

Classification and Nomenclature of Somali Literary Forms: A New Perspective

By Maxamed Daahir Afrax

E-Mail:mdafrax@gmail.com

In an interesting introduction to their collaborative work, professors Andrzejewski, Pitaszewicz and Tyloch (1985:22) state that

The classification and naming of types of literary composition is another area which it is illuminating to study. In the surveys represented here the majority of the systems of genre division are product of oral cultures which had no literary scholarship in any written form. No common underlying system between the cultures has so far been observed, but what is common is the fact that each genre plays its own social role and has its position in the hierarchy of values of each community. The great variety of genres, as well as the lack of correspondence between them and the genre names used in such languages as English or French creates problems of translation and lays bare the inadequacy of the traditional European genre classifications, which are more a product of historical development than of scientific thought.

The case of naming Somali literary forms perfectly attests to these informed statements. If the issue of classifying African literature and art is agreed to be far from settled (see, for instance, Ogumbiyi, 1982; Etherton, 1982) the Somali case is an obvious example. Here, “the lack of correspondence” between indigenous literary terms and the genre names used in English is just one, albeit perhaps the biggest, of several problems. The hard choice between a legion of subtle Somali literary names is yet another problem. This puzzling situation presents students of Somali literature

with a real dilemma, something John Johnson refers to as “the biggest problem in my research” (Johnson, 1996:91n).¹

That is why it is important here to pinpoint some key terms (such as ‘classical’, ‘miniature’, ‘genres’, ‘*heello*’, ‘*hees*’) and consider their use in previous scholarly works on Somali poetry as well as their proposed use in the present study. It is not the intention here to delve into detailed discussion of all the dimensions and implications of the problem. Instead, my aim here is to avoid possible ambiguity in my use of certain terms for which I offer alternative Somali terminology. Secondly, I hope that highlighting the problem as I do will bring it to the attention of other researchers with the hope that this leads to a satisfactory settlement to be arrived at.

‘Genre’ and ‘Form’

The two words of ‘genre’ and ‘form’ are just two examples of many terms frequently used in literary studies which elude clear-cut definition. On many occasions they are used differently by different writers or in different contexts. In this study I use the first term ‘genre’ primarily to refer to an established type of poetic composition defined by its specific metrical arrangements and rhythmic patterns; if chanted, a genre in Somali poetry is more easily distinguished by its familiar melodic tune (*luuq*). Examples of genres in this context are the *gabay*, (the lead genre of Somali traditional poetry), the *buraanbur* (the principal genre of Somali women verse) and the *shubaal* (the most common traditional work song).

Generally speaking, Somali verse is divided into two broad categories: ‘serious’ or *maanso-goleed*, as I propose to call it, and ‘light’ poetry or *maanso-maaweelo*. The best known genres which belong to the first group are the *gabay*, *geeraar*, *buraanbur*, *masafo* and *guurow*. Of the ‘light’ category, *dhaanto*, *saar*² and *shubaal* are among the most commonly used genres. Given below are examples of the first two, namely the *dhaanto* and the *saar*, showing what they are like and, in the process, this will also illustrate what we mean by ‘genre’ in this discussion:

A. *Dhaanto*³:

¹ It must be noted that it is not only non-Somali researchers that face this problem. As an indigenous Somali speaker, I myself had experienced frustrating difficulties with nomenclature when I was working on a book on Somali theatre (Maxamed, 1987) in Somali. This is not surprising because of what Yaasiin calls: “xasilid la’aanta Af-Soomaaliga” (the volatility of the Somali language, (Yaasiin, 1976:xv). There was no official writing system for Somali before 1972 and the issue of establishing a fixed Somali modern terminology is far from settled.

² The *miisaan* or metrical scansion of the *saar* is also shared by the *baarcadde*, the *guux* and the *haan/durbaan*, all of which are different evening performances practised in different Somali regions. As is the case with the *gabay* and the *guurow*, or with the five genres of the *wiglo* family, the above four genres in the *saar* group could only be distinguished when the verse in question is performed verbally and sung to one of the familiar melodies associated with either of these genres. This will be further elaborated later.

³ *Dhaanto* is one of the most common traditional dance songs. It shares the same metrical scansion (*miisaan*) with its sister genres of *wiglo* and *hirwo*, as well as the more recent ones of *belwo* and *heello* which flourished from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. All these light genres can only be distinguished by their respective melodic tunes (*luuq*) to which they are sung. This poses a bit of a

*Xertuu wadey Xaaji Baalbaal iyo
Xaliimo xariirtii baa timid.*

The followers of Xaaji Baalbaal⁴
O Xaliimo, the good ones have arrived!

B: *Saar*⁵:

*Af goortuu xaalku yahay
Itaalkay baan ordaa
Irdaha waan kala aqaan
.....
Intii alif saar taqaan
Anay igu aamineen*

When it comes to poetry
I do my best
I know my way
.....
All those who know the A-Z of the *saar*,
Have endorsed my leading position.

The first obvious aspect in which the two verses are distinguished from each other is the line length which is defined by the number of units of duration (morae), arranged in accordance with the rules specifically allocated for each genre by a well-established structural device called in Somali '*miisaan*', literally meaning balance. *Miisaan* or metric scansion is one of two rigid structural features that regulate Somali versification, the other one being *xarafraac* or alliteration.

problem for the genre classification based solely on metrical scansion; but this is a matter for further research.

⁴ Xaaji Baalbaal, or Diiriye Baalbaal, as he was better known, was a very famous *dhaanto* player and gifted composer who had so many followers and fans among the youths of his time. He is said to be the one who in the early 1940s took the art of *dhaanto* from the countryside to the city in what was the British Protectorate of Somaliland. In the towns of Hargeysa, Berbera and Ceerigaabo he became a legendary name among the younger people from both sexes who flocked to join his endless *dhaanto* festivals (Cumar Dhuule, Fieldnotes, Addis Ababa, 4 June 1996). This is what is reflected in this anonymous *dhaanto* couplet (apparently by a young lady to her female friend). According to Cabdillaahi Qarshi (Tape Recording, 16 February 1995) and others, the rise of modern Somali song in the north was mainly inspired by the urban rehabilitation of the *dhaanto* movement led by Diiriye Baalbaal. One of the strong pieces of evidence which supports this contention is the exclusive use of the *dhaanto* metrical pattern in the new song, first *belwo* then *heello* or *qaraami*. Another resemblance of *dhaanto* in the new genres is the couplet stanza format which they all share.

⁵ The *Saar* is another dance song which is originally associated with spirit possession cult with the same name. As an art, however, it is one of the well-known entertainment verses traditionally sung in the evening by young pastoralists with the accompaniment of drumming and dance. Like the *dhaanto*, it too has three sister genres sharing the same metrical scansion: the *baarcadde*, *guux* and *durbaan*, sometimes called *haan*. The three different genres are practised in different areas of the Somali-speaking territory (from Kismaayo to Djibouti and from Gaalkacyo to Jigjiga), but they share many characteristics including the *miisaan*.

The lines cited here are from a poem by Carays Ciise Kaarshe who died on 6 August 1972, the best known ever *saar* composer, the man who pioneered the utilisation of the genre for modern complex issues of public concern. For more details about the life and work of Carays, see Cabdirashiid, 1999.

As we see from the two extracts above, a line in a *dhaanto* verse contains 12-14 units of duration (Cabdullaahi, 1978, 4/164, p. 3), each represented by a short vowel or diphthong (a long vowel counts as two short ones). A *saar* line, on the other hand, has ten morae, except for some rare cases where it may be one unit more or one unit less (Banti and Giannattasio, n.d. p.32ff).

As to the first category, the ‘serious’ genres, or the *maanso-goleed*, the first three genres in the above list are generally described and illustrated in Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964: 47-49. One more genre which has been described in Andrzejewski and Lewis (p.48) is the *masafo*, although it is referred to as ‘*jiifto*’. The authors cannot be blamed for this inaccuracy in naming the genre, as they must have been informed by indigenous oral sources reflecting a confusion, which still exists among the Somalis themselves many of whom are not aware of the obvious differences between the two genres.

My second use of the term ‘genre’ in this study, is in line with the broader and more widely used meaning of the word which, as defined in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998, includes any “category of artistic composition ... characterized by similarities in form, style or subject matter”. Examples of this are the novel, the drama and, for this matter, the modern Somali song .

The other term, ‘form’, is perhaps even more frequently used in this study for the latter, broader concept, and sometimes for a sub-division thereof, such as traditional or ‘contemporary form of drama’. In this article, the term may also occur occasionally as an alternate to ‘genre’ for the first more technical meaning, with the aim of seeking language variation in style. In other instances, I apply the word ‘form’ for its conventional artistic usage, meaning the structural and aesthetic side of a creative work, as opposed to ‘content’; that is the particular way in which the parts of a work of art are constructed or put together and the various elements employed for this purpose. Needless to say the different applications of these terms will be apparent from the different contexts within which they occur.

‘Classical’ and ‘Miniature’ Genres?

‘Classical’ and ‘Miniature’ genres are two terms occasionally used by students of Somali literature to classify Somali poetry into two categories, the first of which is often called ‘classical’ and the second ‘miniature genres’ (Andrzejewski, 1981; Johnson, 1972, 1996; Rirache, 1989). The latter category is also, less frequently yet more accurately, referred to as the ‘light genres’ (Andzejewski, 1967: 5). The word ‘classical’ is used in Scholarly writings in English to refer to those genres of Somali oral poetry which tackle serious matters, i.e. matters of a social, political or philosophical nature. In other words, Somali ‘classical poetry’ as it stands, is the poetry of public forum often undertaken by individual, significant practitioners. I will further elaborate this shortly .

There is no much controversy over the application of the word ‘classical’ in this context, unlike the second term ‘miniature genres’ with which I have a bit of a problem. The term has been used, as opposed to ‘classical’, to describe a different type of Somali oral poetry, a form which is often smaller in size and less serious in

purpose. Generally speaking, this type is entertainment-oriented, whether individual or group entertainment. What is left in ambiguity, however, is the range of specific forms that come under this naming. The term has been used by different scholars in different perspectives or for different groupings of genres. According to John Johnson, only four related forms belong to what he calls “the family of miniature genres”:

The *wiglo*, the *dhaanto*, the *hirwo* and the *balwo* are the four genres that make up the family of miniature genres. The names of these genres and the classifications of specific poems in a particular genre are Somali. The grouping of the four into one family, however, is my own innovation (Johnson 1996:27)

Thus, While Johnson limits the membership to this family to those four forms which relate to each other, chiefly by their common metrical structure, other researchers (Andrzejewski, 1981 and Rirache, 1989) use the term ‘miniature genres’ in a broader sense, in comparative perspective (i.e. as contrasting with the ‘classical’) and mainly with reference to traditional oral poetry. To Professor Andrzejewski (1981), for instance, the phrase refers to an unlimited number of traditional poetic forms which, compared with classical genres, are used for less serious purposes.

The miniature genres, though equally cherished, were concerned with matters of lesser important such as entertainment at dances or providing relief for monotonous pursuits such as watering camels, weaving mats, pounding cereals, rowing or long-distance marching” (Andrzejewski, 1981: 5)

Mohamed Rirache (1989), on the other hand, although he does not provide us with a clear definition of what the term “miniature genres”⁶ stands for in his interpretation, he is closer to Andrzejewski’s application in terms of reference to traditional dance and work songs. However, from his emphasis on what he calls “the smaller genres” (p. 36ff) and from the type of genres he has selected for examination, we understand that according to Rirache, a “miniature genre” means a very short-lined form of traditional verse, a characteristic feature not applicable to the genres targeted by Johnson which are neither short-lined nor exclusively traditional; in fact two of the four genres (*balwo* and *heello*) are modern innovations. While the length of a typical line of any of the four genres grouped by Johnson is normally 13-14 morae, the line length in some of the genres targeted by Rirache is as short as just four morae. To illustrate the differences between the two types of oral poetry studied in the two works, consider the following two couplets. The first is a modern love *heello* cited and translated by Johnson (1996: 62) and the second, which is identified by Rirache (1989: 36), is a women’s work song for pounding grains in the mortar, in Somali ‘*badar-tun*’:

A. *Sidii baxrasaaf ku yaalla bustaan*
ayuun baad hadba ii bidhaantaa

⁶ It must be noted here that the term ‘miniature’ was first used by Andrzejewski (1967) with particular reference to the phenomenon of *belwo*, the first form of Somali modern song.

Like a eucalyptus tree growing in a garden,
You always appear to me from a distant place.

B. *Mooyaha*
Magacii?
The mortar
What is its name?

Moreover, Johnson makes his concept of a ‘miniature’ crystal clear by saying:

As the name of the family implies, the miniature poem is short. Its usual length is from two to four lines, though single line poems have been composed as well as ones with six, eight or even more lines. (Ibid., p. 28)

This arises the inevitable question: what do we mean by “miniature genres”? “Miniature” in what sense? Is it in terms of the line length, as indicated by Rirache? Or in terms of the length of the whole poem as focused by Johnson? Or is it because, from the point of view of content, it is “concerned with matters of lesser importance” (Andzejewski, 1981: 5) compared to the ‘classical’? We find no clear answer in the literature on the subject thus far.

Moreover, a positive answer to any of the above questions would lead to another set of questions. If, for instance, we adopt the metre-based possibility, i.e. that a genre is considered ‘miniature’ based on the shortness of its lines, the question that arises would be what about genres such as the *geeraar*, which is often counted as being a “classical” genre, because of its serious themes, but which has one of the shortest line ranges? To which of the two - supposedly contrasting - categories it belongs: to the ‘classical’ or the ‘miniature’?

The content-based classification is even more problematic. In the past, the boundary between serious and non-serious (supposedly miniature) genres was quite clear - each had its separate functions and characteristics. In post-independence times, however, things have remarkably intermingled.

The modern song is the most obvious ground where the new intermingling character of all genres can easily be observed. In its metrical scansion, the new song utilizes all existing genres to varying degrees but without leaving any of them unattempted. What is more, the *hees-casri* is a ‘light’ and ‘serious’ poem in one. As mentioned earlier, it deals with the most serious political and philosophical questions in modern society, without giving up its central position as a leading form of cultural entertainment. It often tackles the stated serious matters under the cover of love theme with the help of such artistic devices as symbolism and figurative language.

Where shall we draw the line? If the example of the *geeraar* clearly invalidates the scansion-based division into ‘classical’ and ‘miniature’, the latter example, i.e. the case of the modern song, nearly devalues the second possibility, the content-based classification. So, confusing as it is, this situation makes one feel quite uneasy about using the term ‘miniature genres’ for the said purpose; and this makes us understand

why Professor Andrzejewski reluctantly refers to the term as “the so-called ‘miniature genres’”, (Andrzejewski, 1981:5).

The description ‘light’ poetry would be more adequate; it would be certainly adequate to describe the non-classical component of traditional verse. But, it is not adequate enough in contemporary context where things get more complex. The modern song, the lead form of the entire body of post-independence poetry, is both ‘light’ and ‘serious’. On the one hand, it is indisputably the leading form of entertainment in the present-day Somali society; in this connection, it fulfils functions parallel to those of jazz and pop songs in western cultures. On the other hand, however, the *hees-casri*, as we call it in Somali, is perhaps the most effective form through which Somali transitional poets tackle most serious issues concerning political and social discourse (Johnson, 1996: 19-20,163). In most instances, the poet composes a song in such a way that serves both purposes at the same time. Somali poets are renowned for their ability to disguise extremely serious messages with a ‘pretended’ love theme and romantic music and with the competent use of such techniques as symbolism, allusion and cryptic language. (Andrzejewski, 1967: 7).

This makes it very difficult to classify a song like *Leexo*,⁷ for instance, as being either ‘light’ or ‘serious’. This 1960s “love” song was, on the one hand, one of the few Somali ‘Top-of-the-Pop’ masterpieces favored by young music-lovers for many years; while on the other hand, because of its political undertone, the same song is believed to have greatly influenced the defeat of the country’s president and his government in the general elections of June 1967, as it was repeatedly broadcast through Radio Mogadisho on the election day. As described by John Johnson, who details how this happened, upon the announcement of the results of the vote, “the word goes out far and wide: the poem *Leexo* has brought down the government of Aadan Cabdulle Cismaan” (Johnson, 1991: 8).⁸

The preceding analysis leads us to conclude that the phrase ‘miniature genres’, as it stands, is misleading and inadequate for the intended classification of Somali poetry.

The other term, ‘classical’ is less problematic, as stated earlier. The only problem I have with it is the lack of distinction between the serious poetry as it existed in pre-colonial times and as practiced today.

In its general use, the word ‘classical’ often conveys the meaning of belonging to an old or established system of methods or principles, with connotation of seriousness and high standard. To my knowledge, Professors Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964) were the first who used the term in Somali poetic context, with elaborate illustrations. The type of poetry they have collected and treated under this classification satisfies the said general criteria. They have targeted various samples from the earliest available oral classics by celebrated 19th and early 20th century poets from Raage Ugaas to Ismaaciil Mire⁹.

⁷ loosely meaning ‘the Twisted Wind’, *Leexo* was composed by Axmed Saleebaan Bidde, poet/playwright, 1967.

⁸ . For more details, see Johnson, 1991 and 1996: 139-40.

⁹ This was the oldest they had managed to collect. Apparently, there is striking contradiction between the ability of the individual Somali to memorise long poems to the letter for many years and the

Generally speaking, however, the term is frequently used to refer to the serious Somali poetry as distinct from the light. This is where clarity is badly needed. The word 'classical' should be reserved for earlier works of a serious nature which are likely to stand the test of time. Another term is then needed to describe the contemporary serious poem, or we have to come up with an alternative name accommodating the serious poem of all ages, one which leaves no room for ambiguity.

In this respect, established Somali terminology offers some alternatives to both terms of 'classical' and 'miniature' genres, an observation which lends credence to the statement made by Andrzejewski, Pitaszewicz and Tyloch above concerning the relevance of indigenous genre naming. This is by no means to suggest that the existing Somali literary terminology provides a sufficient and satisfactory supply of terms for all the literary aspects which cry out for adequate naming and classification. As a matter of fact, literary nomenclature in Somali is not free from the confusion explained above with regards to English terminology, as we shall see shortly. Nonetheless, one could be closer to the required degree of accuracy by grounding one's nomenclature on original Somali terminology, i.e. by adopting relevant Somali terms, where available, aided by the closest English translation .

By custom, Somalis divide their verse into two broad categories: *maanso* meaning 'poetry', and *heeso*, which means 'songs'. (This traditional classification has also been touched upon by Said, 1982:74). In another pair of naming, based on the social function of the two categories, they are known as *murti* (wisdom) and *madadaalo* (entertainment) respectively. Thus, the first category is the type of poetry used in public discourse to deliver a serious message, and the second is the one composed for entertainment, whether individual or collective. Again, the first category, *maanso*, comprises all forms of standard poetry regarded "as most noble and best fitted for dealing with serious and important matters" (Andzejewski and Lewis (1964: 47).

The Somali names of the best known genres in this category are the *gabay*, the *geeraar*, the *buraanbur*, the *masafo* and the *guurow*.

Of the two traditional terms, the first (*maanso* - poetry) lacks some accuracy. It is not the so-called serious genres alone that could be considered as "*maanso*", the *hees* too is a form of *maanso* despite the common perception of the non-literary-minded Somali who may not conceive it as such.

inability of the collective oral memory of the Somalis to extend beyond two centuries. Surprised by this, Professor Andrzejewski writes:

In 1954, as we have seen, Burton testified to the Somali devotion to poetry [described them as 'nation of poets']. It seems unlikely that the flowering of the poetic art that we find in the 19th and 20th centuries could have come suddenly into existence without being preceded by a long period of poetic activity, and yet almost nothing have survived from any earlier time. There is one poem - a mediation on the qualities of God - by a famous cleric, Sheekh Cali Cabduraxmaan, who lived in the 18th century and some others which may be earlier but these are anonymous and therefore very difficult to date. It is a mystery why the oral memory of Somalis does not extend beyond two centuries as far as poetry is concerned. (Andzejewski, 1993: 3)

The second naming, ‘*hees*’, or ‘*heeso*’, in the plural form, is much more accurate for what it stands for. It is interesting to note that, aside from the above-described genres, which are traditionally classified as ‘*maanso*’, almost all other forms of the vast corpus of Somali poetry are individually known as ‘*hees*’, derived from the infinitive ‘*heesid*’ (to sing). There are divisions, sub-divisions and sub-sub-divisions to this very broad category.

Customarily, the *hees* grouping is first divided into the two big sub-categories of ‘*hees-hawleed*’ (work song) and ‘*hees-ciyaareed*’ (dance song), each of which is divided again into groupings, sub-groupings and a countless number of genres, all with their own specific names, metric structures and identifying melodic tunes. For example, the *hees-hawleed* (work song) is further broken into *heesta xoolaha* (livestock songs), *heesta badda* (sea songs), *heesaha dumarka* (women songs) and so forth. Each type of livestock has its own work songs, and so on. Virtually, every single activity carried out by a traditional Somali is accompanied by a certain form of verse/*hees*, to reduce the burden of those tedious activities in a hostile arid environment. Most of such verses have particular names, but they are all referred to in Somali as ‘*heeso*’ (songs).

Thus, the name ‘*hees*’ includes virtually all poetic forms referred to under the name “miniature genres” in all its different applications by different writers, or all ‘light’ (non-‘serious’) genres from lullabies to the modern song through the *shubaal*. The latter is a well known genre chanted by male pastoralists to reduce the burden of the extremely hard work of watering livestock at shallow wells.

As we said, many genres have their own specific names, nonetheless, they are individually known as *hees* at the end of the day. For example, the generic name of lullabies is *hobeey*, derived from the genre’s fixed introductory formula, a series of meaningless words with which a mother would open a lullaby. It goes as follows:

Hobeeya hobeey
Hobeeyaa.

Other names may be used in certain areas, but this is the most common name for Somali lullabies and its use has been reinforced and standardised by noted poets who have documented the term in their verse. The acclaimed poet and oral tradition preserver, Maxamed Ibraahim Warsame “Hadraawi”, in one of his well known sung poems, called *Hooyo*, (mother) uses the two terms of “*hobeey*” and “*hees*” interchangeably in reference to lullabies. Addressing the mother, to whom he devotes the whole poem for her unique role, Hadraawi says:

Ruux aanad habinoo
Kolba aanad hees iyo
Hoobeey ku sabinoo
Hawshaada waayaa
Hanaqaadi maayee.
(Hadraawi, 1993: 96-97)

A person whom you don’t feed
Who is deprived of your [loving] *hees*

Of your cuddles with 'hobeey'
Who is denied your breeding
Wouldn't grow up properly.¹⁰

Thus, although this genre is known as *hobeey*, it is also more commonly known as '*hees-carruureed*' (baby songs). Practitioners themselves (i.e. mothers), refer to it as '*hees*', as we see from the lines below, a standard opening stanza with which a mother would address her crying baby:

Hobeeya hobeey Hobeeyaa
An kuu heesee dhageyso
Dhageysoo dhego u yeelo!

Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Listen, so I sing you [a *hees*]
Listen and open your ears!

Likewise, the hunter's chant is called '*maanyo*'; this is one of the traditional poetic forms that are now in danger of extinction. It is a form characterized by its extremely slow rhythm with elaborately extended end tune which corresponds to the slow and patient nature of the activity of a hunter dodging for many hours, waiting for the prey to come nearer. Now, if you ask any Somali what *maanyo* is, he or she would immediately answer: 'a kind of *hees*' or 'it is a hunting song'.¹¹

In the light of the preceding discussion, and in recognition of the identified problem with the nomenclature and classification of Somali literary forms, I offer three suggestions, for want of a better terminology. First, I propose to maintain the English term 'classical', but restrict its use for the serious, traditional verse, i.e., the not-for-entertainment verse produced in pre-colonial and early colonial periods which has stood the test of time. No adequate Somali word presents itself at the moment to occupy the vacancy. Users of the Somali language may adopt this universally familiar term, 'classic', derivatively (*kalaasigga*), as do users of languages such as Arabic.

Secondly, to make use of existing indigenous terminology, with slight innovative additions allowed by the astonishing flexibility of the Somali language, I propose the use of the compound word '*maanso-goleed*', with its broader sense than 'classical', to accommodate all forms of serious poetry of all times - past, present and future. This compound word is made up of the established term "*maanso*" (poetry), as explained earlier, taken as a root, with the descriptive suffix "-*goleed*", derived from '*gole*' (forum), to specify the type of *maanso* in question, with the implication that the existence of other types of *maanso* is recognised. The overall meaning of the term is thus 'public forum poetry' or 'the poetry of the public forum'. The latter has also been used by Professor Andrzejewski (1967, 1981, 1982) for more or less the same purpose.

¹⁰ For notes on this poem and its author, together with the full original text and Italian translation, see Antinucci and Axmed, 1986: 165ff.

¹¹ For an interesting description and analysis of this rare poetic form, reinforced by sung illustrations, listen to Shube, 1997.

Thirdly, the term '*hees*' offers a unique solution for the problem with "miniature genres", as one can gather from the above delineation. It is a satisfactorily conclusive and flexible term for naming the non-*maanso-goleed* forms of Somali poetry, both traditional and modern. My suggestion is thus to utilise the word '*hees*' in the plural form '*heeso*' to refer to all those "light" forms, as distinct from *maanso-goleed*. Different sub-divisions of '*heeso*' can easily be named by attaching an identifying suffix to the root '*hees*', as follows: *hees-hawleed* (work song), *hees-ciyaareed* (dance song), *hees-hiddeed* (traditional song), *hees-casri* (modern song) and so forth.

'Hello' or 'Hees'?

Unlike the existing confusion between say the *jiifto* and the *masafo*, which is observed among many Somalis of the new urban generation, the confusion between the two terms '*hello*' and '*hees*' is not widespread at present time. It is only noticed in some writings on the subject. Nevertheless, it is something that deserves our attention.

In his pioneering work, *Heelloy*, John Johnson (1996) understandably describes the difficulty he had experienced in naming the poetic form he was dealing with, namely, the modern Somali song. In this arduous task he has chosen to disagree with terminology previously favored by Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964).

What I have called "*hello* A and B", Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964, call "*hello*" and "modern *hees*". I have pointed out that Somalis themselves use two terms for the modern poem, *hello* and *hees*... This usage is further complicated, because the term *hees* is used for several other genres and the term *hello* is almost always used when the modern poem is under discussion by Somalis. Andrzejewski and Lewis's terminology then presents a problem, because it is somewhat oversimplified; (Johnson, 1996: 91n)

Professor Johnson was right in maintaining that the term *hees* is also used for genres other than the modern song, as I have explained in the preceding section. Besides, Johnson's innovative endeavor should be appreciated if one considers the fact that in the 1960s when he carried out his research, the term '*hello*' was still in use, albeit on a remarkably decreasing level, alongside with the other term, '*hees*', which was set to replace it.

Notwithstanding, later developments have failed Johnson and confirmed that Andrzejewski and Lewis were on the right track when they preferred to use the term '*hello*' as the old name of the art form and '*hees*' as the current one. As rightly documented by Johnson himself (1996), the name *hello* was itself the successor of a previous name of the new song, '*balwo*'. The renaming became necessary, in the early 1950s, when the artists decided to replace the controversial name, *balwo*, a loan-word meaning 'misfortune' in Arabic where it comes from. Cabdillaahi Qarshi, one of the first innovators who developed the genre, explains:

in Somali usage, the word had acquired the implication of profligacy in matters of sex, womanizing, drinking, and so on. Thus, we see that the

name *balwo* which had negative connotation in Somali was adding to the unacceptability of the ‘balwo movement’ in respectable society. It provided the religious leaders with ammunition to have it suppressed and outlawed. So we changed the name to *heello* and began the first few bars of the song not with balwo [as done before] but with the acceptable traditional invitation to dance ‘heelloy heellelloy. . . .’, (Abdilaahi, in Johnson, 1996: xii)

In about a decade, the genre’s name changed again into *hees*, another traditional name, but with a broader range of usage, as discussed earlier¹². This change in the name coincided with other changes in some more substantial aspects of the art form. From around the early sixties, the composers began to devise the rhythmic patterns (*miisaan*) of a wide range of established genres in regulating the structure of the modern lyrics.

This new development has replaced an earlier practice which exclusively relied on one particular *miisaan*, namely, that of the *wiglo*-turned-*dhaanto*, since the birth of the new song in the early 1940s, under the name of ‘*balwo*’ to the late 1950s. Another early 1960s major innovation was the development of the music component into much more complex standards in place of the older pattern which just imitated the rhythmic tune of the lyrics.

A third earlier and, perhaps, more significant innovation was the upgrading of the theme(s) of this particular art form. While romantic love remained the only theme of the *balwo* and early *heello* or *qaraami*, to be more precise, more sophisticated political and social themes were introduced as of the mid-1950s. This latter change preceded the former two and it took place while the *heello* was still fully in charge. The turning point for the change came in 1954, when

an event occurred which changed the whole course of political life and led eventually to full independence. This precipitant was the final liquidation of British administration in the Hawd and Reserve Areas and the complete surrender of these vital grazing lands to Ethiopian control. (Lewis, 1965: 150)

The Somali reaction to the surrender of these Somali territories to Ethiopia “was swift and bitter” (Johnson, 1996: 96). An overwhelming outcry erupted and was expressed in many ways ranging from “riots and large demonstrations” and even “armed clashes at the new border” (Ibid., p. 99) to a new wave of dissent poems, plays and new *heellos* with political themes for the first time. Artists took advantage of the momentum to organize themselves into competent artistic troupes which took the lead in an emerging politicized cultural movement. *Walaala Hargeysa* in the north and *Hay sheegsheegin* in the south were at the forefront of these well organized companies who used the new art for championing national independence.¹³

¹² The details of why and how this change has taken place remains a matter for further research.

¹³ For fuller details of these related political and cultural events, together with analysis and sample texts, see Johnson, 1996: 95ff; Maxamed, 1987: 27ff; Cabdillaahi Qarshi, 195; Yuusuf, 1996; Cumar Dhuule, 1997.

The inner workings of the stated changes which occurred to the *heello* phenomenon later towards the early 1960s and whether the name change related to them or whether it was just a coincidence is a matter for further research, beyond the scope of this article. However, one thing is quite obvious. As Professors Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964) wittily observed, as far back as the early sixties, the name ‘*hello*’ has gone out of use for current songs.

In his ground-breaking article, on the rise and metamorphosis of the *balwo*, Andrzejewski (1967) rightly concludes that

The *belwo* is now a part of the history of Somali culture which the younger generation only knows from the nostalgic accounts of the middle-aged. It was an interesting experiment in semantic concentration which may be of some significance to a student of the theory of literature. There seem to be very few parallels to it anywhere else in the world. (P. 14)

If Professor Andrzejewski engaged, say in the 1970s, in a similar article on the *heello*, he would have said the same about it. Indeed, it is only in the “nostalgic” memory of some aged people that the present younger, even middle-aged generations of Somalis would find the word ‘*heello*’ and would know about what it stands for. The use of the term is now only relevant in the context of the historical studies of Somali cultural heritage. As far as contemporary usage is concerned, the word has faded well into lexical archaism.

In the light of this, I absolutely agree with John Johnson in his innovative division of the historical development of the new songs into three distinct periods, at the time of his research; I also agree with him in calling the first two periods “*Heello*: Period One” and “*Heello*: Period Two”; but I categorically disagree with him in referring to the third as another “*Heello*” Period. As a matter of fact, what Professor Johnson has described in this part of his work (p. 117ff) is ‘*hees*’, not ‘*heello*’. It was no more *heello*, neither by its main features nor by its name as used by Somalis.

Even in historical studies, there is another term which I believe is more accurate in referring to that component of Somali artistic heritage. The name ‘*qaraami*’ could be a potential alternative or at least alternate to *heello* in that context.

The modern use of the word ‘*heello*’ was associated with the emergence and later metamorphosis of a particular type of Somali song called ‘*qaraami*’, the popular lyrics of the 1950s. ‘*Qaraami*’ is a loan-word meaning ‘love’ in the old Arabic usage and it was first used for an innovative light poetry (*gabay*) with love theme introduced in the 1930s by a group of young poets called *Kabacad*, literally ‘those with white shoes’.¹⁴ The name was then extended to the new song, about two decades later, because of their exclusive love theme carried over from the original *qarami* poetry.

¹⁴ So named because they were distinguished by wearing white trainers which were fashionable at the time.

The *Qaraami* was clearly distinct from the current modern song in several aspects: chiefly, the leisurely-paced music, the unity of theme (love) and unity of *miisan* (the rhythmic pattern inherited from the *wiglo* family of dance songs).

Further details would be too involved for this study. All that need to be added here is that, despite the fact that ‘*qaraami*’ songs have not been composed for over forty years (at the time of writing), people still enjoy listening to their old recordings with relish and nostalgia; this is heightened further during the last decades of decline and self-destruction through civil war and anarchy which have resulted, among other things, in an unthinkable cultural impoverishment in the country. According to a long-timer Djibouti cassette trader, Cali Dibbiro, “*qaraami* recordings sell much better than recent albums, because they are the best ever produced by Somali composers” (Fieldnotes, Djibouti, 18 August 1997). Despite the ring of hyperbole in the judgment of the late art-loving trader, *qarami* lyrics are of a uniquely timeless aesthetic quality. Their unity of metre and theme as well as their melodic compatibility and their autonomous stand (not part of plays) have no parallels in any other block of Somali songs produced during any given period of time.

With the people returning to the now classical lyrics, the name ‘*qaraami*’ has been revived in the memory of Somali art-lovers, both old and young, and one can assume that this will continue for many years to come, probably until a new overwhelming artistic renaissance takes over, which is not feasible in the near future. In the midst of the present dark moment in Somali history, people find solace in listening to the classical love songs of the good old days with their relaxing music, delighting diction and soothing tune.¹⁵

In the light of that, it may be more relevant for future researchers to use the name ‘*qaraami*’, which is not only more familiar to younger generations, but also more accurate than the now archaic ‘*heello*’, when referring to that type of Somali love songs produced mainly in the decade of 1950s.

The name ‘*Qaraami*’ is more accurate in two respects. First, it is more exclusive for the period in question and hence, less confusing. The other name, ‘*heello*’, is many centuries older than the modern art form named after it. In fact, in its broader sense, the word used to name the entire art of traditional dance songs (*hees-ciyaareed*), as distinct from work-songs (*hees-hawleed*)¹⁶ and the meaning of the infinitive ‘*heellayn*’ is ‘to sing’ or ‘singing’.

The vast lore of Somali oral tradition, including poetry, provides ample evidence showing the use of the word *heello* for the said purpose. The following piece of poetry, which dates back to over two hundred years, is referred to by its composer as “*heello*”. Unlike many traditional *heello* poems, this one is by a known author. According to sources of oral tradition, the piece was composed by Xirsi Faarax Shirwac, the ancestor of a current sub-clan in central Somalia. Improvised in a

¹⁵ The art of ‘*Qaraami*’ has parallels in neighbouring cultures. For instance there are many similarities between this art as practised in Somalia and the Yemeni *Dan*, especially in the coastal area of Hadramout, Yemen. For details see Taher, 1987.

¹⁶ In a tape-recorded interview conducted in 1985 Ibrahim Jaamac Garabyare (1985), one of the few living pioneers of modern Somali songs, uses the term ‘*heello*’ throughout our conversation to refer to traditional dance songs.

historical dance performance, sometime in the late 18th century, the *heello* goes as follows:

Habar baa darooryaysoo
Oday baa dareen galaye
Heellada inoo tuma! (Shube, 1997)

An old lady is chattering
An old man is growing suspicious,
Let us carry on [our] ‘*heello*’!¹⁷

The poet wants to attract the attention of his fellow players and make them disregard the side remarks of the two elderly people watching them and simply carry on their ‘*heello*’. This means that ‘*heello*’ was the name of what Xirsi Faarax and his fellow performers had “carried on” singing

Indeed, it is in the work of classical oral poets that we find most examples in support of this point. Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan (1856-1921) in his boasting as master of all major poetic forms names these forms as follows:

Harannimiyo hooyaale gabay, heello iyo maanso
Nin kaleba naftiisa ha hafree, hoodo anigow leh. (Jaamac, 1974:319)

The masterly composition of *gabay*, *heello* and *maanso*
Is my own privilege, even though others delude themselves.

The Sayid’s placing of the *heello* in this position, side by side with ‘*maanso*’ is quite significant for two reasons. First, it confirms the traditional division of poetry into the two categories of serious and light by the names of ‘*maanso*’ and ‘*hees*’, as discussed in the preceding sub-section. Of the two sub-divisions of ‘*hees*’ category - *hees-hawleed* (work-songs) and *hees-ciyaareed* (dance songs) - only the latter was practiced by known authors at the time of Sayid Maxamed thus constituting one of the two major poetic components in which poets of the time had competed.

Second, the Sayid clearly refers to this poetic component (dance song) by the name of ‘*heello*’. Such a reference made by an authority of the stature of Sayid Maxamed leaves no room for much doubt about the use of the word “*heello*” as the generic name of dance songs.

Finally, another celebrated classical poet, Salaan Carrabey, uses the term in a similar context about thirty years prior to the emergence of the type of modern lyrics named ‘*heello*’. In his famous rejoinder against Cali Duux, Salaan says:

¹⁷ According to sources of oral history, Xirsi had joined the performance secretly, pretending to be just another player, while in reality he came to spy over rival sub-clan and locate the whereabouts of his young sister, Beydan, a marriageable beauty, who was kidnapped by another sub-clan, the organisers of the dance evening. He was waiting for his kinsmen to follow him in a retaliating raid. In this stanza he was trying to distract the attention from warning remarks made by two experienced elderly people who were in the scene as spectators. During my fieldwork, Cabdulqaadir Cabdi Yuusuf “Shube”, a poet and oral historian, related the whole story in a tape-recorded interview (Shube, 1997).

Kol uun buu Hilowle u tumaa, heello iyo jib e.

Again and again *Hilowle*¹⁸ plays for him the rhythm of *heello* and choral refrains. (cf. Andrzejewski and Galaal, 1963: 194)

All these evidences show that '*heello*' is the traditional name of dance-accompanying chants and it had obviously been renewed in the 1950s by extending it to the *qaraami* songs. Such an extension is not surprising if one considers the fact that the modern song or the *qaraami* came as a legitimate child of the dance song, the mother *heello*.¹⁹ When it comes to contemporary songs, the term '*hees*' is the only living name unanimously used by the present-day Somalis when they want to refer to this art form. Hence, I adopt the term '*hees*' and its English translation, 'song', either together or alternately, whenever I wish to refer to the current Somali song in this study.

¹⁸ In Somali mythology, Hilowle was a spirit of revelry that inspired people with the desire for dancing, singing, abandon and levity. There is also a particular dance-song called '*hilowle*'.

¹⁹ For details about how the new song moulded out of the old *heello* or traditional dance song, consult Cabdillaahi Qarshi, 1993, 1995; Garab-yare, 193, 1985; Cumar Dhuule, 1996.

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