

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Somali Poetry: The Case of the Miniature Genres

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5071c0j4>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Rirache, Mohamed Abdillahi

Publication Date

1989

DOI

10.5070/F7172016876

Copyright Information

Copyright 1989 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Somali Poetry the Case of the Miniature Genres

by
Mohamed Abdillahi Rirache

Many observers of Somali society have been very impressed by the Somali veneration of poets and poetry; many references have been made to this very important aspect of Somali culture. In 1854, Richard Burton observed that the country was teeming with poets, poetasters and poetitos, and that every man had a good ear for recognizing a good poem from a bad one.¹

A century later (1964) Professors Andrzejewski and Lewis admired Somali poets for achieving worthwhile results in the very difficult medium of Somali prosody; they were also impressed by feats of memory by the reciters of poetry, some of whom were poets.² In reference to Somali poetry, Said Samater, a Somali scholar, seconded these earlier foreign scholars in their assessment of Somali poetry writing:

The very form of the art has been a factor distinguishing prominent poets from less talented ones. Somalis consider a line to be poetry when the units of which it is composed are alliterative and balance one another with rhythmic regularity. Even the most elaborate poets and reciters are unable to clearly express the complex rules of Somali verse.³

It is because of its importance to both the Somalis themselves and the observers of Somali society that Somali poetry is a major component of Somali studies. However, the different Somali poetic genres were not identified for a long time. It was shortly after the Somali language was put into a script that Abdillahi Diriye Guled and Mohammed Hashi Dhama discovered Somali poetic scansion or meter (MIISAN) based on vowel numbers and their arrangements.⁴

Though this opened the way for identifying Somali poetic genres, some of the most basic rules and genres were not given a conclusive treatment. In complete agreement with Said Samater, "even the most elaborated poets and reciters are unable to clearly express the complex rules of Somali verse."⁵

Using poetic scansion, scholars identified the most famous genres such as GABAY, BARAANBUR, GEERAAR, and JIIFTO, but the smaller genres, though not less important, remained either unknown or vaguely defined. According to Somali poetic scansion, a genre has a certain number of vowels, some long and some short, arranged in a

certain way. If we depend on the number alone, there are many genres which have the same number of vowels; however, a trained ear can still recognize differences between genres. Therefore it is equally important to establish how the vowels are arranged and how each line gets its self-balancing.

With my colleagues Abdi Migane and Omer Ma'allin, we tried to identify the smaller genres; we were struck by the fact that the Somali poetic genres are far more numerous than we thought. As an oral society Somalis devised songs for every type of work. Of course, this resulted in the emergence of many verses or genres. These work songs, with their simple vowel arrangements, the shortness of the lines and the verses' harmonious rhythm, made it easier for every Somali pastoralist, from a very young age, to memorize and sing them.

Most of the short genres belong to Somali children's literature or poetry. Most of these children's verses or genres are the basis for the more complex verses or genres. By starting with the shortest genres, in a very descriptive way, I will try to identify different genres and establish the relations between them.

A. The shortest genre which we have identified has four vowels. The verse is taken from a woman's work song for pounding grains in the mortar (MOOYAHA).

- | | | |
|--------------|-------|-------------------|
| (4) MOO/YAHA | 2 : 2 | The mortar |
| (4) MAGA/CII | 2 : 2 | What is its name? |

The self-balancing within each line is in the vowel arrangement of 2:2, but they are not fixed in their arrangement. They can be either all long or all short; in most cases one part has long vowels while the other can be short.

B. the second category of genres belongs to the six-vowel system. Though there may be many genres in this category, we have identified only two.

I. The first of the two consists of verses sung when watering animals (SHUBAAL). For each line to have its self-balancing it seems that the six vowels must go in pairs.

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------|
| 1 GEELU/GEEL/FULAY | 3/2 : 2 : 2 |
| 2 GAADHI/MAA/YEE | 3/2 : 2 : 2 |
| 3 HAKA/DABA/FULO | 3/2 : 2 : 2 |

The vowels do not have fixed positions. The long ones and the short ones can exchange positions. When a line begins with a long vowel,

the number of vowels, at least in writing, are apparently seven, but when singing the singer shortens the vowel at the beginning of the line. Therefore, we consider that the third line can be taken as a standard line of this genre.

II. The second genre in this category is taken from verses used in the SEDEXLAY, a folkloric dance. This particular verse, the MARJUUQA, is used only in certain parts during the course of the dance. This short and sharp verse is:

NAA/MALAYKO	2 : 4
MAY/LINKAYGA	2 : 4
FOOL/MAROODI	2 : 4
SAW/MAMOODID	2 : 4

In contrast to the first genre in this category, each line of the MARJUUQA gets its self-balancing in the vowel arrangement of 2 : 4. The vowels also have fixed positions: they should come in the arrangement of long/short/long/short.

C. The third category of genres belongs to a seven-vowel system. Like the genres in the second category, we have identified two.

I. The first of the two is taken from a children's song MAQALAY WARLAY. They sing it when marching baby sheep, singing:

MAQALAY /WARLAY	O, uninformed baby sheep,
MA LAGUU /WARRAMAY	weren't you are told,
INACALI /LA DILAY	That Ali has been assassinated
OO CUMAR /LA DILAY	and Omer has been assassinated
OO WARAN /DHUL GALAY	And spear were put to operate . .
OO DHIIG /QULQULAY	And blood was let flow.

The self-balancing within each line is in the vowel arrangement of 4 : 3. At the same time the vowel positions are not fixed: a long vowel can be replaced by two short vowels. This is particularly true of the first part of this genre's lines which has four vowels, but since the second part has three vowels in it, there must always be a short vowel.

II. The second genre in this category whose verses are taken from children's song, WARYAA WARAABE, in contrast to the first genre,

gets its self-balancing in the vowel arrangement 3 : 4. Besides, the vowel positions are fixed.

WARYAA WARAABE	Hey Hyena,
XAGGEED KU ROORI	Where are you running to
XAGGI KHADIJJA	To where Khadiija was.

D. The fourth category of genres belongs to the eight-vowel system.

I. The first of the two genres which we have identified is taken from a children's song, HELLADA BUTIILE; it refers to a children's story about a human like monster, BUTI, that used to feed on the tender flesh of children,

HELLADA/ BUTIILE	The song of Butiile
SARE LOO/ MAQAADO	shoul'n't be sung with a
	high voice,
HOOS LOO/ MAQAADO	shouldn't be sung with a
	low voice.

As one can see, the self-balancing within each line is in the vowel arrangement of 4 : 4; the vowel positions of the first part are not fixed, but in contrast to the second part vowel positions are fixed in the arrangement of short/long/short.

II. The second genre in this category is also taken from a children's song, MAROODI/ CADHOOLE. It refers to an elephant with a skin disease.

MAROODI/ CADHOOLE	Hey, Mr. Elephant!
HADDII COL/ LA SHEEGO	If an enemy comes
CADAADDA/ KU MEERE	you hide behind the acacia
	tree
HASHII COS/ SOB WAATAN	But the she-camel Cossob
	is here.

Like the first genre the self-balancing within each line is in the vowel arrangement 4 : 4, but unlike it the vowel positions are fixed for both parts of the verse line. They should come in the arrangement of short/long/short/short/long/short.

E. The fifth category of genres belongs to the nine-vowel system. We identified one genre only. But with this category the major and the most famous Somali poetic genres begin. To most people it is known as JIFTO or JIB. Most of the songs that go with Somali Folkloric

dances come from this genre. Each line of its verse gets its self-balancing from the vowel grouping 4 : 5, but the vowel positions are not fixed. They come in this form:

FARASKANA/DHEXDOWGA EG

O! the one who resembles the horse on her waist
DHUDIYEY/MA NABADBAA
O Dhudi, are you in peace. . .

F. The sixth category of genres belongs to the ten vowel system. Although there are several genres in this category, I will confine my discussion to two of them.

I. The first of the two is GEERAAR, one of the best known Somali poetic genres. It is flexible in the way in which it either takes additional vowels or drops some without changing its character. Sometimes it can have nine vowels: ISKU GOOYEY/CIYAARTA (9). Sometimes it can have eleven vowels: NIN CALOOLA/CAD JOOGAYOO (11). But, on the average, most examples of GEERAAR verse have ten vowels. Each line gets its self-balancing from a vowel grouping of 5 : 5; the number of vowels in a line is nine, it will be 5 : 4, or if it has eleven, it will be 5 : 6. It seems that the vowel position of the GEERAAR are not fixed, but the eight vowels of the middle of the line, or at the end, have fixed positions in the arrangement of short/long/short/short/long/short.

MAALINTII CUMARAADAN

II. The second genre in this category is taken from a woman's work song that is sung while extracting butter from milk in the DHIL or KHODE (two different milk vessels).

HAANTII/BUROY II BAX

O! the milk vessel Buro give me butter.

Each line of the verse within this genre gets its self-balancing with the vowel grouping of 4 : 6. The vowels in the first part of the line have a fixed position, but in most cases, those of the second part also have fixed positions, coming in an arrangement of short/long/long/short.

What I have discussed above are some of the basic Somali poetic genres which I consider simple. But I believe that for each category the number of genres identified are not the only ones. A genre can be formed with any vowel grouping or vowel arrangements. Therefore, for each category, other genres can belong.

By combining two lines of a genre, one can create a compound genre. The famous genre of HIRWO, known to some as WIGLO or DHAANTO, belongs to this category. Each line of the HIRWO is two times that of the SHUBAAL (B I.) The line:

SIDII CIRKU HOO
RAY MEEL COSSOBLOO

is made up of two lines of the SHUBAAL genre. Therefore, for any genre which is made up of two lines of a simple genre, a compound genre exists. In the same way, by combining two different simple genres, a new compound genre exists. Thus, genre formation is a continuous process in Somali poetry.

There is also an interrelation between the simple genres. We stated that the simplest genre, (A) MOOYAHA has four vowels; by adding a grouping of three we can:

(A 1) MOOYÁHA + 3V = CIMAQALAY WARLAY = 4/3

Again:

(A 2) MOOYAHA + 4VS (in a fixed vowel arrangement of short/long/short) = 4/4 = (D 1) HEELLADA BUTIILE

(A 3) MOOYAHA + 5V = 4/5 = JIIFTO/JIIB

(A 4) MOOYAHA + 6V = 4/6 = HAANTII BUROY II BAX

In the same way, there are some other genres which came from one another. The MARJUUQA genre (B II) with the vowel grouping of 2 : 4 (FOOL MAROODI), when a short vowel is put at the front we have 1 + 2 : 4 = 3/4 = MAFOOL MAROODI = (C II) = WARYAA WARAABE.

By making the arrangement 3 + 1 short : 4, adding a short vowel to the first vowel grouping of three, we have 4 : 4 = WARYAABE WARAABE. The genre in (D II) = MAROODI CADHOOLE. By putting a short vowel in front of the arrangement 1 + 4 : 4 = 5 : 4 = MAMAROODI CADHOOLE, we can have a line of a GEERAAR (F I). Therefore, in most cases, we can have a genre by adding a vowel to an existing arrangement or by dropping one from it.

In conclusion, the identification of Somali poetic genres will make it easier for students of Somali poetry to not only understand its nature, but by utilizing it for composing in a more efficient way. In modern compositions Somalis do not only use traditional genres, but also create new ones by making different combinations. I believe that

there remains a lot of work still to be done in understanding the complex nature of Somali poetry.

¹B.W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, Somali Poetry: An Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 45-46.

²Idem.

³Katheryne S. Loughran et al., eds., Somalia in Word and Image (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 27-32.

⁴Idem, pp. 35-37.

⁵Idem, pp. 27-32.