hyena,  
and slaughtered by the owner
3. if you are told to take a quarter free
4. that you won't bring a vessel for it,  
swear by God!

Sheekh Caaqib reported the climax of Qayrre Shirwac's poem at the tragic moment when he shafted his spear into Wiilwaal's father, Garaad Faarax.

1. qadaar malab ahoo meel qotoma, oo rag wada quuto
  2. Qayrroow aduun ka qatanoow, qadaan kari maayo.
1. A plate full of honey to be shared by all men
  2. to the exclusion of Qayrre alone, I won't accept.

From this oral literature, we can arrive at a reasonably safe conclusion that the role of poetry was as prominent among Somalis at the turn of the 18th century as it is today -- two centuries later. This bears testimony to what Burton observed in "the First Footsteps in east Africa" in 1850s. As the folktales alone help reconstruct our distant past, from here, we have no alternative but to make a long leap to discuss Empress Arraweelo, a legendary figure in the Somali folktales. She was said to be a woman-poet; but before discussing her poems, we will have to examine her identity and her epoch.

From a vast and rich oral literature, we can learn that Arraweelo had once established a monolithic pre-Islamic authoritarian rule over Somalis. However, the tales dispute on her nationality and her sphere of influence as much as scholars dispute on the etymology of her name and her epoch.

Many folktales claim she was Somali; some hold her to be Oromo and yet others say she was from Yemen. I am tending to support the first claim not because I am Somali, but rather because both the social settings of her tales and the material used in them seem to me wholly typical of Somali nomadic life-style<sup>29</sup> where camel husbandry and roving encampment has been, and still is, prevailing as the bases of the subsistence economy

29. In one tale, she demanded bare camels be loaded with bare kariiri (very small uneatable wild fruits) using no containers whatsoever. In another, she demanded rain-bow sized dhigo (half-circle shaped long wooden pieces that help sustain the upper part of the traditional movable Somali house--agal). In yet another tale, she ordered for a long journey of the encampment in an attempt to search the camel caravan of Oday Biqo, the uncastrated aged male who always succeeded in helping his castrated countrymen solve her exacting conundrums.

Several parts of Somalia are said to have been her locations. The majority of the tales, though, contend that she lived around the tip of the Horn of Africa, most probably in Sanaag.<sup>30</sup> But that her tales intruded every house everywhere in Somalia is undisputed.

There are several tales that speculate the etymology of her name. Each of her two Somali names — Carraweelo and Arraweelo — is often assigned to different meanings. Some people believe that her original name, or nick-name to be more precise, was Arraweelo and that at a much later time the "a" — like such other letters as "x", "q" and "kh" — slipped into the Somali language in the dynamic use of pharynx. This phenomenon was researched by a distinguished Somali scholar, Ambassador Saalax Maxamed Cali, better known as Shariif Saalax.<sup>31</sup> So she became "Carraweelo" — a version used by such known Somali scholars as Shire Jaamaq Axmed.<sup>32</sup>

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30. In east Ceelaaqo, an imaginary tale tells us that when urinating she used to put each of her legs on one of two neighbouring rocks — meters apart — at the edge of the sea.
31. The Unity of the Somali Language, a paper presented at the 3rd Congress of SSIA at Rome, p.5, May 1986.
32. Muddaynta Aqoonta, Hiddaha & Dhaqanka Soomaaliyeed (cyclostyled) p.4a, Muqdisho, March 1973.

Retaining or drop the "c" does not really matter very much, for in either case, the tale tells us that it is not her actual name, but a nick-name she acquired from her behaviour at adolescent age. One tale that is prevalent in the northern and eastern regions believes that the concept of making irrational demands did in fact exist in the language and that the word, "arraweelo" which describes such a concept stands both for the noun and the verb.<sup>33</sup> So the Empress drew her nick-name from it.

Another tale also prevalent in the same regions as well as much of the southern regions has the tale vice versa. That is to say: at first, the name "Arraweelo" was an ordinary name; but later it was used as a verb to describe any arrogant and ignominious behaviour similar to hers, resulting in the subsequent public refrain from a name associated with shame and cruelty.

In the Maay dialect too — I am told — there is a plausible tale on the etymology of her name. "Arraweelo is a combination of two words: arro (land) and weelo (possess)", so goes the tale, "and thus the compound name was to describe her dire desire for a grandiose empire."

Equally, the period in which she lived — if she ever lived — which is least speculated about by the living tales is as much disputed as her name, nationality and location. In a study he intended to date some of the country's oral heritages, Shire Jaamac Axmed dated Carraweelo as back as 2000-3500 b.c.<sup>34</sup> or 4000-5500 years ago.

33. Proponents of this view conjugate "arraweelo" with such verbs as caato (getting slimmer), lulq (getting sleepy) and bogso (getting healed).
34. Muddaynta Aqoonta, Hiddaha & Dhaqanka Soomaaliyeed (cyclostyled) p.4a, Muqdisho, March 1973.

How this Empress, as many prefer to call her, had managed to get such a powerful throne in the first place or why she turned so cruelly anti-male is speculated very little in the tales of her conundrums.

At least one tale claims that Arraweelo lived long before Islam came to the world and that -- contrary to the then prevailing custom -- she inherited the empire, being the only child of her father, not without opposition from the male population. "In the sequel," goes on the tale, "the animosity that ensued from this bitter fight for power, turned her so cruelly anti-male".

But that her reign of terror lasted long until no male in her domain -- except Oday Biigo and her grandson -- had escaped castration is vividly evident in the folktales.

Despite being so ostentatiously anti-male, the living tales tell us that she had a daughter and that her daughter, too, had a son who was to kill the grandmother later. These suggest that both Arraweelo and her daughter had some form of cohabitation if not of marital relationships. But the tales fail to give us any suggestions as to whether her husband and her son-in-law were also castrated or whether they had died before Arraweelo had acquired the intent or the ability to have men castrated.

That the idea of castration is a later comer is also quite apparent from the logic of the tales. However, the tales are invariably characterized by her consistent tests of and challenges to male wisdom.



For reasons not strange to the Somali thinking even to this day, she believed there existed a mutual relationship between man's sexual ability and his mental ability, or rather between his impotence and his unintelligibility.<sup>35</sup> Thus, she castrated all men in the belief that impotent men would lose all their mental powers but retain their muscular powers. Mental powers -- she thought -- enabled men to dominate women.

Scientists can say whether her argument finds any bases in biology. From experience, though, an uncastrated camel is observed to be recalcitrant, brave and aggressive; in contrast, the castrated one is obedient, timid and unaggressive. In fact a veterinairan friend explained to me that testicles produce hormones called testosterone which provides mental energy and activity. But when castrated, this source of supply is lost and as a result the male becomes docile and timid. The male also loses energy in sexual activities and becomes unfallly. So, probably Arrawelo had borrowed the idea from the camel-husbandry, after empirical observations.

However, psychologists agree that, since castration constitutes a painfully cruel mutilation of man's beloved organ, this inhuman act is bound to have serious adverse effects on the normalcy of his mental state.

All her poetry is lost except a single line that was preserved in an episode in which she demanded that no water was to be drawn from the well until she had a bath there. As Somalis always loved camels, men kept coming every day to remind her that the camels were thirsty, but it took her days to wash every part of her bulky body with all the diligence in the world.

35. Always, she rightly suspected that an uncastrated old man was hidden somewhere for consultations.

1. maantana far baar mayrayaa, hay fadhiyo geelu<sup>36</sup>
1. Today too, I am washing a finger,  
(so) let the camels wait for me.

Though the idea to plot to kill her was conceived long ago, the rage of this episode had probably hastened it. Both the motive and the method of the assassination plot are described in this anonymous quatrain.<sup>37</sup>

1. Arraweelo waa bay arrimi, ugu abaadaysey
2. waa bay Ugaas iyo ahayd, Aaqil taliyaa e
3. waxay eedday geelay iyadu, oomiyaay tidhiye
4. uub baa manjaha loogu riday, ololki naareede
1. Arraweelo once longed for to rule
2. (so) she became Ugaas<sup>38</sup> and Aaqil<sup>39</sup>
3. (but) she lamented her order  
to keep the camels thirsty
4. she was thrown into the blazing hole.

At any rate, if we are to give any credence to popular folktales, then Arraweelo places Somali poetry into the remote past. Shire Jaamac Axmed, one of the prominent Somali Somalists generously dated her empire at 4000-5500 years back.<sup>40</sup>

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36. Shire Jaamac Axmed, "Muddaynta Aqoonta, Hiddala & Dhaqanka Soomaaliyeed", (cyclostyled), p.4a, Muqdisho 1973.
37. Sheekh Caaqil Sheekh Cabdullaahi, Wiilwaal am iyo Shakhsiyaad kale, (manuscript at SOMAC), p.91, Muqdisho 1982.
38. Ugaas; a tribal title equivalent to Sultan.  
(also Caaqil):
39. Aaqil: a tribal title little lower than the Uga Ugaas.