Somali literature

Somali oral literature

Data on Somali literary traditions were published already in the second half of the 19th cent. by explorers such as Burton and Robecchi Bricchetti, geographers such as Paulitschke, and linguists such as Hunter (1880), Reinisch and others. These early sources are reviewed in Andrzejewski (1983). Significantly, Burton (1856:115f.) wrote: "The country teems with poets, poetasters, poetitos, poetaccios": every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions, whereas a false quantity or a prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation".

This major type of oral poetry is discussed under the entry maanso, as it is called by Somali scholars such as seeb Gaama' (Jaamac Cumar Ciise 1974:ivf.), Yaasin 'Ismaan (Yaasin Cismaan Keenadiid 1984:62f.) and Mahamed 'Abdi (Maxamed Cabdi Maxamed 1989:3). It includes different genres, is always authorial (s. also Orwin 2005) and, before the spread of literacy, it was always sung, not recited. Little is known about the equivalents of maanso in the interriverine area such as, e.g., the tradition of praise poetry in Afgooye on the lower Šabeelle River (Wabi Šaballe).

Poetic style and sung performances characterize several other genres, such as (i) dance songs, that are frequently accompanied by hand clapping, feet stamping or drums, and (ii) work songs. Such genres are generally not authorial and much shorter than maanso poems. Dance songs vary regionally, e.g., the daanto is traditionally widespread in the northern and western Somali-speaking areas, the sīrib in the coastal areas to the north of Mogadishu, and the saar in the south-west. On particular occasions, dance songs are improvised in poetic contests between talented youths. Work songs accompany different traditional activities, and can be divided into (a) male work songs such as camel-watering songs or camel-loading songs, and (b) female work songs such as shepherd songs, songs for grinding cereals, churning butter, weaving mats etc. (s. Maxamed Cabdi Maxamed 1989:176ff.; Banti – Giannattasio 1996:103ff., 116–22). Particular castes like the hunters have their own genres such as the maanyo songs (s. Ciise Maxamed Siyaad 1988).

After World War II the modern Somali song developed from different genres of dance songs through various stages like the baluuo and the heello (s. Andrzejewski – Lewis 1964:49ff.; Johnson 1974). It merges traditional poetry with popular culture, its themes ranging from politics to social critique and love.

Oral texts not necessarily marked by poetic style are, e.g., genealogies that are pervasive among the Somali (genealogy in social life). Complete recitations of one's genealogy (abtirsiinyo) often involve dozens of names, from the nearest forefathers to the legendary ancestors of all Somali. In a well known maanso poem seeb 'Ali ‘Abdirahmaan, also known as seeb 'Ali "Maģeerteen" or seeb 'Ali "Duulaa" in 'Merka, traced his ancestry to Adam and Noah, before his clan's forefather. Here are its fist five lines in Somali orthography:

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Ummadda Eebbahay badane, bani-Aadan baan abay Nuucci baddiyo doonta, ku bilooyay baan abay Haddii lays lubbabeeryana, bax-ma-Haajarayn abay Buu-Caqayl biyaha Jabarti, wii ka beermay baan abay Daarood boggiysiyu, beekrityo laftaan abay

'God's creatures are many, but I am a son of Adam, I am from Noah who procreated after the flood and the boat, And dividing people into families, I am from Haağar's family, I am a son of 'Aqayl, a man from the semen of Ismaa'il Gabarti, I am from the chest, the liver and the bones of Daarood'.

Genealogies and historical narratives about the history of particular clans or sub-clans were collected systematically by European scholars during the early 20th cent. (s. CerSom I, 51ff.; Colucci 1924), more rarely in recent times. Also oral texts of customary law (Customary Law: Traditional legal institutions) have been published (e.g., by Cerulli in CerSom II, 75ff.), even though they have been studied more in their legal aspects than as oral literary texts. Famous sentences passed by well-known traditional judges like ina Sanweye are the subject of many traditional narratives s., e.g., Muuse Galaal (1956:31f.; for folktales s. the sub-article on "Folktales and modern written literature").

Proverbs are pervasive in Somali speech and are given much importance by Somalis. Frequently they display metrical parallelism and complex patterns of alliteration like the following one, about failing to solve a difficult problem:

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Waraabbe ulna laha gaari waa, erayna wax lagaga gerti waa
‘You didn’t get at the hyena with a rod, nor did you get anything back from it with your words’.

Parallel syllables in the two halves of this proverb have identical vocalic lengths with the only exception of gaad and gu, while waraabbe ‘hyena’ alliterates with the two occurrences of waa ‘didn’t’, ‘rod’ with eray ‘word’, and gaari ‘get at’ with gerti ‘get back’.

A particular genre that is very popular among Somali, are the numerical sayings, i.e., proverbs organized in series of three, seven, etc. (s. CerSom II, 213ff.). They hark back to a very old tradition, since they are pervasive in the Old Harari Kitab al-far’i al-dīd (s. CerStud I, 282–343), occur in several other parts of the Medieval Islamic world, and are already attested in the Bible (Prov 30; s. also Banti 1996:180ff.). Here is a numerical saying in Benadair Somali (in Somali orthography), alliterated in d, whose first two half lines are 5-syllable sirrib lines with their typical iambic rhythm:

| Siddax waxkaato waa dadaal, sidaaxna Daayimaa yuuwaad |
| Duful sooney waa dadaal, durnuma Daayimaa yuuwaad |
| Duguu ood waa dadaal, dinna Daayimaa yuuwaad |
| Dababo guuiri waa dadaal, dada Daaayimaa yuuwaad |

‘Three things depend upon your effort, three only God can give,
Sowing depends upon your effort, rain only God can give,
Building a home depends upon your effort, religion only God can give,
Marrying a woman depends upon your effort, children only God can give’.

Like other peoples of the Horn of Africa, the Somali have highly formalized riddles that are generally alliterated. In north-eastern Somalia they are called googgale; who asks the riddle first says googga, who answers says ‘adale or wab kale ‘another thing’, then the actual riddle is asked.

Extensive collections of oral literature, such as anthologies of maansu poetry by different poets or diirsaad’s of the major poets, collections of proverbs, sayings and folk stories were among the first texts that were published by educated Somalis, and many have appeared also in recent years.


Giorgio Banti

Somali religious literature

Schleicher (ed. by Reinsch 1900), Cerulli (CerStud I, CerSom II, 177–220, CerSom III), Andrzejewski (1983), Andrzejewski – Lewis (1994), Kapteijn – O’Fahey (2003), Mohamed M. Kassim – O’Fahey – Reese (2003) and Gori (2003) provide evidence of the antiquity and wide circulation of Arab religious literature among bilingual Somalis. This literature first circulated among the religious orders (fariqa; Islamic brotherhoods), mainly the Qaida – Iyi (the most ancient and popular), Ahmadiya, Salihiya, and Rifa’iyya (originating from Mukalla, Hadramawt. Thanks to them, the Somalis developed close links with the Sunni communities of the Arabian Peninsula along with other Muslim communities in the Sudan, Eritrea (Massawa), and southwestern Ethiopia where these religious orders had missionaries (TrIslam 233–56). Harar, where the Qaida was established in the 15th cent. by sharif Abū Bakr b. ‘Abdallāh al-Aydarūs (d. 1503, Aden), played an important role in diffusing Islam among the Somalis, along with the coastal towns of Arab-Persian – if not earlier – foundation (Iran). From these centres Islam reached the agro-pastoralists of the interior. Religious agricultural settlements (gama’a), like those in the fertile region between the Sabeele (Wabī Sābīlē) and Guba (Ganele) rivers, played also an important role in rallying followers among the somalized Bantu,