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REVIEW ARTICLES

Poetry and Camels in Somalia: Reflections on *Suugaanta Geela* by Axmed Cali Abokor. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1986, 95 pp.

What sounds would feature in an acoustic image created to embody one's strongest impressions of rural Somalia? Dominant, surely, would be the sound of voices chanting alliterative verse, counterpointed by the low-pitched bellowing camels and the clattering of the wooden bells hanging from their necks.

In Somalia poetry is everywhere; it is the main art, providing entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, it is the vehicle of reflective thought and it is a storehouse of the communal memory of past events.¹ In the structure of the Somali hierarchy of values, poetry occupies an elevated position only surpassed by the supreme claims of Divine worship and the powerfully strong bonds of kinship. The prestige which the poets enjoy and the influence which they exert over their public would inspire the envy of their confrères in Western Europe and North America, whose work reaches only a fraction of their compatriots. In Somalia, poetry reaches the masses, and though much of it is high art it is by no means an elitist pursuit. What is more, poets are commentators on current affairs and use their influence in situations of conflict, whether as an effective offensive weapon or as a means of bringing reconciliation and peace. Poetry also comes in the form of the anonymous texts of work songs, which enhance the significance of the activities performed and lighten the burden of boredom inevitable in repetitive tasks. In camel-herding, work songs are used when driving, guarding or watering the herds or when soothing frightened or fractious beasts.

The paramount role of poetry in Somali culture, self-evident to Somalis themselves, made a profound impression on foreign travellers and scholars from the mid-nineteenth century onwards; among them are Sir Richard Burton, Fred M. Hunter, Luigi Robbecchi-Bricchetti, Philipp Paulitschke, Mario Maino, Enrico Cerulli, Margaret Laurence, I.M. Lewis, Werner Keweloh, John W. Johnson and Giorgio Banti.² In the last three decades Somali scholars, such as Said S. Samatar and Yaasiin Cismaan Keenadiid,³ have begun to appear on the international academic scene, and they have corroborated from their inside knowledge the testimony of outsiders.

It is on the grounds of this evidence that Somalis are sometimes referred to as a nation of poets, but we would be equally justified in calling them a nation of camel-herders. Camels, supremely adapted as they are to the arid local environment, capable of living without water for long periods, able to survive or even thrive on scanty and forbidding

vegetation, are the natural allies of Somali pastoralists in their struggle for survival and well being.

It is a very welcome development in the history of Somali studies that these two facets of Somali society, the art of poetry and the herding of camels, have been brought together in a work entirely devoted to the subject,⁴ *Suugaanta geela*. This is a work of considerable academic merit based on large scale research as well as personal experience and its author, Axmed Cali Abokor, a seasoned researcher and scholar on the staff of the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts, deserves our gratitude and recognition, as do the joint sponsors of the publication, the Somali Academy (SOMAC) and the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies (SAS).

To understand the significance and the purpose of the work we have to bear in mind that it was published as part of an on-going project undertaken by these two bodies which bear the name "Somali Camel Research Project".⁵ This has both academic and practical aims and extends to all possible aspects of Somali camel husbandry, for camels represent a large proportion of the wealth of the Somali nation and their value for the economy and future development of the country is inestimable. It is hoped that the Project will produce results which could form a basis for decisions in development planning and their practical implementation.

The experience of many development schemes throughout the world has shown that to be truly effective and to reduce undesirable and sometimes disastrous side-effects, it is essential to take into account the social and cultural setting within which they are to operate. The team directing the Somali Camel Research Project is very much aware of this fact, as can be seen from the publications of its members and associates.

The title of the book under review means literally "Camel Literature", but although the author centers his attention on literary texts he organizes his materials within a framework which is essentially ethnographic and sociological. He presents a long series of statements which describe various aspects of Somali camel husbandry, and each statement is followed by a literary text which illustrates it and at the same time supports its validity as a primary source. Judging from their wide and detailed coverage and their accuracy, the author has a profound first-hand knowledge of the life and work of Somali camel pastoralists and the Somali literary heritage.

After a general introduction dealing with the ecological setting, five chapters follow which give particularized statements and illustrations, grouped thematically. Chapter II describes the economic side of camel husbandry, in other words the value of camels as sources of milk and meat and as the means of transport for seasonal migrations and for water and trade caravans. In Chapter III a detailed account is

given for their use in various social transactions in which they provide a form of payment in kind, such as bridewealth given to the family of a bride, compensation for death or injury and gifts of prestige. The author stresses the function of camel herding as a source of social cohesion and solidarity which finds its recognition in a legendary tale, which he summarizes. It is said that when the ancestors of the Somalis first found camels in their country they called the day of the discovery *Ila* which means "With-Me", because camel-herding could not be conducted by a man working alone. Such tasks as driving a herd to water or to pasture, protecting it against robbers and beasts of prey, or recapturing it if it has been looted, certainly require a team of strong men dependent on one another for mutual support and cooperation.

Chapter IV is thematically linked to the preceding one and it describes the powerful emotional attachment of Somali pastoralists to their camels and the prestige accorded to their ownership, especially in large numbers. But the great benefits which Somali pastoralists derive from herding their camels are counterbalanced by the enormous hardships which it involves. Watering camels, driving them for long distances in search of good pastures, looking after their health and organizing their breeding all require incessant care and vigilance. No less arduous is the need to be on alert, day and night, against dangers from beasts of prey and human raiders. Chapter V gives a vivid and detailed account of the harsh life of the herdsmen and explains why camel rustling was and still is, so common in the nomadic interior and tends not to be regarded as morally wrong, but on the contrary brings prestige and glory to successful raiders.

For anyone interested in social change from the rural to the urban mode of living Chapter VI is of particular relevance. The author demonstrates how the new generation of poets who live in towns and now usually write their poems instead of composing them orally, are still very much influenced by the camel herding ethos. Far from cutting themselves off from their traditional cultural environment they draw their inspiration from it for their poetic language, which abounds in camel metaphors, similes, allegories and personifications.

Suugaanta geela is an important contribution to our knowledge of Somali camel pastoralism and the traditional way of life, and it adds significantly to the ethnographic and sociological literature on these subjects so far published.⁶ At the same time it is of considerable value to literary scholarship since most of the poetic texts presented in this work are not available anywhere else in published form and are derived from the collections made by the author or his colleagues at the Somali Academy. A number of the poets represented in *Suugaanta geela* are of great fame in Somalia, and one whose work is quoted is Cumar Xuseen Isteelliye, who achieved nationwide acclaim in the first half of this

century for his praises of camels. In the poem of his given on p.37 he enthuses over the power of camels when they are given as compensation for killings in inter-clan fighting, and vividly describes how peace comes with the handing over of the camels, and how all thoughts of revenge and future bloodshed are abandoned. Again, on p.76 a poem of a renowned modern poet, Maxamed (Axmed) Ismaaciil "Qaasim", is quoted in which he uses the image of a she-camel to symbolize Somalia herself. With the exception of a few proverbs, all texts consist of short work songs or excerpts from long poems and the majority are transcripts of oral poetry obtained from live performances or tape recordings. Some were originally composed as long ago as last century but had been preserved in oral transmission by memorizers, who according to the demands of the unwritten code of poetic practice aim at the goal of verbatim memorization.

Some of the texts given in the book are difficult to understand even for a Somali unless he is steeped in the traditional culture of the pastoral interior; even then he might need some explanation about the circumstances in which a particular poem was originally composed. Here the descriptive statements which precede each poem have the double role of describing the practices of camel herding and of elucidating the texts. The texts, in turn, illustrate and validate the description and this is the hallmark of what we might call "the Dual Approach School" in Somali scholarship. This school is represented by such authors as Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil, Shire Jaamac Axmed, Sheekh Jaamac Cumar Ciise, Yaasiin Cismaan Keenadiid, Axmed Faarax Cali Idaajaa, and Axmed Cartan Xaange⁷ and draws its inspiration from the Somali traditional oral culture rather than any foreign models.

The book exhibits meticulous attention to detail and numerous glosses are provided which explain archaic words and specialized terms and identify the names of camels and places. In addition, where the text belongs to the classical or modern genres of poetry, as distinct from anonymous work songs, the name of the author is stated. This is done not only on the case of some of the written poetry represented in Chapter VI but also for transcripts of oral poems. In this connection it should be noted that the names of the poets are preserved in oral transmission in accordance with the unwritten copyright law operating in Somali society, which demands that anyone who wishes to recite someone else's poem, should aim at verbatim memorization and should mention the name of the original author at each performance.

Axmed Cali Abokor goes even further in his treatment of his authors by providing biographical information in an appendix. This is a very welcome measure since in the field of Somali literary studies reference materials on literary biography are still sorely lacking.

Since *Suugaanta geela* is written entirely in Somali it is obviously inaccessible to readers who do not know that language, but fortunately there is an English translation made by Axmed Cartan Xaange, an eminent literary scholar, a senior member of the Somali Academy and a creative writer in Somali.⁸ The publication of this book was sponsored by the same bodies as the original work.

As stated in the introduction the translation is free, but it nevertheless always conveys the general meaning and the spirit of the original. Annotations are provided but they are rather brief, and in the text the translator occasionally takes short cuts, obviously in order to avoid lengthy and burdensome explanations. In his rendering of the poetic texts he frequently uses archaic diction, characterized by unusual grammatical constructions and word order, thus producing a high degree of stylistic defamiliarization. This may, however, be deemed appropriate in view of the fact that the field of discourse is so very unusual for a non-Somali reader, and it has a charm of its own.

Suugaanta geela is an important work which is essential reading for anyone engaged in Somali studies or in development work, not only in Somalia but in any part of the world where pastoralism is the predominant way of life. It is of equally great interest to anyone concerned with literary studies and linguistic research, and this applies not only to the poetic texts in the book but also to Axmed Cali Abokor's explanatory narrative. His style is representative of the elegant new literary prose in Somali which has developed since the introduction of the national orthography in 1972.

B.W. Andrzejewski

NOTES

¹General information about Somali poetry and bibliographical data can be found in the following works: B.W. Andrzejewski, S. Pifaszewicz and W. Tyloch, eds., *Literatures in African languages: Theoretical issues and Sample Surveys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1985); Katherine S. Loughran, John L. Loughran, John William Johnson and Said Sheikh Samatar, eds., *Somalia in word and image* (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Cross Cultural Understanding, in cooperation with Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986); Francesco Antinucci and Axmed Faarax Cali "Idaajaa", *Poesia orale somala; Storia di una nazione*, Studi Somali 7 (Rome: Comitato Tecnico Linguistico per l'Università Nazionale Somala, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, 1986) and Giorgio Banti, "Letteratura," in *Aspetti dell'espressione*

artistica in Somalia, ed. Annarita Puglielli (Rome: Università di Roma "La Sapienza" 1988), pp.33-71.

²Bibliographical references to their writings can be found in the works cited in Note 1, and are supplemented in B. W. Andrzejewski, "The 19th Century Documentation of Somali Oral Literature," in *L'Africa ai tempi di Daniele Comboni: Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Africani, Roma 19-21 Novembre 1981*, ed. Maria Caravaglios (Rome: Istituto Italo-Africano and Missionari Comboniani, 1983), pp.316-331.

³See Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Maḥammad 'Abdille Ḥasan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Yaasiin Cismaan Keenadiid, *Ina Cabdille Xasan e la sua attività letteraria* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1984).

⁴A shorter work on a similar subject was published two years later: Mohammad Abdillahi Kirash, "Camel Herding and Its Effect on Somali Literature," in *Camels in Development: Sustainable Production in African Drylands*, ed. Anders Hjort Ornäs (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), pp.53-68. It is a very welcome and highly competent contribution to documentation in this field.

⁵Information about this project and bibliography of publications which have already resulted from its work is provided in Anders Hjort af Ornäs, Mohamed Ali Hussein and Christer Krokfors, "Somali Camel Research Project Presentation, September 1987," in Anders Hjort Af Ornäs, ed., *Camels in Development: Sustainable Production in African Drylands* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), pp.141-164. The project team publishes *Camel Forum* (1983-, in progress), a serial which consists of papers relating to all subjects concerned with camel husbandry. The project is supported by the Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC). The coordinators of the project are Mohamed Ali Hussein (SOMAC) and Anders Hjort af Ornäs (SAS).

⁶Bibliographical guidance to this literature can be found in David D. Laitin and Said S. Samatar, *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press; London, England: Gower, 1987). The book also contains a penetrating discussion of the Somali "camel complex."

⁷Relevant bibliographical information is provided in the works cited in Note 1 but should be supplemented by Axmed Cartan Xaange, *Dalkii udgoonaa: The Land of Spices* (Mogadishu: Akadeemiyada Cilmiga iyo Fanka, 1984) and S.A. Warsame, *Hoobaanta afka hooyo: Les fruits mûrs de la langue maternelle* trans. Aidid Aden. (Djibouti: Institut Supérieur d'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques et Techniques, 1983 and 1987 [In Somali with a parallel translation into French]) The interaction between poetry and prose which characterizes this school has parallels in creative writing as has been demonstrated in Ali Jimale Ahmed, "Modern Somali Prose Fiction: An Overview," in *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Somali Studies*, ed. Annarita Puglielli (Rome: Il Pensiero Scientifico Editore, 1988), pp.139-142.

⁸Axmed Arten Xange, trans., *The Camel in Somali Oral Traditions*, by Axmed Cali Abokor (Uppsala: Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts in cooperation with the

Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1987). Biographical and bibliographical information concerning the translator can be found in the first work cited in Note 1. The list of his publications given in that work should be supplemented by Ahmed Artan Hange, comp. and trans., *Sheekoxarirooyin Soomaaliyeed: Folktales from Somalia* (Uppsala: Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts in cooperation with the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988).