

Main Characteristics and Categories of Kenyan Somali Poems: A Case Study of Poems from the Somalis of Garissa County

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Abstract

The study examines the main characteristics and categories of the Kenyan Somali poems with special attention paid to the poems of the Kenya Somalis living in Garissa County. Several aspects of the oral poetry of this community including the content and occasions of performance of the poems are discussed. The study also explores the indigenous classes of the Kenya Somali poetry and suggests some other alternative modes of classification of the poems. In doing so, the study reveals that poetry, among this community, involves every aspect of the life of the community. Some of the activities specifically linked to oral performances which are discussed in the study include: pastoral duties, courting, wedding ceremonies, child care and clan feuding. The main preposition of the study is that there is a close link between oral poetic composition, performance and community's way of life. It reveals that, in the Kenyan Somali context, the performance of oral poetry derives directly from the people's way of life, their everyday experiences in the vast arid environment of Garissa County of Kenya, their nomadic, pastoral activities and their Islamic faith. Based on field material collected from Garissa County of Kenya the study endeavours to interpret the oral poetry from the point of view of the community which owns and consumes the poetry. It attempts to locate the poetry within the geographical and socio-historical context of the Kenyan Somalis of Garissa County. Twenty people including eight poets were interviewed. The respondents were drawn from the six sub-counties of Garissa and seven of them were female, while thirteen were men. Twenty four poems were collected but twelve were analysed. The study adopts a composite approach combining sociological and psychological theories.

Keywords: Poem, Somalis, Garissa, County

1.0 Introduction

There are quite a number of scholars, African and non-Africans, who made commendable efforts to study the African oral poetry. These attempts were mainly observed during the colonization of the African people and shortly after the independence. We can cite as examples scholars like Chadwick (1942), Gill & Newell (1958), Laurence (1954), Finnegan (1977), Egudu & Nwoga (1971), Jones (1973), Mbile (1969), Moore & Meier (1963), Soyinka (1973) and others. In the case of the Somali oral poetry we can pay tribute to: Andrezejewski (1964), Lewis (1964), Cerulli (1959), Galal (1956), Aw Jama (1976) and others. Poetry, therefore, and unlike other genres of literature, enjoyed a little attention of world scholars.

As an attempt to further the existing knowledge about Somali oral poetry, this study discusses the main characteristics and categories of Kenyan Somali poems. Not all Kenyan Somalis who are widespread in Kenya, but the study specifically deals with the oral poetry of the Somalis living in Garissa County of North Eastern Region of Kenya.

The focus of the study is to reveal the significance of the poems to the lives of the Kenyan Somalis in Garissa County and the particular importance that they attach to its performance. To achieve its objectives, the study identifies and discusses significant patterns in the corpus of the Kenyan Somali oral poetry including the main preoccupations of content and major recurrent themes and topics of the poetry. The study discovers that, in tackling the various topics, the Kenyan Somali of Garissa County poetry adopts variety of attitudes. It may, for example narrate, describe, praise, criticize or advise. The extract below blends a variety of these:

Bilan bowda gerileey, baabooy bogor waa adoogaa

Eeggay ladan Loda maalayso, laalaamayso laabta la igooyaa

Sidii boqor buugga laga tiray, waan baaliyey timo baluugleey

Dalka ma iska dhaafaayeeey, diyaaasad sideeda ma duulaayeeey

Suran iyo Sarboy ma qabee, sabuulkuu u dooni Saaqaa

Gashaanti gaduudan mooyaane, garoob geel ma loo cidleeyaa

Bilan you have thighs like giraffe's, and your father is a king

When Ladan is milking the cows, is when my heart bounces

Like a deposed king, I am idle with my curly hair

Do I leave this land, fly off like an aeroplane?

He has neither Suran nor Sarbow, he only looks corn maize at Saka

Unlike it is a dark complexioned maiden, do men really desert their camels.

The study also identifies the common occasions where poetry is performed. Indigenous modes of

classifying the oral poetry are also briefly examined and contrasted with what may be regarded as a productive mode of scholarly classification.

The primary conviction of the two combined theories, sociological and psychological approaches which the study adopts is that oral poetry can be studied from its psychological impact on the individual and collective consciousness of the people who compose and consume it, and more so from the social interpretation of the text, taking into account the social circumstances in which it is created and received.

2.0 Research Hypothesis

- a) Oral poetry of the Kenyan Somalis does not contribute to enhance, sustain and promote the community's activities and experiences.
- b) There is no relationship between poetic performance and the community's social life.
- c) Oral poetry does not reflect the social, psychological and moral values of the Kenyan Somalis, therefore, it has no significance to the lives of the people.

3.0 Justification and objectives

This study is justifiable on three main grounds:

- (a) The uniqueness of its area of study
- (b) Its revelation of aspects of the Kenyan Somali social life.
- (c) Its enhancement of intra-communal and inter-communal understanding.

No study known to this author has been undertaken into the main characteristics and categories of the Kenyan Somalis of Garissa County. So, this study explores a new field of significant interest for scholars and enthusiasts of oral poetry. The objective here is to draw the attention of scholars to the wide and rich oral literature of the Kenyan Somali community.

As poetry reflects many spheres of social life, the study gives the reader some insight into the social structure of the Kenyan Somali community. It also helps one to understand the society's attitude towards certain social phenomena and how the Kenyan Somalis respond to the world around them. The study helps reveal the society's attitude towards morality and social ethics.

It is hoped that this study will positively contribute towards the enhancement of mutual understanding among the ethnic communities in Kenya. Poetry expressively reveals the socio-cultural values of its people. Therefore, the more we carry out poetic studies based on different communities in Kenya, the more likely we are to understand one another better. The study aims at demonstrating that the Somalis have got close cultural affinities with the other Kenyan communities, as reflected in their poetry.

4.0 Methodology

The study was conducted through the following activities:

- (a) Archival research
- (b) Interviews
- (c) Attendance of performance and recordings
- (d) Transcription and analysis

The archival research began with an extensive study of the texts which are related to the research problem. The researcher especially tried to familiarize himself with works on literary theories, poetry works produced by African writers and works which are generally about the Somali people.

In the field, the researcher carried out a feasibility study into the research area. He was particularly keen to know the clan settlements, the differences between the dialects and the areas where the performances of the poetry are held most.

The researcher interviewed twenty male and ten female respondents. Among the interviewees were seven well-known oral artists (poets). As there are some poems which are performed by women only, the interviewees consisted both male and female.

During attendance at live performances in the field, the researcher tape-recorded twenty six poems of different categories. The field research was conducted in Garissa County. All the material collected was transcribed in Somali. Then the researcher analysed the poems and selected twelve poems for specific study. Each of the six main categories of the Kenyan oral poetry is represented by two poems. English translation of the field material were also done.

5.0 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by two-pronged theoretical approaches:

- (a) Sociological approach
- (b) Psychological approach

Sociological theory talks of the interactional purpose of literature. It is concerned with the social function

and the origin and application of the work. This approach deals with the social elements in the interpretation of literary works. In other words, the suggestion here is “works of art to be considered with a social context”. One of its major proponents, Kenneth Burke sees art as manifestation of society’s culture which portends the norms and inspirations of its members. The theory, therefore, follows that adequate interpretation of a text must take into account the social circumstances in which it is created and received. This is strongly underlined by the researcher’s field experience of Kenyan Somali oral poetry and sums up reasons why he has chosen this theory to guide this study. Without mincing words, I used the sociological theory to interpret the texts from the social/society’s point of view and link that interpretation to the occasion of performance and the appropriateness of that particular piece to the situation and timing.

The psychological approach treats a text as an expressive act both reflecting and satisfying deeply felt emotional needs. It looks into the mental and emotive impact of the work. This conceptual model approach was basically the Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychology(1880s) which later evolved into the current psychoanalytic criticism (1930s). It attempts to interpret the text from the human behaviour of “unconscious”, the “desires”, and “defences” which are given rise by “id”, “ego” and “super ego” of human mind.

Critics believe that if we study texts through this approach, with a full grasp of which concept is operating the text, it can help us enrich our understanding of the literary work. The view here is that any given interpretation of texts is also suggestive of the psychological motives of the performer. The approach also contends that, other than prominent meaning of the texts there are usually some hidden meanings prompted by the psychological being of the composer/performer.

In exploring this aspect of the Kenya Somali poetry and adopting this theoretical approach as a guide, the study draws on the insights of theoreticians like: Lacan (1988), Bloom (1973), Gallop (1985) and Kristeva (1984).

I adopted the psychological approach to attempt to understand, as a researcher, the unseen forces that controlled the conscious and the rational thought of the poet/performer which motivates him/her to produce texts in that circumstances and in that environment.

6.0 The Content of Kenyan Somali Poetry

All life’s experiences are grist for the mill of the poet’s imagination. However, Kenyan Somali oral poetry manifests preoccupation with certain topics and themes. It, for example, appears to be centred over around four recurrent topics.

- (a) The people’s way of life, especially the pastoral existence.
- (b) Personal relationships, particularly love, family, marriage and the position of women
- (c) Social interaction, especially inter-clan relationships.
- (d) Religious meditation.

Poetry reveals many social aspects which are related to the lives and values of the pastoral community of the county. Any new events that have cropped up, for example, the unacceptable form of behaviour of an individual member of the community or an entire clan are all publicised through poetry. Also, any problem that is facing the community is revealed and discussed in poetry. Some of the problems which are usually addressed in the poems include issues affecting the community because of the people’s way of life. The Kenyan Somalis living in Garissa County are pastoralists who have got little sense of territorial boundaries. They always move and graze their animals where there is good and greener pasture, including the Game Reserves and National parks. While in those restricted areas, the pastoralists often engage in skirmishes with game wardens who usually arrest or fire at their livestock indiscriminately. Oral poetry reveals such a sad situation where animals are slain and herdsmen are arrested, while all their hamlets are torched. The following lines signify the poet’s worry about the dreaded wardens.

Booreey baar weyn
Adoo Bookiyo
Buuhoodkaa Kore
Baannaanada joogta
Oo barkaa dhalay
Maalin balo timid
Baabuur buubuhu
Hadduu soo baxo
Bireen kula dhaco
Oo bar kaa laayo
Waa balaayee
Eebboow kaa qabo.

Boorey, the big-humped

While at Booka
The upper greener area
And the plains
And some of you have just calved
A day of catastrophe
The fast moving vehicle
If it intrudes
And fires at you indiscriminately

And slays some of you
It is a real disaster
May God spares you.

Poems also reveal the attitudes of the pastoral community toward their stock. Animals are seen as blessing from God. Particularly, camels are observed as a privilege but not as a right. Thus, the person blessed with camels is expected to share them with his brothers in the community, whom God has not granted a similar fortune. On the other hand, although God's power as the provider of all wealth is not questionable, animals, as exemplified by the following poem, are believed to be earned through hard work.

Faruureyaha Qoyan
Ee la fiirini
Wiil aan faydanin
Fudayd lagu waa.

The wet lips
People may be envious
A man who doesn't work hard
Cannot easily own them.

Somali poetry describes a strong belief in the nomadic lifestyle and a negative attitudes towards urban life. The Kenyan Somalis of Garissa County seem to be very proud of their nomadic lifestyle and often boast about it. On the contrary, they also seem to strongly despise life in the urban centres. Oral poetry does not fail to show this:

Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Dameer iyo dibi ma raro
Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Danada hoosteeda ma dego
Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Ma daldalo dayn Islam
Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Diimaa, calaf iyo daruur
Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Wuxuu deeqlahay nasiiyo
Darajaaleey wiilashaan
Wuxuu wadaa dooranuug.

My respected brothers
Will not pack on donkeys and ox
My respected brothers
Will not settle in the slums
My respected brothers
Will not beg for credit
My respected brothers
Luck, rain and Diima
My respected brothers
What God gives us and
My respected brothers
Will herd the camels.

Personal relationship, particularly marriage and family, are another aspect of social life which is a common topic of Kenyan Somali oral poetry. Marriage, among the Somali community, does not only involve the couple but it unites the relatives known as (magwadaag) "the dia-paying group". Poetry usually discusses the part each party is supposed to play. The father is the central figure in marriage affairs. He has the final word about who would marry his daughter. The mother does not actively participate in the making decisions affecting the lives of

her daughters. She is only notified of the decisions of the men concerning the marriage of her children. Paradoxically, she is required to participate actively in the preparation of the wedding and particularly give advice and assistance to her daughter in the first seven days of the marriage. Somali poetry often discusses the numerous marriage contracts and formalities which are to be fulfilled before approval.

Among the Kenyan Somalis, the bride wealth which is known as “Maheer” and any other payment related to the marriage is taken seriously and the bridegroom is required to complete payment before consummating his marriage. Poetry also reveals the expectations of the parents of the couple on how they should treat one another, particularly the daughter, who is expected to uphold the names of her parents by becoming a good, obedient and hardworking wife. The following stanza from one of the poems I collected during the research justifies the argument:

Walaalooy Dhuubooy saddex yey dhegtayda ku dhicin
Oo way wareegeysay waabkeedi wuu cidloobay
Wuxuu la caaryeystay weelkeedi cugay la’aan
Oo yey na soo gaarin “kuwii yaa ka guursan jiray”.

My sister, Dhuubooy, let me not hear three things:
She deserted her house and went wandering
Dust heaped on her utensils because of not cleaned
Let me not hear people saying “he shouldn’t have married from those”.

Kenyan Somali poetry also clearly explains what the community expects from a married man. He is, for example, expected to give due respect to his in-laws, particularly the father and mother-in law. The husband is, for example, urged to give money to his wife to take to her parents whenever she is visiting them. See this lines:

Walaalow xidid caaya xajiimeeya waa la nacay
Eggeeyoow xigaalkeeda u kici xaashi lacag ah u dhiib
Walaa xulbaaloow xummaanteenna yaan la wadin

Dear brother, shame on those who abuse their-in-laws
Give her money when she is visiting her relatives
Please, my dear, let not our weaknesses be noticed.

Women’s position in the society is clearly marked in the Kenyan Somali poetry. Their duties include the bringing up of children and the community recognizes that big responsibility and lauds it in its poetry. Motherhood is a much cherished role and one often hears a Kenyan Somali poet feeling sympathy for the mothers languishing over the upbringing of their children. Also, mothers love and concern of the welfare of her children even after marriage is revealed in poetry. Here is one example.

Aniga ma lahayne waxay hooyadeed lahayd
Ha iga guulguulin oo ha iga goondhabayn
Guulguul ma galayso gabadhayda gaari saxan
Haddaad garan weydo gurigayga aayar keen.

It is not me but her mother said
Don’t beat her up and subject her to agony
My daughter cannot bear that agony
If you don’t understand each other please bring her my home.

Social interaction, especially inter-clan relationships, is a common subject for Kenyan Somali poetry. The emphasis on segmentary leanages or genealogies as a whole is so widespread and recognised in this community that nearly all Somali poetry has a tribal sentiment. Clan in its widest sense plays a great role in the day-to-day activities of the Somali people. It, for example, creates political units which act unitedly whenever there is outside threat or people to cast ballot papers for National Elections. Referring to this clan system Lewis (1961) says: “Genealogies represent generally the widest range of possible political unity by diving and uniting groups of kinsmen according to the ancestors from whom they stem. Unlike its larger homologue, the clan whose members often count about twenty generations to their founder, frequently acts as a cooperate political unit”. The feelings for kinship are very strong and a Somali would no doubt volunteer to die if his kinsmen are attacked. Aware of this fact, poets usually exploit tribal euphoria during war time and, to be taken seriously, evoke old wounds, basing their arguments on some past wrongs committed by some clans. The following lines are examples:

Labootigii nalaga laayey
Lafaha laytka cad yihiin
Lo’ baa leeftaa haddaba
Nin liibeeyana lahayn

Wuxuu wiil badan laqmaday
Laayanfacu baa la yiri.

Our warriors who were massacred
Their white bones are still visible
Even the cattle lick them as they graze
No body compensated their blood
“Useless” was the word.

Religious meditation is another very common topic of Kenyan Somali poems. Many poems of this community discuss the faith of the people and show how the society adheres to religious practices. An explicit of this comes from wedding poems, particularly the (Buraanbur) in which the poet manipulates the event to make it one which reminds the people of their God.

Bisinka iyo Alifka iyo aayadaha Koran
Agalka lagu taagay baa tiirar looga dhige

In the name of God, the letters and the verses of the Koran,
are foundations of this marriage.

In tackling the various topics, the poetry adopts a variety of attitudes. It may narrate, describe, praise, criticize or advise. The extract below blends a variety of these:

Bilan bowda gerileey, baaboy boqor waa adoogaa
Eeggay Ladan lo'da maaleyso, laalaameyso laabtaa la igooyaa
Sidii bogor buugga laga tiray, waan baaliyey timo baluugleey.
Dalka ma iska dhaafaayeeey, diyaarad sideeda ma duulaayeeey?
Suran iyo Sarbow ma qabee, sabuulkuu u dooni Saaqaa.

Gashaanti gaduudan mooyaane, garoob geel ma loo cidleeyaa!
Bilan you have thighs like giraffe's, and your father is a king.
When Ladan is milking the cows, is when my heart bounces.
Like a deposed king, I am idle with my curly hair.
Do I leave this land, fly off like an aeroplane?
He has neither Suran nor Sarbow, he only looks for corn maize at Saaqaa.
Unless it is for a dark complexioned maiden, do men really desert their camels?

7.0 Occasions of Performance

The occasions most commonly associated with poetic performances among Kenyan Somalis are:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|---------------|
| (a) Pastoral activities | : | Work poems |
| (b) Courtship | : | Love poems |
| (c) Wedding ceremonies | : | Nuptial poems |
| (d) Child care | : | Lullabies |
| (e) Inter-clan conflicts | : | War poems |

Poetic performance often accompanies activities related to the society's lifestyle. Pastoral activities such as the tending of the livestock – watering, grazing or treating the animals – all have special performances.

The following poem, for example, is performed when animals are being watered:

Dhargi waysaye
Dhasha gerigiyo
Ma dhul baan shubay

You never get satisfied!
Are they the calves of giraffe
Or is it the earth that I watered!

Courtship is closely associated with poetry. When a young Somali pastoralist man meets a girl he loves, he is likely to articulate his feelings in poetic form, because the society believes poetry conveys messages more effectively than prose. This is an example.

Gora ari haddaan gado amana gaareyda
Gobkii aabbahaa iyo haddaan gaaridii gaaro
Gaabanoow walaalkaa haddaan galab la haasaawo
Ma igar diidi Geenyoy haddaan gooyo madaxaada?
If I sell out cattle and goats

And pay dowry to your father and mother
And converse with your brother about you
Will you marry me Geenyo if I pay a lot of wealth?

Poetry is performed during wedding ceremonies to which Kenyan Somalis attach a lot of importance. A wedding is seen as a great event and all the relatives of the couple are alerted of the impending grand occasion two to three weeks before the event. Poetry for this occasion is usually performed in praise of the new couple, the parents, relatives and the rest of the clan. It also highlights the greatness of the occasion and offers advice to the new spouses. Sentiments like the following are common in wedding poems:

Oo maarita waa maalintaan duubka qaadan jiray
Intaan is doonyeeyo afka dahab ka daadin jiray
Oo aabbaheed waa gobkii geedka ka hadli jiray
Oo hooyadeed waa sameyduu sultaanka dhalay
Silsilad lacagooy ab iyo siif la caaya maleh.
Today is the day I used to take the crown
Cover myself with silk and pour out golden words.
Her farther is the elder who judges people under the tree
Her mother is the beautiful one of the king
She has a golden chain from her ancestors.

Poems for children are prominent in the Kenyan Somali community. Through the poetry, the mother or the nurse, who is usually an elder sister or a relative, talks to the child, educating him/her, while, at same time, soothing the child to sleep or making him/her stop crying. The following example was collected during the field research for this study:

Bilow bushi maad la ooyi
Ama baahaad la ooyi
Haddaad bushi aad la ooyi
Bushiga shilinteenna weeyo
Haddaad baahi aad la ooyi
Baahida beenteeda weeye
Gaafdheer dhalay baa dhallaan ah
Maxaad waysay oo aad la waalan?
Muxuu weynahay ku yeelay?
Maxaad anna ii wareerin.

Bilow, are you crying because you are sick
Or you are hungry?
If you are crying because you are sick
Diseases are common in this world
If you are crying because you are hungry
Hunger is lying to you
Because Gaafdheer has just calved
What is that you are missing and forced you to cry?
What is it that God has done to you?
Why are you disturbing me?

During inter-clan fightings poetic performances become inevitable. In the event of war, poetry becomes extremely important because it is utilized for many purposes related to war tactics. It is, for example, used for incitement or encouragement to fight mercilessly and in doing so, it reveals or boasts about the power of the clan and the heroic action of its warriors. Following is a poem in which the poet incites his people.

Saqirkeenna iyo kabiir
Suldaamadii maxaa ku dhacay
Seeftaan soofaha marsani
War maad sarakacdaan
Soomalida Gaariseey
Waa su'ale maxaa la sugi?!

Our youngsters and elders
Where are the warriors
I will grind my sword
Why can't you get prepared?
Oh! Somalis of Garissa

What are you waiting for?

8.0 Indigenous Classes of the Kenyan Somali Poetry

The Kenyan Somalis recognize six main categories of their poetry, namely:

- (a) Saar (wedding poems)
- (b) Heesaha xoolaha (livestock poems)
- (c) Heesaha Carruurta (children's poems)
- (d) Jiib (courting poems)
- (e) Heello (praise poems)
- (f) Maanso (war poems)

Saar is the most popular type of poem in Garissa County. It is believed to be the oldest kind of poetry of the Kenyan Somalis and to have its origin within the county. The word Saar can be roughly interpreted as "Camel Dance", although this name particularly applies to one of its sub-categories. Saar has five sub-categories.

- (i) Saarmooyo (wedding poems with drum)
- (ii) Saarlugeed (wedding poems without drum) It is also known as 'Camel Dance'
- (iii) Diisoow (wedding poems for displaying war prowess)
- (iv) Buraanbur (wedding poems for women only)
- (v) Eehoow (wedding poems for the new wife)

All these poems are performed during wedding ceremonies. Some, like the Diisow, are performed by men only, while others like the Buraanbur and the Eehoow are strictly for women only. However, Saarmooyo and Saarlugeed are performed by mixed groups of men and women. All these varieties are widely known throughout the Garissa County with the exception of Diisoow. The Diisoow appears to be restricted to Garissa South, where the predominantly cattle-herders, known as Waame live.

Heesaha Xoolaha (livestock poems) are performed during stock herding. They are usually recited in praise of the animals and accompany activities like milking, watering and pasturing. This category has also sub-categories which depend on the type of animals that Kenyan Somalis rear. There are three sub-categories of Heesaha Xoolaha (livestock poems).

- (i) Heesaha Geela (poems for camels)
- (ii) Heesaha Lo'da (poems for cattle)
- (iii) Heesaha Ariga (poems for sheep and goats)

Of all these, the most popular sub-category is the one for the camels, because the camel itself is the most-valued animal of all the livestock.

Poems for children can be split into two groups: poems which the children sing as they play and lullabies which are sung by the mother or the nurse of the child.

Of these two, the latter is the most popular and emphasized variety. Lullabies also has two smaller categories:

- (i) Heesaha Wiilasha (poems for boys)
- (ii) Heesaha gabdhaha (poems for girls)

While children's play poems are rather shallow in meaning and usually have little impact on adult listeners, lullabies are more profound. As the Kenyan Somali mother soothes her child to sleep, she exposes to him many realities about life and expresses her expectations of the young child.

Jiib (Courting poems) are for courtship. Some samples can be found in the rural areas, but this type of poem appears to be losing in popularity and is hardly to be found in the urban areas. Some of my respondents during the research tried to suggest that there are two sub-categories of the Jiib, but the majority were of the opinion that the type does not plausibly subdivide.

Heello, unlike Jiib, is commonly performed in urban areas. Most people in the rural areas are not familiar with its performance. Heello is one of the most recent types of the poetry of Kenyan Somalis. It is believed that it spread to Kenya from Somalia around 1950's. This is supported by Andrezejewski and Lewis (1964) when they say, "while the origins of other types of poems go far back into the past, the Heello is an innovation which was first introduced in 1945. Its creator, Abdi Deeqsi, nicknamed "Cinema", was the owner and driver of a trading lorry, and composed the first Heello when his lorry broke down near Zeila" in Somaliland.

The poem is usually popular with the young educated elites and makes little sense to elderly people. However, Andrezejewski and Lewis claim that the subject matter of this poem is "invariably love, the only departures being into the spheres of politics" is highly disputable. Contrary to this claim, most of the performances observed during the field research showed little interest in "Love and "Politics". The main concerns of the poems were the behaviour of people and the advice they needed to rectify their mistakes. No sub-categories were suggested in the Heello during the research.

One unique aspect of Maanso is that its performance is not restricted to any occasion and its subjects are miscellaneous. However, a situation where the performance of this poem becomes inevitable is when there is an inter-clan conflict, especially when there is need to make the clan understand the depth of the problem. This

poem is usually long and its complete performance sometimes takes more than one session. Maanso is regarded as a particularly serious and thoughtful variety of poetry, and for that reason it is seen as poetry for the elderly and more discerning people.

9.0 Alternative Modes of Classification

Apart from the kind of dogmatic classification of oral poetry that the Kenyan Somali community adopts, there are other alternative modes of classification which a researcher may explore. In other words, from the scholar's point of view, Kenyan Somali oral poetry may also be classified in two further alternative ways:

- (a) According to mode of performance
- (b) According to themes

According to mode of performance, Kenyan Somali oral poetry may further be classified in four categories:

- (i) Spoken poems
- (ii) Recited poems
- (iii) Poems sung without musical accompaniment
- (iv) Poems sung with musical accompaniment

Maanso poems are an example of spoken verse, their performances differing only ever so slightly from ordinary conversation patterns. On the other hand, courting poems (Jiib) and children's play poems are recited with a noticeably pronounced heightening of tone and quickening of pace. Lullabies are sung plainly with no musical accompaniment, while Saar (wedding poems) and Heello (praise poems) are accompanied with extra-verbal embellishments, like ululations, clapping and drumming.

Alternatively, Kenyan Somali poems may be classified according to their themes. Most of Kenyan Somali poems are composed with definite themes and are usually intended to influence the opinion of a group of kinsmen or the entire community. According to their themes, Kenyan Somali poems can further be classified into four categories:

- (i) Praise poems
- (ii) Poems of advice
- (iii) Love poems
- (iv) War poems

Praise poems express appreciation or kind admiration for people, class, institutions, religion, God and livestock. As we noted earlier, the subject for praise poems is invariably tinged with an element of exaggeration.

The poems of advice are mainly intended to uphold acceptable standards of behaviour in the community. They emphasize the distinction between what is permitted and what is forbidden and uphold desirable practices like generosity, respect for elders and love for one's kinsfolk. All these are reflected in several of the poems recorded during the field research. Below is one example:

Hunnooy saddex lala ma caytamo
Hunnooy nin kudhalay nin kaa weyn
Hunnooy sheikh lala ma caytamo

Girls, three people must not be quarrelled with
Girls, an elder and your parents.
Girls, Religious men should not be quarrelled with.

Poems of love and affection are common in the Kenyan Somali tradition. However, love in this case is not restricted to that between opposite sexes, but broadly applies to the relationship between human beings and living and non-living things. Love for spouse, parents, children, livestock, land, God and clan is usually reflected in love poems.

War poems are about inter-clan fighting. They usually urge the affected clan to fight ruthlessly to conquer more land to graze their animals. These poems also dig out old wounds and show the clan the need to avenge past wrongs.

10.0 Conclusion

It is hoped that brief exploration of the main characteristics and categories of the Kenyan Somalis of Garissa County helps to establish its viability as a significant form of creative activity among its performers and audiences. The attempts to contextualize it within the physical, social and economic environment that engenders it and within which it is performed are part of a conscious effort to respond to the poetry from the point of view of the people who compose, perform and consume it. So, also is the emphasis laid on the indigenous categories under which the performers and audiences perceive the poetry and the occasions with which they associate them. It is suggested that the composition and performance of poetry is not merely a clever, affectatious aesthetic exercise. Rather it is a highly conscious and sophisticated grassroots participatory activity, deriving from and contributing to deeply-felt needs and concerns of the community. This explains the emphasis laid on the

occasions and purposes of performances of the poetry. Its artistic value can only be truly appreciated in the perspective of their social functions.

11.0 Future Tasks

A number of important issues which require serious attention in the area of Kenyan Somali oral poetry was revealed to the researcher in the process of developing this study. Some of these are: the need for a thorough linguistic study of the Somali language and the formulation of a comprehensive literary theory of African Oral Poetry. A broader sample of poetic performances over a wider area than that covered by the research for this study would no doubt help to refine the typologies suggested here and to reveal more aspects of the characteristics and categories addressed in this study. Also a broader and more systematically selected sample of field informants would enhance the scholar's insight into the community's attitudes and responses to the performances of its oral poetry.

A more thorough socio-literary methodology should be applied to the analysis of both the composition and the performance of the poetry in order to deepen understanding of the two-way relationship between social context and oral poetry. It is particularly desirable to further investigate how the social-cultural activities influence the composition of the poetry and how performance of the poetry in turn impacts on socio-cultural attitudes and activities.

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