

Moolla, F.F. (2012). When orature becomes literature: Somali oral poetry and folktales in Somali novels. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 49(3): 434-462



When Orature Becomes Literature: Somali Oral Poetry and Folk Tales in Somali Novels

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The concern of this essay is with the transformations which occur when what is variously termed, “orality”, the “oral tradition”, “oral literature” or “orature” is incorporated into literature in the context of Somali culture. While most sources use these terms interchangeably, Ngugi wa Thiongo, the Kenyan novelist, in a lecture titled “Oral Power and Europhone Glory”, stresses a subtle distinction of meaning between “orature” and “oral literature”. Ngugi notes that: “The term ‘orature’ was coined in the Sixties by Pio Zirimu, the late Ugandan linguist”.¹ Ngugi observes that while Zirimu initially used the two terms interchangeably, he later identified “orature” as the more accurate term which indexed orality as a total system of performance linked to a very specific idea of space and time. The term “oral literature”, by contrast, incorporates and subordinates orality to the literary and masks the nature of orality as a complete system of its own. For this reason, “orature” is the preferred term in this essay.

What this essay proposes is that the particular relationship of the spoken word and script in Somali culture points clearly to the need to reconsider and revise understandings of the oral-literate “dichotomy”. The necessity to reexamine assumptions about orality and literacy, including the idea of the teleological progression from an oral to a literate world, is suggested in other oral traditions also, but in a slightly more occluded form than in the case of Somali orature.

The Somali experience suggests very strongly that the most profound transformation does not occur when orature encounters writing. The dominant assumption of the radical departure represented by writing rests in part upon the idea that understanding an oral form assumes an aligned worldview between artist and audience which need not be the case for the written text. What is suggested here is that insofar as shared meaning may be constituted in either a written or an oral form, a shared interpretive horizon is implied. This interpretive horizon, furthermore, implies a more profound shared understanding than a limited conception of language as textuality. The interpretive horizon embraces practices and codes which derive ultimately from tradition and its engagement with the transcendent. This dimension of the argument is deeply informed by the insight of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, across the range of his work but more especially in *Sources of the Self*.² Although Taylor is not repeatedly cited, the understanding of what constitutes the fundamental transformation in the transition from “oral” worlds to the world of print capitalism is influenced by Taylor’s proposal that the significant move which defines modernity is the individual internalization of social codes which create meaning. Thus, the most significant social and cultural change is not associated with writing *per se*. The

most profound transformation occurs instead when orature encounters the form of writing which claims that the apparent multivocality and plurality of writing and the written text itself constitute the highest virtue. The idea of the openness of writing inheres in the notion that script allows an irony and sophistication constitutively impossible in the oral forms. Robert Kellogg and Robert Scholes in *The Nature of Narrative*, which considers the changes in narration over historical time, suggest that it is only with the development of writing that the author, rather than the narrator who is the instrument of tradition, may emerge.³ What the case of Somali oral verse suggests is that authorship and the irony attendant upon authorship is a constitutive possibility in orature also. What makes irony in the genres which develop with print capitalism different from irony in oral and script traditions is the fact that here irony itself, and the polysemy to which it leads, come to constitute the higher order. The novel is the cultural form in which this development takes its clearest form.

Somalia and its orature are used as a case study where misconceived assumptions about the oral-literate “dyad” are most clearly identified. But in this respect Somalia is representative not only of North and Eastern Africa where “oral” societies have coexisted with “script” societies over millennia, but also cultures from around the globe. “Oral” Africa has existed from pre-history with written language. The script of the nomadic Touareg, which may be written from left to right, right to left, or in a circle is a case in point. And “Ges” the scripted liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox church may be traced back to the fourth century CE.

Somali literature exists in a number of genres, including drama, poetry and the short story. What will be considered here, however, is the novel for the reason suggested above; namely that the novel embodies to the highest degree the features and trends associated with the development of writing in print capitalism. The focus of this exploration, unfortunately, is narrow in terms of the languages it engages. Somali literature, as an outcome of its particular historical experience, exists in Arabic, Somali, French, Italian and English. What will be engaged with here is only Somali orature in English translation, reviews, critiques and English translations of Somali novels in Somali and a more detailed and nuanced attention to Somali novels in English.

Encounters: Orality and Literacy

The study of the inclusion of orature in the novel is burdened by assumptions of profound and mutually obstructive proportions. These are most clearly articulated by Eileen Julien in *African Novels and the Question of Orality*.⁴ Julien identifies two broad motivations in scholarship on the incorporation of orature in the novel. The first type of approach searches for an indigenous aetiology of the novel as a culturally freighted index of the continuity between the oral and the literate. Implicit in this approach is an evolutionary scope which assumes a natural and teleological progression from an oral past to a literate future. Orality in this conception acts as a metonym for a society defined in terms of the communal and the collective. Literacy, by contrast, is identified with the emergence of the “I” from the unindividuated mass of the folk or the race; and the novel embodies the most significant cultural symbolic form of the development of

individualism. This approach paradoxically reinforces precisely the evolutionary paradigm from which it seeks to escape. Through locating the origins of the novel and its concomitant constitution of a particular form of subjectivity in the oral tradition and through assuming that orature must develop, apparently out of its own internal necessity into literature, confirms a universalist evolutionary pattern, premised upon the gradual effacement of orature. Refracted in a marginally different way Marxist criticism identifies the entry into the novel via the conduit of the oral tradition as the entry into history.

A somewhat more significant variation on this argument noted by Julien is the idea not of *continuity* of oral and literary forms, but of the African novel with oral elements as symbol of the reconciliation of contradictory and clashing worldviews. In terms of this tangent of the argument, the “egocentrism” of the novel is tempered by the oral tradition which represents the “collective outpouring of the communal spirit.”

The second major strand Julien identifies is the idea that it is orality precisely that makes the African novel (continentally defined) authentically African (essentially defined). This view proceeds upon the assumption, by contrast, that the novel is a European form but that the overlay of African orature imparts African indigeneity. This approach sublimates various other assumptions. It assumes the existence of a mythic African consciousness which itself is a response, necessary in some contexts, to a common modern colonial experience. It also assumes that “orality” is *the* defining mode of African experience. As Ali Mazrui suggests, the rallying cry for sub-Saharan Africa of “We are all African” is a response to modern colonialism.⁵ It is also an idea produced by the nineteenth century science of race as much as an invention and reconstruction of identity shaped by the experiences which emerged out of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Orality and Africa become virtual synonyms. Depending on the cultural baggage of the scholar, oral literature is the index either of a closed, static, primitive society, on the one hand, or, on the other, a precious repository of an all but lost pastoral, pre-lapsarian past from the well-springs of which a technologized, individualistic society must revive itself.

Nomadic Border Crossings

Literature in Orature: The “Literary” Features of Somali Oral Poetry

What is fascinating about the case of Somali orature is the way in which it seems to unsettle many of the assumptions about the worldviews associated with orature, on the one hand, and literature, on the other. If one considers the evolutionary model of the transition from the communal “we” of the oral tradition to the “I” of literate individualism, then Somali poetry, although wholly oral both in composition and performance, nevertheless seems more “individualistic” than many literate modes.

The paradigm of poetry in performance does not in any significant respect apply to Somali oral verse. A frequent assumption about orature in general is that it is composed on the spot, what Ruth Finnegan, drawing on the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, terms “composition-in-

performance”.⁶ Parry proposes in the context of ancient Greek epic poetry that repetition of stock epithets and episodes suggests the reliance of the epic poet on set formulae, commonly referred to as the “formulaic theory”.⁷ Lord’s research into Yugoslavian oral poetry draws the conclusion that formulaic style is universal to all oral poetry.⁸ What these theories inflate is the dependence of the oral poet on an “originary” script and a cumulative cultural tradition. Dominant understandings of the *griot* tradition of west Africa may be considered paradigmatic here. Orature here appears to rely upon a “communal” text inherited from previous generations, passing back into the mists of time. The “collective” texts are apparently easy to memorize since they may rely upon repetition as a mnemonic device. Like Finnegan, Isidore Okpewho recognizes the relevance of the formulaic theory, but qualifies it in certain respects. In the various traditions, repetition may take the form of prosody, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, parataxis, repeated formulae and *topoi*.⁹ However, the oral poet inescapably manipulates the cultural “stock “ in individually creative and context sensitive ways. Both Finnegan and Okpewho argue very strongly that what frequently is considered to be a collective or communal text, in fact, constitutes the conventional framework, much like the often submerged conventions of literate traditions, in which the *griot* infuses an individual aesthetic element which also reinterprets the text in a new context. Often this individual element is missed in written transcriptions of the oral texts, since the uniqueness of the performer’s interpretation emerges only in performance. This is one element of the whole series of connections Ngugi symbolizes by the circle, which is also the circle of performative space.

In the environment of a nomadic society where for practical reasons the volume of portable property is severely limited, the greatest importance has been attached to oral poetry rather than to the plastic arts. Although Somali oral poetry is the product of a nomadic pastoral society, it must not be confused, as Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine remind us, with European pastoral poetry which is the poetry of nostalgic longing for a natural life lost to the urban poet.¹⁰ While both the beauties and the rigours of the natural world are a significant feature of Somali verse, “nature” as a concept is not suggested. The composition of Somali oral poetry, furthermore, approximates more closely to the prevailing understanding of original composition in predominantly literary cultures rather than the poet as medium for tradition as the oral composer frequently is regarded. In this respect, Somali orature is quite similar to the oral poetry of the nomadic camel herders across the narrow expanse of the Red Sea. Classical oral poetry of the Bedouin of the Arabian peninsula, like Somali oral poetry is original in composition, but unlike Somali verse, original within the constraints of a pronounced formula.¹¹ The classical Arabic *qasīdah*, or ode, consists of a number of *topoi* which constitute an almost unvarying formula. The challenge for the poet is to compose verse which is memorable since it employs the conventional “formula”. This pattern usually opens with a description of the abandoned encampment and musings about the people who have left it, an exploration of the distractions of love since the emotion of love is sure to capture the attention of the audience, then a description of the desert journey and finally self-praise and praise of the potential patron. The formulaic paradigm ensures mutual understanding but in order for the poem to be arresting and compelling it must present a unique talent and vision. But the Somali and Arab traditions are in a number of ways quite

distinct from the oral traditions of most other parts of the world and other parts of Africa. Classical Arabic poetry is original in the context of the constraints of a conventional formula.

A good case study to explore the ways in which Somali oral verse eliminates the reliance even on “formula” as it is employed in Arabic oral verse is to consider the rules of composition of what is traditionally considered the highest poetic art, namely the *gabay*. The *gabay* shares with the other “noble” Somali verse forms the requirement of the use of a specific poetic diction and alliteration, in Somali referred to as “*higgaad*”. *Higgaad* is a form of creative constraint which paradoxically is also liberatory. Perhaps the most complete account of Somali oral poetry is provided by B.W. Andrzejewski and I.M. Lewis in *Somali Poetry: An Introduction*. The authors note that the convention requires that: “In every hemistich of a poem at least one word has to begin with a chosen consonant or with a vowel.”¹² The feature which the “classic” *gabay* shares with other Somali verse forms is the fact that the *gabay* is wholly individually, but orally, composed. The formulaic theory, even in the qualified understanding of Finnegan and Okpewho, does not apply. What distinguishes the *gabay* among the other genres, according to Andrzejewski and Lewis, is scansion and length: “The *gabay* usually consists of between 30 and 150 lines, though shorter ones and considerably longer ones are not unknown. The number of syllables in each line varies from 14 to 18, and in the majority of cases there is a caesura before the sixth syllable from the end.” (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 47) The rigid prosody which provides the limits within which the poet may find his voice, the requirement of alliteration and the use of an archaic poetic diction which, paradoxically through constraint, challenge and liberate imaginative freedom in composition underlines again the fact that this is not an impromptu verse.

The following elegy by the eighteenth-nineteenth century poet, Raage Ugaas, of the Ogaden clan is remarkable for the depths of emotion it stirs through the skillful use of imagery. Both the poem and its English translation come from the collection by Andrzejewski and Lewis.

1 Sida koorta yucub oo La suray	korommo buubaal ah
2 Ama geel ka reeb ah oo nirgaha	Laga kachaynaayo
3 Ama beelo kaynaan ah oo	kor hayaamaaya
4 Ama ceel karkaarrada jebshiyo	webi karaar dhaafay
5 Ama habar kurkii wadnaha	Lagaga kaw siiyay
6 Ama kaal danley qaybsatiyo	kur iyo dhal yaabis
7 Shinni kaaluf galay ama sidii	koronkorro oomi
8 Chalay kololo'aygii ma ladin	kaamil reeruhu e
9 Kunbulkiyo ardaagii miyaa	Laygu kaliyeeyay
10 Wichii Laygu kuunyeeyay miyaa	igu karaamoobay
11 Kunbiskii miyaa Layga qubay	kolayo ii buuchay?
12 Maanta na kataantii miyaa	Layga kala qaaday?
13 Kob abaar ah oo dheche miyaa	koore ila meeray?
14 Kub miyaan ka jabay bliichiyaan	kabayo Loo haynin? (64-67)

Poet's Lament on the Death of his Wife

- 1 Like the *yu'ub* wood bell tied to gelded camels that are running away,
- 2 Or like camels which are being separated from their young,
- 3 Or like people journeying while moving camp,
- 4 Or like a well which has broken its sides or a river which has overflowed its banks,
- 5 Or like an old woman whose only son was killed,
- 6 Or like the poor, dividing the scraps for their frugal meal,
- 7 Or like the bees entering their hive, or food crackling in the frying,
- 8 Yesterday my lamentations drove sleep from all the camps.
- 9 Have I been left bereft in my house and shelter?
- 10 Has the envy of others been miraculously fulfilled?
- 11 Have I been deprived of the fried meat and reserves for lean times which were so plentiful for me?
- 12 Have I today been taken from the chessboard (of life)?
- 13 Have I been borne on a saddle to a distant and desolate place?
- 14 Have I broken my shin, a bone which cannot be mended? (page 64-66)]

The rhetorical questions describe the poet's grief and the internal split in the poem reflects the phases of mourning with the passing of the days. The similes in the first half of the poem suggest the husband's anguish and confusion in trying tentatively to find a way to describe the sound of his lamentation on the day he loses his wife. The natural imagery conjures up a view of people dependent for survival on animals, the environment and each other. The sound of the poet's despair is like the loss of hope at hearing one's camels, upon which life itself depends, being lost. His cry is the cry of the human or animal mother at the loss of her child. The poem then moves to the present of its utterance. For the poet, the loss of his life's partner is like being deprived of home, food and physical integrity. Perhaps the most striking image in the elegy is the idea of that outcome of grief is like being removed "from the chessboard (of life)". What this poignantly expresses is the sense that the loss of his wife represents the inevitable loss of all of the codes and practices which govern meaningful relationships and pursuits.

Clearly, in order to achieve the effects described in the analysis of the poem above, Somali oral poetry cannot be an unrehearsed, unplanned, spontaneous expression of ritual formulae. It is wholly individually composed, albeit against a rigid and rigorous metrical, alliterative and stylistic paradigm. Alden and Tremaine go so far as to suggest that poems are associated with individual poets "to an even greater extent than in the Western written tradition" (13). Poems, as we have seen, are never composed on the spot. They are the product of exhaustive labour, usually mainly by those with poetic talent and an extensive knowledge of the Somali language since, in order to achieve the prescribed alliterative pattern, an often archaic, "literary" vocabulary needs to be summoned. Said Samatar notes quite explicitly, in part summarizing the argument suggested above, that: "... the concept of 'composition in performance' associated with the propounders of the 'Formulaic Theory' does not apply to Somali oral poetry, nor do

Romantic/folklorist notions of oral poetry as a ‘communal product ... an instinctive, artless outburst of feeling’ which ‘naturally’ springs to life without prior deliberation”.¹³ On every occasion that a poem is recited by someone other than the composer, the original poet must not only be acknowledged, but also, in the *exordium*, the circumstance of the composition needs to be provided. Furthermore, every word of the text must be faithfully and accurately reproduced. Infringement leads to strict penalties. Individual property rights in intellectual capital thus are even more pronounced in the context of Somali oral artistic creation than it is in conceptions of private ownership which govern print capitalism. Somali “copyright” laws require not only that every instance of verbal recitation of the work of art be attributed to its author, but also that the historical context of production be explained.

In this respect, Somali oral verse is similar again to classical Arabic poetry in that ownership in the poem vests in the original poet and even the poet’s *rāwī*, or professional “transmitter-cum-interpreter”[?] is not allowed to alter the verse. Classical Arabic poetry is a phenomenon of the 6th-7th centuries CE. Even when it has been anthologized in later centuries, in Isfahani’s 10th century CE *Book of Songs*, for example, the author biography and context of composition are noted. But what makes Somali oral poetry stand out even against this backdrop of similarity is the fact that the Somali oral poem may be recited by anyone who has memorized it correctly provided that the identity of the poet and the context which delimits the meaning be acknowledged on every occasion of recitation.

As should be clear from the foregoing discussion of transmission, the concept of poetry-in-composition also reduces the role of individual memory, a factor of major importance in relation to Somali oral poetry. Lewis and Andrzejewski make special mention of the exceptional powers of recollection both of people who choose to recite the poems and in particular, the poets themselves: “The reciters are not only capable of acquiring a wide repertoire but can store it in their memories for many years, sometimes for their lifetime. We have met poets who at a ripe age could still remember many poems which they learnt in their early youth” (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964, 45). In the context of Somali poetry thus, it is not formulae which are memorized. Poems are memorized verbatim.

On the question of the formulaic theory in respect of Somali oral verse, it must be noted that the poetic tradition, culture and social structures of the South of Somalia differ in various ways from the North. The South has suffered a lack of scholarly attention which recently has begun to be redressed. Academia has colluded in the frequent self-image of the ways of life and the cultural expressions of the patrician North as the “authentic” Somali nomadic pastoralist culture. “Canonical” versions of Somali oral poetry which emerge from anthropological and ethnological studies map the tradition in the following way. An idea of a “Golden Age” of poetry is developed which fixes all Somali culture within an unchanging paradigm. This version of the oral poetry also excludes the expression of many groups within Somali society. The male genres of the *gabay*, *geerar* and *jiifto* emerge as the “high” art against which other genres are either judged or altogether excluded. Often this canonization and exclusion is promoted by those within Somali

society with a vested interest in maintaining a particular vision of the society. The female forms of the *buraambur*, or work songs, in particular have been disregarded since they are considered to be non-prestigious.¹⁴ Similarly, the forms which have emerged in the period of Somali engagement with modernity which articulate the concerns especially of urbanized youth tend to be occluded from view in authoritative accounts both within and without Somali society. In an urban context, the longer genre of the *heello*, originates in the short form of the *belwo* which itself develops out of the established group of genres identified by John William Johnson as the “Family of Miniature Genres”.¹⁵ What the ongoing development of the oral genres suggests is an ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation by Somali poets in a period of rapidly changing social, historical and economic contexts against a shared horizon.

But there are tensions not only between the “high” genres and other genres. If one considers the *gabay*, the oral form which enjoys the most prestige, then differences emerge around the features of this genre also. These differences are mainly regional. Virginia Luling notes that the *gabay* of the people who live in the south around the area of Afgooye is “*extemporized*”, in contrast with the *gabay* in the North: “The poet, known as *laashin*, is expected to compose on his feet, drawing on his remembered stock of phrases and alliterative links to help him”.¹⁶ Thus the qualified poetry-in composition model proposed by Finnegan and Okpewho appears to apply in the case of some of the poetry of the south.

Somali orature, furthermore, employs many techniques associated with more “literary” modes. There are examples of “inter-orality” where one Somali oral poem alludes to another oral poem. Said Samatar’s research on “The Hurgumo Chain” of poems which originate in early 1978, for example, clearly indicates the complicated network of allusion and counter-allusion to which Somali poetry lends itself.¹⁷ There are also examples of inter-orality where a Somali oral poem refers to the oral tradition of another culture. In the poems collected by Andrzejewski and Lewis, an instance is noted of the allusion within a Somali poem to the oral tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia (132). There are also examples of, for want of a more elegant neologism, “inter-oralexuality”, where an oral poem alludes to a written tradition. “The Death of Richard Corfield”, probably the most well-known Somali poem by the Sayyid, Muhammed Abdille Hassan, known as both the “father” of Somali nationalism and the Somali “Shakespeare”, alludes to the textual tradition of the Qur’an in the repetition in the poem of the imperative, “Say” or “Recite” or “Read”.

Muhammed Abdille Hassan in the poem in question was roused to great rhetorical heights since he identified in some ways in Richard Corfield the mirror image of himself. Corfield had been sent to restore order to the coastal areas after an ill-considered colonial policy had created a disturbance in the balance of power. Corfield’s success on the coast led him contrary to policy to engage the Dervishes inland in the battle of Dul Madoba in August of 1913. Corfield was shot in the head and died instantly. Perhaps recognizing in Corfield his own impetuous determination, Muhammed Abdille Hassan composed possibly his most well-known poem after being informed of the death of his enemy and alter ego. A small fragment of the poem from the translation of

Andrzejewski and Lewis is provided below and, as can be seen, line 31 of the poem applies as aptly to the poet himself as it does to his subject. Muhammed Abdille Hassan inflates the ferocity of the death to calculated political effect. The poet presents Corfield's soul, hell-bound, being interrogated by the inhabitants of heaven. The poem puts the following words into Corfield's mouth using the technique of declarative utterance employed in a number of verses of the sacred book, the Qur'an:

...

23 Sida janannadii hore tashigu	igu jaguugnaa dheh
24 Taladii jinnigu ii hor maray	jaasadeed helay dheh
25 Jiidaha chanuunka leh markii	La igu jeeraarshay
26 Jibaadka iga soo bachay dadkii	jiifka qaban waa dheh
27 Kolkay rubaddu jow tiri or bay	iga ag jiibsheen dheh
28 Jiirkaygii na bahal baa cunoo	jiitay hilibkii dheh
29 Jurmidiyo baruurtii dhurwaa	juguch ka siiyaa dheh
30 Jiiljiiladiyo seedahay tukuu	igaga jaadeen dheh
31 Haddaan Lays jikaarayn tolkay	Laga jiilroonaa dheh
32 Weligood wacha Lagu jaraa	jilibdhig duulaan dheh
33 Daraawiishi waa jibin dhowga iyo	jowga soo bichi dheh. (72-75)

The Death of Richard Corfield

...

[23 Say: "Like the war leaders of old, I cherished great plans for victory."
24 Say: "The schemes the djinns planted in me brought my ruin."
25 Say: "When pain racked me everywhere
26 Men lay sleepless at my shrieks."
27 Say: "Great shouts acclaimed the departing of my soul."
28 Say: "Beasts of prey have eaten my flesh and torn it apart for meat."
29 Say: "The sound of swallowing the flesh and the fat comes from the hyena."
30 Say: "The crows plucked out my veins and tendons."
31 Say: "If stubborn denials are to be abandoned, then my clansmen were defeated."
32 In the last stand of resistance there is always great slaughter.
33 Say: "The Dervishes are like the advancing thunderbolts of a storm, rumbling and roaring." (72-74)]

The life and achievement of the man who has come to be known as the "Sayyid", or the "Master", cast an interesting light on the issues explored here. The Sayyid, born in 1856 into a family of religious scholars in a British controlled area of Somalia presented the most formidable resistance initially to Ethiopian, but then also British and Italian colonial expansion into Somali territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, as time has passed, the Sayyid and his Dervishes appear to have presented the most significant resistance to imperial ambitions,

including resistance to the American military intervention, ironically called “Operation Restore Hope”, which attempted to establish a sphere of influence in the Horn of Africa in 1992. In this case, virtually unarmed Somalis routed the world’s biggest military power. The difference between the resistance of Muhammed Abdille Hassan to British imperial ambitions and recent American imperial designs is the fact that the Sayyid has left a cultural legacy. The history of the Sayyid is not, however, without contradictions. The Sayyid and the Saalihyiah religious order that he represented alienated many Somalis, in particular, the more accommodationist Qadiriyyah order which dominated the Benaadir coast, especially around the city of Berbera. The Sayyid also lost many potential allies through his autocratic style and the raid and loot techniques he employed to feed his army. Prior to the revisionist historiography which conferred upon him the honorific of “Sayyid”, Muhammad Abdille Hassan was pejoratively known to the British as “the Mad Mullah”. Both the fact that he presented a bulwark of resistance to British imperial ambition and the nature of that resistance appeared as the confrontation between colonial rationality and irredentist irrationality.

What has made the Sayyid loom large in recent Somali consciousness, however, especially in the period of the civil war since the fall of the dictator, Muhammed Siyad Barre, is the fact that despite historical tensions, the Sayyid was able to mobilize Somalis across clan lines. For this reason, he has come to be seen as the father of Somali “nationalism”. This idea must be qualified, however, by the note that the dynamic for the “nationalism” of the Sayyid was not nationalism in which associational bonds are forged out of individual will of the citizenry. The unity which the Sayyid was able to muster among Somalis was a unity formed in relation to a common set of religious values.

What in particular makes the Sayyid stand out not only in Somali history, but also in more general histories of political and religious leadership, is his role as creative artist. The Sayyid is and was acknowledged, even among his enemies, as the foremost bard of the Somalis. Said Samatar, in a very comprehensive and insightful analysis of the significance of the Sayyid’s verse to his political and religious eminence, identifies the man as “poet, mystic and warrior” (Samatar *Oral Poetry*, 196). Samatar, implicitly responds to understandings of the relationship of art to society which emerge in nineteenth century Europe whereby art, to preserve its integrity, must isolate itself from the social world. Samatar thus makes a strong case for the inextricability of the poetry to the Sayyid’s social role. An analysis of his life and art suggests, however, that in terms of the worldview of the Sayyid, this dichotomy was not apparent. The Sayyid used the traditional forms, in particular the *gabay*, to respond to situations but not in an unrehearsed, spontaneous way. Samatar notes:

To be sure, the Sayyid’s verse did inspire and inflame the Somalis, but it was far from being an “impromptu” art, representing as it did a conscious production of a complex form of literature which sought to fuse ideas with verbal beauty in such a manner as to produce certain effects in the hearer. Behind the seeming spontaneity and vitality of the reciter of pastoral verse are the composer’s long hours of patient labors. The Sayyid was fond of

observing, it is said, that he composed his verse to “show the truth of his position” and the “falsehood” of that of his opponents (187).

The poem, “The Death of Richard Corfield” is central to the discussion of orature in one of the novels by Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah, to be considered later.

Oral poetry among the Somali, furthermore, is constitutively woven into the fabric of the society and plays a similar role to the popular media in a print culture. One of the earliest written accounts of the Somalis is contained in Richard Burton’s travelogue, *First Footsteps in East Africa*. Burton identifies Somalia as a country which “teems with poets, poetasters, poetitos, poetacciaos.”¹⁸ At all times, but especially in times of political strife, the poet has in certain ways occupied the role of the news media in the contemporary globalized world. But there is one significant difference in the oral poet’s agency in informing and persuading. While contemporary news media construct an ethical horizon out of procedurally rational critical discourse, the oral poet appeals to a substantively rational code of conduct constituted by the social life of the people and religion. Somali oral poetry also responds to and intervenes in day to day trials and tribulations. For example, the diasporic Somali poet, Hawa Jibril, at the age of twelve composed poems to articulate her grievances against her younger brother and later to refuse a proposal of marriage.¹⁹

In general thus, Somali oral verse foregrounds composition by a creative, critical, verbally gifted artist more visibly than other African and global oral poetic traditions, and perhaps in a way which compels one to readdress the assumptions held about these traditions. A few cases from other traditions which foreground the poet as a unique talent may be noted as examples here. Kofi Anyidoho notes the trend in the verses of major Ewe oral poets to view their talent as a special gift, which paradoxically alienates them from their communities.²⁰ Their outsider status as lonely and isolated artists provides them with the vantage point, however, to turn a necessary critical spotlight on the failures of their community. While this self-reflection of the Ewe poet on himself and his community may strike one as similar to the self-conceptions of the Romantic poet in the European poetic tradition, it is fundamentally different since the Ewe poet regards his talent as a sacred gift, binding the poet to a mythical and metaphysical world shared by his community rather than as the product of individual genius. The poet thus remains moored to a shared conception of the good.

Praise poetry also suggests an individuation which challenges assumptions of the effacement of the person in the collective or the communal associated with orality. Praise in the context of praise poetry moves beyond the notion of simple admiration of the other. Praise poetry is a significant part of verse traditions globally, and in Africa may be identified as part of the repertoire of the Zulu *imbongi* and the *griot* in parts of West Africa. Praise poetry effectively embodies the absence of dichotomy in the relation of person and community in a non-modern worldview. Praise poetry simultaneously valorizes the unique and exceptional person as it reinforces the values held in common. Often the object of praise is the versifier himself, as is the case with the warrior praises among the Bahima of Ankole. The delineation of the exceptional

person is evident from the frequency of the use of the first person in these poems – every line extols the “I” – and from the obvious inflation of virtues.²¹ But even where “praise poetry” does not commend positive qualities and appears rather to celebrate the brutality of the anti-hero, as Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias notes in connection with “praise” of the antagonist, Sumanguru, in the *Sunjata* epic, the effect of praise is nevertheless to articulate the person extolled in relation to others against a common horizon.²² De Moraes Farias expresses this idea as follows:

What praise discourses postulate is their capacity to seize upon the “truth” of the praisee’s being, and to activate it and generate acknowledgement of it by the praisee’s private self and by the public at large. To achieve this, praise operates on “the individual” not as if on an entity primarily defined by its boundedness, but rather as if on one whose singularity is constituted precisely by its participation in what lies beyond its boundaries (225).

In other words, the dynamic which motivates praise poetry is not the uniqueness of the disembedded individual whose exceptional talents are generated wholly from within. Without a common framework of value the person’s exceptional talents would not be recognized. The praise poem thus acknowledges the code in relation to which both “praisor” and “praisee” achieve their singularity in the first place, as well as the egregious talents which allow each to stand in relief against the code since their self-realization exceeds the fulfillment of less praiseworthy members of that shared community.

The case of the *oriki* of the Yoruba also clearly illuminates the idea that the individual person is both constituted and enabled by an external and shared system which embodies a non-linear conception of time and embraces spiritual zones of experience. Yoruba *oriki* chants consist of a chain of epithets which, in describing or defining what is unique about the recipient of the chant, also appear to evoke or summon up precisely what is identified. Karin Barber notes that *oriki* are not praise poems since what is elicited in the chant are often negative qualities in terms of the Yoruba conception of virtue. The *oriki* often insult or embarrass, but nevertheless capture what is distinctive about its subject.²³ Barber also observes that, “while *oriki* affirm the distinctiveness of their subjects, they are also agents of transcendence. ... [where] boundaries between entities are opened, even in the act of asserting the irreducible uniqueness of each” (14). The boundaries of the self are brought down in its relationship to time where the past is contained in the present and in relation to a spiritual world. Unlike the case of Somali oral poetry where the poet’s voice is distinctive, the *oriki* downplay the style of the performer since all attention is concentrated on the recipient of the *oriki*. The one exception is the case of the *oriki* of the bride called *rara iyawo*, where Barber suggests that the purpose of identifying parents and other family members is to draw attention to the subject of the utterance, the bride herself (113).

Somali oral poetry thus brings the recognition of the person embedded in other oral traditions into sharp focus. Somali oral verse is wholly “individual”, but it is an “individualism” which, paradoxically, in terms of the evolutionary model which suggests a progressive development from

the communal “we” of orality to the “I” of print capitalist literacy, is also wholly oral. Somali oral verse also challenges the idea that “Africa” is orality and orality is fundamentally “African”. Somali scholars suggest that “contrary to common belief, Somalis seem to have been more familiar with the culture of writing in their pre-colonial past, than they seem to be now”.²⁴ Cultural, commercial, linguistic and ethnic links with the literate ancient Egyptian Kingdoms and close contact with the three “religions of the Book” are adduced in support of this idea. In certain of these respects virtually no part of Africa can be said to have existed in a state of primordial oral “innocence”. However, Somalis, apparently unconvinced by the progressive evolutionist model, have had an ambiguous attitude to literacy. In a world where each person has been a “living library”, the dependence on books has been seen as a cultural loss. Some sense of this loss expressed in a wider social and cultural context is suggested by the very well known poet, Hadrawi, who challenged the regime of the dictator Siyad Barre in the late 1980s. Hadrawi suggests: “Poetry is alive, but the conditions of life it expresses are at an end. ... We’ve lost a lot of our skills and our knowledge and our culture because of this modern civilization”.²⁵

Despite transformations in ways of living highlighted by Hadrawi, the Somalis remain, however, predominantly an “audio-aural” culture²⁶. Notwithstanding this fact, presently, as a response to the Somali diaspora and immersion in a complex globally connected world a culture of writing is being strongly fostered. This has been centred in Hargeisa, the capital city of the relatively peaceful, as yet internationally unrecognized Somaliland Republic in the north, and in the major cities of the Somali diaspora. These initiatives have been promoted by various Horn of Africa publishing houses, reading clubs and Somali writers’ organizations. For example, the Somali Week Festival is organized annually in London. Similar festivals are arranged by diasporic Somalis in Australia, Canada and the U.S.A. In November 2008, a literary festival was organized in London by the Somali chapter of the PEN association and the HalAbuur Centre. An international book fair was also organized in Hargeisa in June 2009.

“Paper” literacy, however, frequently is sidestepped for “technological” literacy. The internet is a major factor in the dissemination of Somali literature. As a consequence of high levels of violence and instability and massive displacement both internally and internationally, Somalis have tried to maintain the bonds of community through technological means. The internet is used by Somalis for the dissemination of news, transacting business, for political ends and for religious teaching among other uses. The fact of the use of the technology of the post-industrial age to maintain traditional forms of community necessarily in some ways transforms relations within those communities. A mutated dynamic operates within these cyber-communities which is beyond the scope of this essay to consider. Issa-Salwe’s research shows that 3 % of Somali internet sites are devoted to Somali literature. But as Issa-Salwe notes: “Common features that can be found in almost all categories are the literary and Islamic sections. These two features demonstrate the importance that Somalis give to these most enduring elements of their heritage”.²⁷

But as with the dissemination of Somali poetry by means of audio-cassettes at an earlier juncture of technological development, literary use of the internet among Somalis seems once again to move directly from the oral to the aural, sidestepping the written word. Issa-Salwe observes that many Somali internet sites use the audio facility, which acts as “an analogue of oral media”. This type of use might “shift the balance from print to audio”. Abstraction and the potential for conceptual thought occur in both the predominantly oral world and the world of print capitalism. However, the abstraction and conceptualization produced within the framework of a predominantly oral society is qualitatively different from the abstraction and conceptualization of print capitalism. Much work remains to be done on the transformation of worldview engendered by the transition from an oral to an aural world, ushered by the use of the internet. It is interesting to note in this regard that in Hargeisa there is one public library with the number of books probably of the average mobile library, but there is an internet café virtually on every street of the city centre.

Orature in Literature: The Somali Novel for the Somali Reader

Somali literature originates around the early twentieth century and initially existed in a number of different scripts. A standard script and orthography were only officially introduced in October 1972 by the government of Mohammed Siyad Barre. Andrzejewski identifies three categories of text in his overview of the works produced from around the middle of the twentieth century, namely, the work of the “Preservers”, the “Transmuters” and the “Innovators”.²⁸ Only the first two categories are relevant to the issues under consideration here. He refers to the writers who aim simply to set down oral narratives and poetry in writing as the “Preservers”. Among the works of the preservers, he notes the anthology of traditional prose narratives collected by Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal, titled *Hikmad Soomaali* or *Somali Wisdom*, as well as the compilation by Cumar Aw Nuux of the poems of oral poet, Xaaji Aadan Axmed, among other works. Andrzejewski uses the term “Transmuter” to refer to those writers who “use texts and themes derived from oral sources as important ingredients of their works, which however, belong to genres alien to Somali oral literature ...” (9). The examples Andrzejewski refers to are the novel and the fully scripted play with stage directions.

The novel, referred to, first published in 1974, is worthy of mention since it now counts among the “classics” of Somali literature in the Somali language. The novel is titled *Aqoondaaro waa u nacab jacayl* or *Ignorance is the enemy of love* by Faarax M. J. Cawl.²⁹ In many respects this novel is similar to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The author relies upon an oral tale extant at the time which itself is based on a true story. The love theme is very common to Somali oral narratives. The novel engages in an interesting play on the value of both orature and literature rather than presenting these expressive media in conflict. The narrative shifts between the perspectives of both the hero, Calimaax, who is a dervish supporter of the Sayyid, and the heroine, Cawrala. The literate heroine is attracted to the unlettered hero because of the eloquence of his speech, in particular his knowledge of existing poetry and his flair for original composition, as well as his familiarity with Somali culture with its rich storehouse of wit and wisdom, captured

in proverbs and folk tales. The fact that he cannot read, subsequently, however, is the hero's undoing since he cannot decipher his beloved's love letter which, interestingly, takes the form of a page poem. The hero's oral talent thus is the spark for romance, but ironically, his non-literacy, in the novel described as "ignorance", is the "enemy of love" since it is an obstacle in the course of love. If Romeo's flaw was that he loved "by the book" rather than loving sincerely, Calimaax, the hero of the Somali novel, is hampered by the fact that he has no book learning at all. The consummation of the love of the Somali Romeo and Juliet is also prevented by tragic mistiming. Calimaax arrives when Cawrala is just put in her grave and correctly predicts his own impending death because of grief. Ironically, at Cawrala's graveside, Calimaax reveals through writing his own page poem on the reverse of his beloved's letter which he has kept as a talisman, that in the intervening period he has learned to read and write. In this Somali novel, the introduction of script into a predominantly oral society is not the catalyst for tragedy; rather it is the absence of literacy which precludes romantic and personal fulfillment. In this novel, writing does not make the world of orature fall apart. Writing, instead suggests a different medium for self-realization.

The novel is interesting also for the extent to which it relies on oral poems, both composed by others and composed by the author. The characters speak in verse at moments in the text which are conventionally appropriate. The transition from orature to literature in this context is not presented as indexing a profound philosophical shift in worldview. In the context of early twentieth century Somalia, writing is simply another medium which allows mutual communication in a changed and changing context. The sources against which the hero and heroine determine the conception of self-realization remain the same whether the characters are lettered or unlettered.

Many later novels in Somali, despite being set in urban or semi-urban environments, continue to incorporate oral poetry. In an analysis of a more recent novel, *Waddadii Walbahaarka* or *The Road of Grief* by Xuseen Sheekh Biixi, Martin Orwin notes that a transformation has occurred in the way that poetry is used in the novel.³⁰ This novel is set in the period of the turbulent times just before the flight of the dictator, Siyaad Barre, in 1991, which led to full scale civil war in the later 1990s. This novel also combines the themes of love and the journey, although by the late 1990s, the journeys of many Somalis have been intercontinental. Interestingly, in this context, the lovers, Xamdi and Mahad, meet in a bookshop. The course of their relationship is traumatically interrupted by the violence which prevails in their country. After many harrowing experiences, the couple eventually are reunited in Canada. Orwin notes that while earlier characters in novels used poetry to communicate in socially appropriate contexts, characters in recent novels use poetry to emphasize moments of "emotional intensity". This is quite understandable given the recognition that the social contexts within which it was appropriate to recite poetry no longer exist since entire communities and their ways of life have been brutally torn apart. Orwin suggests furthermore that in recent novels, the nature of the retrospective focus of the novels highlights the way that "situations that were presented in earlier novels belong to the past, thereby foregrounding the new, changed situation in which Somalis find themselves" (337). In other words, oral traditional elements are employed in long narratives with oral traditional

themes but in ways which show themselves to be not a fossilized index of a static past, but as part of a complex negotiation with transforming social contexts.

Very recently a younger generation either in the diaspora or diasporic Somalis who have returned to Somaliland, which is the only part of greater Somalia which enjoys relative stability, have begun to write novels in English for a local market. These novels often are the product of a kind of “cottage” publishing industry, very similar to the Ghanaian popular literature studied by Stephanie Newell. Like the Ghanaian authors Newell considers, Somali writers “tend to be published in small print-runs and distributed within the locality, a process often paid for by the authors themselves”.³¹

The Somali novel in English intended for a Somali audience similarly relies upon narrative structures familiar to orature. By way of example, consider *Tahrib a Novel: People on the Move* by a lecturer in English at a college in Hargeisa.³² The novel tells the story of an educated young man who because of a failed romance and the influence of his friends decides to leave his homeland for the economic prosperity and social possibilities of Europe. He is the eponymous “tahribist” or “emigrant”. The hero, Samir, and his travails represent the unique realization of an experience common to many young Somalis since his exile symbolizes the exile of hundreds of thousands of Somalis who have fled their homeland. He settles in Norway but is unable ever to assimilate into Norwegian society. He marries a young Somali woman, who unlike the male protagonist does seem to find a way to be at home in a foreign land. Despite the massive sacrifices required for his journey, a journey where he also loses some of his companions, he nevertheless decides to return home to Hargeisa in Somaliland. His marriage does not survive the relocation and when his wife leaves him, he again takes up with his first love.

This novel also combines the love theme frequent in Somali orature, with the journey motif common to Somali folk tales. The novel does not, however, incorporate existing oral verse, most likely because of the challenges of translation. Since this text generically identifies itself as a “Novel”, one assumes that the hero’s journey is one which leads to self-discovery and social re-integration through the life-experiences of the disengaged subject. What one discovers instead is that the journey is the journey of a hero who orients himself against a social horizon and whose experience on returning home widens those horizons. The novel quite clearly is written with a specific audience in mind, namely, young Somalilanders who may be enticed by the appeals of foreign climes. Its purpose evidently is to persuade young people of the merits of remaining within a community which shares the values against which one orients one’s own self-realization. Thus despite the fact that this novel does not incorporate specific examples of from the existing oral repertoire, it’s deep structure is shaped by the structure of the journey motif in the Somali folk tale.

Orature in Literature: The Somali Novel for the International Reader

It is interesting to note that the first Somali novel, published in 1970, in contrast to the trend in other parts of Africa and the world where the novel is not an autochthonous form, was a novel in

English rather than in Somali. This may be explained by the fact that a script and orthography for the Somali language was formalized only in 1972. What makes the language in which the first Somali novel was written even more interesting is the fact that its author is a veritable polyglot. Nuruddin Farah wrote the novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, in a language which is his fourth after Somali, Amharic and Arabic, a choice explained in part, the author suggests, by the fact that he had at hand a Latin script typewriter. The novel was published in the Heinemann African Writers Series which automatically incorporated it in the network of literary works aimed at presenting a politically and culturally overdetermined concept of “Africa” to a metropolitan audience. An implicit assumption about the novels which entered this global network of exchange was that these were cultural forms which constitutively embodied Africa’s step into modernity. The transition from oral to literate worldviews, as outlined earlier, is a key dimension of this assumed evolution.

Following the success of *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah has gone on to be Somalia’s most well known international author, winning the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, and has often been punted as a potential recipient of the Nobel prize for literature. He has published 10 novels to date, an *oeuvre* which seems to encapsulate a complete history of the novel. His novels move from the proto-realism of *From a Crooked Rib* to the modernism of *A Naked Needle* and the postmodernism and magic realism of the later novels, for example, *Maps* and *Secrets*.³³ Apart from Farah’s first two novels, all his other novels have been written in the form of trilogies which allow the author the broad canvas required to explore an idea fully. Farah’s novels, all of which are set in the Somalia from which the author himself has been exiled since 1974, enjoy international acclaim and have been translated into numerous world languages, including Finnish.

What is strongly foregrounded in criticism of *From a Crooked Rib*, are the indigenous roots of the novel in Somali oral forms. The novel narrates the experiences and thoughts of the heroine, Ebla, who escapes the tribulations of a life of nomadic pastoralism and an arranged marriage for the personal liberation and freedom of romantic association presented by the city of Mogadiscio. Thematically one observes that the first Somali novel in English shares the preoccupations of the early novels in Somali, which themselves reflect the concerns of Somali orature. *From a Crooked Rib*, like *Ignorance is the enemy of love*, brings together the themes of love and the journey. Unlike the novel in the Somali language, *From a Crooked Rib* is a *Bildungsroman* which traces the staged development of the heroine as a response to personal experience measured solely against an individually conceived rationality. Ebla’s possessive individualism which gauges freedom in her sovereign capacity to own herself and alienate aspects of herself, for example, her sexuality, suggest a character wholly egregious in her environment. Early criticism of the novel takes issue precisely with the inconceivability of some of the heroine’s thoughts in her context.

Ironically, Derek Wright, probably the most well-known Farah critic, suggests that it is precisely the persuasive orality of the protagonist’s literary representation that allows her to be believable as a character, despite possession of a worldview inconceivable in her context.³⁴ Wright argues:

This is so, essentially, because she lives on the page as an oral being, triumphantly alive in an oral culture glimpsed here in its original unsullied state before its corruption by the General. [The reference here is to the dictator, Mohammed Siyad Barre, whose manipulation of Somali oral culture is analyzed by Wright elsewhere.] The quirky, disjointed style of the narrative catches her living minute by minute, on the spot, improvising; pausing, in the manner of the oral tale, to examine the meaning of her experiences and the truth of her reflections on them; and expressing by turns a range of responses (credulity, curiosity, tolerance, amused contempt) none of which have any final or enduring value. Though uninformed, Ebla's is a shrewd and skeptical intelligence, and her medley of psychological "asides" shows how its instinctive wisdoms and insights are fed by remembered anecdotes and proverbs, folk tales and moral fables, and the poems of the Sayyid, all imbibed with the oral culture of her childhood (28-9).

Undoubtedly there is a strong oral element in the novel in its reliance on the alliteration, imagery and symbols common to oral verse as well as the use of folk tales. However, the oral dimension of the novel is not the dynamic which drives the character towards her self-realization. Eileen Julien refers to this superficial use of orature in the "extroverted" African novel, or the novel intended for an international audience, as "ornamentalism".³⁵ Orature in *From a Crooked Rib* is "ornamental" to the extent that the world of orature is not the horizon against which the heroine orients herself. Self-realization in the novel paradoxically originates in and advances towards an idea of personal freedom atomistically conceived which is not a product of and could not be sustained by the understanding of the person in Somali culture. The plot structure of the novel does not resemble the plot structure of the novel in the Somali language even though thematically they are similar. The plot structure of *From a Crooked Rib* instead follows the pattern of the classical European novel of development where the central character rejects the constrictions of his upbringing, in particular the social role which is foisted upon him. The journey from countryside to city is presented as a journey of both education and liberation where the protagonist develops out of his own internal resources. Closure of the classical *Bildungsroman* presents the protagonist ironically coming to occupy a similar social role to the one initially rejected. The entire trajectory of personal development maintains the illusion that the final assumption of a social role is the product of the free choice of the autonomous subject. (The use of the masculine pronoun here is deliberate since the path of the individual towards the self-fulfillment of liberation was a path open initially only to the male protagonist in the early novel of development.) If one relates this paradigm to Farah's first novel, we see that at the end of the narrative, the heroine, Ebla, in the city of Mogadiscio "freely" chooses to marry a man as old and fat as the husband initially chosen for her by her grandfather in the countryside. Closure in the novel, is, however, tinged with this final irony which hermeneutically opens up the novel.

The question of orality only comes up strongly in criticism of the very early novels by Farah, namely *From a Crooked Rib* and *A Naked Needle*. The use of oral features in these novels seem to occur to prove that the Somali novel in English is authentically Somali. The question of orality

then surfaces in the first novel of the first trilogy, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, but now orality and the worldview it represents is presented as particularly susceptible to the manipulations of postcolonial, increasingly autocratic regimes. In criticism of the novels, the question of orality hereafter seems to fade from view.

Orality and the world it represents, however, comes up significantly again in the final novel of the first trilogy, *Close Sesame*. Even though this is the only novel by Farah which quotes Somali oral verse, orality as bridge into a literate worldview is not foregrounded in criticism of the novel since at this stage in the author's career, the Somali novel in English no longer appears to be burdened with proving its cultural authenticity. What makes this novel especially interesting in relation to the question addressed here is the way in which the function of the oral verse is completely transformed. The protagonist of this novel is an elderly man who, for the greater part of his life, was absent from his family since he was imprisoned by the Somali dictatorship. The novel presents the protagonist as a character whose worldview is profoundly shaped by an orature which is the cultural embodiment of an all-encompassing fusion of religion and tradition, albeit an oral culture mediated because of the protagonist's infirmity, by technology. The old man, Deeriye, in his sickbed in his son's home, listens to audio tapes of recitations from the Qur'an and recitations of the verses of his favourite oral poet, Muhammed Abdille Hassan, the father of Somali nationalism and the Somali "Shakespeare" referred to earlier. The poem which is quoted in the novel is the poem, "The Death of Richard Corfield", a fragment from which is translated above. Curiously, even though at the level of the deep structure of the plot, the self-fulfillment of the protagonist, Deeriye, seems to replicate the life of the Sayyid, nevertheless the crucial decisions in his life are not determined by the meaning he gleans from the Sayyid's art. The fact that the 11 lines from "The Death of Richard Corfield" are not translated in the novel are a clear indication that the world of orature is not the world against which Deeriye's idea of perfection of the self is measured. If it had been, it would have been necessary for the reader to be able to evaluate his development against ethical norms represented by the oral verse he listens to.

Towards the end of his path to self-realization, Deeriye experiences an epiphany. Curiously, his epiphany is not inspired by the sources against which the novel presents him as perfecting himself, namely the fusion of the social codes of religion and tradition. Deeriye's ultimate revelation is not an illumination of a course of action determined by the social code. It is instead the realization that he has not interpreted his own experience correctly. The terms in which his epiphany is expressed suggest that the fundamental misrecognition is a linguistic misrecognition. Deeriye has misrepresented experience through an inadequate understanding of language: "Then a sudden thought occurred to him ... 'All our lives, mortals that we are, we misname things and objects, we misdefine illnesses and misuse metaphors.'" (Farah *Close Sesame* 235) The protagonist thus, although superficially identified with the world of orature, in fact, locates his moral sources in the polyvalency of language, of which the apparent openness of the novel is the prime symbol.

Another factor relevant to the assessment of the use of orature in the novel is the recognition that while composition of Somali oral poetry may be “individual”, performance of the poetry never is. The social dimension of the poetry is elided through the construction of a character who, because of his age and illness, leads a life almost hermetically sealed off from the society from which he is supposed to draw his inspiration. For most of the novel Deeriye remains isolated with his headphones on in a room in the house of his son. Furthermore, while the meaning of Somali oral poetry is never wholly indeterminate, since meaning is in part illuminated by the requirement that the context of composition be outlined on every occasion of recitation, meaning in this novel does not reveal itself. Paradoxically, despite its title, *Close Sesame* is one of Farah’s most open-ended novels. In the final sequence of the novel, an attempt is made on the life of the Dictator, in the course of which Deeriye dies. One cannot determine whether this is a failed assassination attempt or a suicide. The indeterminacy of closure makes interpretation of the novel radically indeterminate. Indeed, indeterminacy itself would appear to be the “meaning” of the novel. Open-endedness is a constant feature of all Farah’s novels initiated by the ironic closure of the first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. As we saw, the ending of the first novel opened up irony when the heroine chooses of her own free will a very similar oppressive marriage to the one she initially rejects. Irony in the later novels develops into complete indeterminacy. A constant feature of criticism of Farah’s novels is praise for the plurality and democratic openness of his fiction which allow many voices to be heard. But polyglossia is a feature not only of Farah’s novels. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s exploration of dialogism, and various other theories of the novel which move in a similar direction, the novel is regarded as one of the most open and democratic cultural forms.

Conclusion

The question addressed by this paper concerns what happens when an oral tradition, which appears to defy assumptions about “pre-modern” worldviews, is incorporated into the novel, the genre constituted in and through modernity. What we find is that a distinction needs to be made between orature which is incorporated into long narratives, loosely referred to as “novels”, and orature incorporated into the novel proper, the genre which develops simultaneously with print capitalism whose plot structure embodies individual subject formation. When this distinction is made, it is clear that the major transformation is not produced when “primal African orality” encounters writing. Script in itself does not fundamentally collapse societies predominantly oral since the introduction of literature does not necessarily close the social horizon against which oral societies determine self-perfection. Orature incorporated into a literary genre which is not unmoored from a social horizon does not produce the seismic shifts with which the introduction of the novel, frequently equated with the introduction of “writing” in Africa is associated.

The case of the incorporation of Somali oral verse into literature is illustrative since it unsettles the assumptions of an oral, communal world, on the one hand, and a literate, individualistic world on the other. This is evident because, despite the ways in which Somali oral poetry foregrounds the uniqueness of the person, despite what is termed its “individualism”, it is constituted against and measures itself in terms of an external, social conception of the higher

order. Said Samatar expresses this dimension of Somali poetry as follows: “While composition is intensely individualistic, pastoral verse finds its appeal by being firmly committed to the moral and spiritual experience of the community, by recapturing images and ideas which most people in a given community would know and appreciate. As one scholar put it, ‘Somali poetry establishes truth by arousing in the people a sensation of shared memory’ ” (*Oral Poetry*, 74).

Thus, although the person is foregrounded in the Somali poetic tradition, the person is shown in relief against a social horizon. Sociality is that which enables the individual person and that which enables relationships among people: Orature, for one Somali elder, is “the central integrating principle without which harmonious relationships in society would be unthinkable.” (Samatar *Oral Poetry*, 55) In terms of this conception of the person, the individual-collective binary is inconceivable since the “opposites” are mutually constitutive, What is interesting is that when oral forms which inherently embrace this conception of the constitution of the person, are incorporated into a form of literature where the social horizon is illuminated, incremental changes occur, but not transformations which re-order the entire social frame. The difference between these two forms of oral incorporation into literature, seem to be indexed by the intended audience of the literary works. The Somali long narratives intended for a Somali audience reinforce the social horizon represented by orature. By contrast, the Somali novels intended for an international audience incorporate and paradoxically subordinate orature to an order where the sources for realization of the self are located with the individual.

The work of Nuruddin Farah are the most significant examples of novels written for a metropolitan audience. The fact that Farah writes what Julien terms “extroverted” novels is clear both from the fact of his popularity internationally, gauged by the numerous translations of his works noted above, and the fact that his work does not appear to be read by Somalis. The only region of the greater Somalia with relative peace and stability at present is the fledging state of the Somaliland Republic in the North, with its capital at Hargeisa, referred to above. Interestingly, Farah has never been translated into Somali and in 2008, the Hargeisa University library, the Hargeisa municipal library and the library run by NAGAD, an umbrella organization of women’s NGOs did not have any Farah novels on their shelves. All civic amenities and indeed all civil life has collapsed in Mogadishu, the capital city of the South, which forms the setting of every one of Farah’s novels.

The novels of Nuruddin Farah incorporate quite conspicuously aspects of Somali oral tradition. This extends from symbolism to proverbs to the use of oral poetry and folk tales. What makes Farah’s use of orature distinct from the examples already discussed is the profound transformation in the orientation of the narratives. The social conception of virtue against which the person is oriented is subjected to the transformation outlined above where the individual now becomes his/her own moral source. This transformation is exemplified by the plot structure of the novel where the dynamic for development is presented as located wholly within the individual character. This inescapably produces irony which appears to liberate the novel not only from traditional plot but also from authorial control. The higher order or moral source thus comes to

be constituted by the “open” structure of the novel, which develops into the idea that the only truth is the truth of the openness of “writing” itself. Thus the effect of orature in the novels of the most significant Somali writer who writes for an international audience extends beyond the use of orature as guarantor of African authenticity within a genre which does not appear to emerge out of Somali social, philosophical, cultural or economic conditions. In addition to its “ornamentalism”, orature in Farah’s novels serves to validate the idea of the inherent “openness” and “plurality” which constitute the truth of the novel.

In the Somali context, orature in the extroverted novel is overdetermined to the extent that it must be present for the novel to be a *Somali* novel, but it must also be subordinated to the overarching “open” form of the novelistic novel in order to satisfy an international market. Subordinating the world of orature to the moral horizon of the illusory multivocality of the novel, as a display of its openness, ultimately and very imperceptibly elides orature. Thus, when the apparently inherent openness of the form of the novel itself comes to constitute the higher order, then the demise of orature, with its inescapable social higher order, is quite literally written in the book.

Finally, Somali orature serves as a salutary reminder that the dichotomy of “the oral” and “the literate” and all of the stereotypes they embody represent a mutually obstructive paradigm of analysis. Somali oral poetry foregrounds artistic creation of the poet in a way that is masked in other traditions when one approaches them with the assumptions forged by an idea of the literary. Somali poetry also unsettles the evolutionary paradigm which traces a progressive teleological development from the oral to the literate. Somali orature has coexisted with literature (but not print capitalism) for centuries, if not for millennia. The social horizon against which the person comes to be constituted in Somali cultural forms is a useful reminder also of the philosophical inescapability of the formation of the person against an external ethical horizon whether one’s creativity takes oral or literary expression.

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