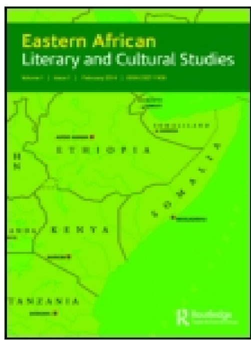

Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 2327-7408 (Print) 2327-7416 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/real20

Performance Poetry and Political Conscientization in the Horn of Africa: Examples from the Somali Bantu Jareer Community

Mohamed A. Eno & Omar A. Eno

To cite this article: Mohamed A. Eno & Omar A. Eno (2014) Performance Poetry and Political Conscientization in the Horn of Africa: Examples from the Somali Bantu Jareer Community, Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, 1:1-2, 95-106, DOI: 10.1080/23277408.2014.941756

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2014.941756

Published online: 14 Nov 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 576

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=real20

Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, No. 1&2, 95–106
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2014.941756

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

©2014 Taylor & Francis

Performance Poetry and Political Conscientization in the Horn of Africa: Examples from the Somali Bantu Jareer Community[1]

Mohamed A. Eno[a]* and Omar A. Eno[b]

[a]*Dept. of African Studies, St Clements University Somalia; & Center for Research and Development, Atlas University of Somalia*
[b]*College of Urban and Public Affairs, Portland State University, Oregon, USA; & Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Atlas University of Somalia*
**Corresponding author email: sankadhudhi@yahoo.com*

Abstract: Ever since the arrival of colonialism gained momentum in the country, Somali literature has been approached narrowly from the tutelage of the pastoral culture. Colonial as well as early Somali writers have taken the comfort of disdaining the study of anthological themes related to the non-nomadic cultures and literatures. That restricted notion of one culture, as purported by colonial writers and later politically enshrined by the state and a section of Somali scholars, has obscured the wealth of the various non-nomadic cultures in this Horn of Africa nation. Therefore, contrary to the notion of a homogenous Somali nation of the same nomadic culture, this essay aims to highlight a non-nomadic version of Somali literature as practised by a section of the agrarian communities in Somalia; those known as Bantu or Jareer. Because the Bantu is an ethnically oppressed community in Somalia, all that is related to their culture and literature in particular has been deemed valueless and, as a consequence, an institution unworthy studying. In particular, this essay argues that despite the degradation by the Somali state and neglect by Somalia scholarship often obsessed with the apocryphal ideology of a self-same Somalia, the agrarian wordsmith is bestowed with rich cultural and literary wisdom which makes him view his environment with sharp consciousness.

Keywords: dissident, Busta Rossa syndrome, literary artist, Horn of Africa, East Africa, oral literature

Introduction: An overview of the Bantu Jareer People of Somalia

> … with every dominant ideology there is always the ideology of resistance, the ideology of the oppressed – Wanjiku M. Kabira (1992, 53).

The community whose oral art is analysed here is a group among the Bantu people in Somalia, locally known as *Jareer*. They live in the inter-riverine area of Somalia and in the hinterland of Jubba and Shabelle rivers. They populate, with varying demographic sizes, about eight regions in central and southern Somalia. Unlike the nomadic section of the country that claims Arab origin (Lewis 1955), the Bantu maintain their Black African descent (Eno 2008; Eno and Eno 2010; Prins 1952; Puccioni 1937).

With no available statistics to determine ethnic demography in Somalia, the Bantu are treated as a minority, due to ethno-political purposes decided by the dominant pastoral groups, mainly because of their African origin and physical features quite distinguishable from those of the Somali nomads. The main reason for this classification, though, is related to the myth of the pastoralists' claim of originating from immigrants of "superior" Arab blood (*The East African Standard* 1930; Mukhtar 1995; Nur 2012) who, after marrying from the host community of "inferior" Africans (Eno 2008), sired offspring in such multitudes that they exceeded the indigenous population (Mukhtar 1995). Based on the ideology of these "superior" Arab and "inferior" African

racial characterizations, the Bantu Jareer have been denied political participation, economic and academic advancement as well as social equality.

Oral Poetry and the Bantu of Afgooye

In terms of literary art, although the Bantu Jareer oral literature may share a few characteristics with its Somali pastoral equivalents endorsed by the state, it varies distinctly from the latter in many aspects. As such, in the context of the poetry in this paper, we use *shurub*, which is one of several types of oral songs that fall in the poetry genre. It is conducted during *shir* (festival gathering) when male and female members of the community participate in festivities with songs and dances that mark special occasions. Whereas *shurub* is conducted in daytime during the *shir,* there are certain occasions when it is performed during the night; for example, in the preliminary outings that lead to the *istunka* (stickfight), the grand annual traditional festival of stick-fighting held in the agricultural town of Afgooye, about thirty kilometres southwest of the capital Mogadishu (Luling 2008, 2002; Eno 1986, 1984). The *shurub* is not accompanied by drums and is different from other songs or poetry which are performed with the accompaniment of either *gurbaan* (drum/s) or *shareero* (traditional folklore guitar) and are common for occasions such as weddings or other social/youth entertainments. The mode of preservation of the Somali Bantu oral art had been by way of committing it to and retaining it in human memory, until recently when audio-recording devices became popular among non-literate African communities.

During the performance, the song, or oral poetry, is initiated by a *laashin* (poet/lyricist) who recites a *gabay* (long poem), an alliterated poetic narrative introducing his subject of discussion, and then concludes it with an alliterated couplet known as *mar* (verse). The couplet is then sung by a group of singers in two parallel lines as they move forward walking and dancing with rhythmic footsteps. Beautiful stamping and body twists mark the end of each couplet verse after a whistle has notified the dancers of the poet's readiness with a new verse. The couplets are chanted alternatively whereby the first segment is sung by the section of singers/dancers at the front while the second part is for the group at the back. The verses are composed in the *Maxaa* Somali language, but with a dialect of southern Somalia specific to the Bantu. The Bantu accent is quite easily distinguishable from other accents used by the pastoral Somalis in the northern and central parts of the country as well as other communities in the south.

Notwithstanding the relationship between literature, politics and society, most of the early African art was conducted without the written word. This conception is further justified by the fact that when some of the verses were composed, particularly those in the 1960s, the Somali script had not yet been introduced. But again, and analogous to comments made by Ahmed (1996), and Andrzjewski and Lewis (1964), Isidore Okpewho (1992, 30) acknowledges how in many situations, "the original authors cannot be accounted for", despite the oral text spreading from one generation to the other as part and parcel of the social knowledge and cultural heritage.

The same situation is also evident here in the case of the Bantu Jareer poetry because, apart from their retention in the social memory of the surviving elders, some of the verses illustrated in this essay could not be accounted for beyond the informant repositories. Nevertheless, we concur with Ahmed's (1996, 31) view that "the alliteration within a certain poem, coupled with the fact that the poem is memorized by several people, makes it difficult to tamper with the original version without contest". The contest might even develop into a more intense discourse, especially when the context of the debate is grounded on dissident or oppositional literature that has been unexplored.

The Bantu Jareer Oral Poetry as a Subject of Study

> I remember literary discussions I had with some members of the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences in the 1980s. Some of these "intellectuals" were of the opinion that certain parts of the country did not have literature – Ali Jimale Ahmed (1995, 142).[2]

What makes this study significant is its underlying factors which focus on addressing, albeit briefly: (a) Ahmed's timely call for "the need for an urgent re-evaluation of what constitutes Somali literature" (2008, 12); (b) Berns-McGown's hypothesis regarding the consideration for a "redefinition of Somali literature" (2008, 361); (c) Virginia Luling's description of southern Somalia poetry (which the Bantu/Jareer culture is part of) as a "fertile field" which still remains academically "an area of un-cleared bush" (2008, 285); and (d) to support Mbugua wa Mungai's "subversive" position and indictment of some Kenyan literary critics, for "how they held us captive" in interrogating literature not through the broader lens of East Africa but only from the narrower perspective focusing on the national scene. Therefore, this paper is a signal towards the expansion of Eastern African studies from the constrained perspective of the East African Community, currently reconstituted as East African Cooperation, to what geographically, historically, politically and linguistically falls under a broader picture of eastern Africa to include Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi, the Sudan, and potentially South Sudan.

To begin the discussion, the next section of the essay has focused on the interconnection between literature, politics and society, followed by an analysis of issues related to the post-independence Somali civilian regimes of 1960–1969 and their implications for the oral poetry of the Bantu Jareer. The subject will then extend into the Bantu poets' perceptions of the dictatorial rule of Mohamed Siad Barre, 1969-1991. Finally, this essay will dwell on Bantu poetry during the civil anarchy period of 1991 to 2012. In general, the essay aims to develop the Somali Bantu/Jareer political consciousness as revealed in their oral expression, a subject which has been hitherto unengaged by either experts on East African studies or scholars on Somali studies.

Dissident Political Poetry in Somalia

> The problem of ideology arises where there is a *discrepancy* between what is believed and what can be [established as] scientifically correct – Talcott Parsons quoted in Clifford Geertz (1973, 198).

Drawing from Wanjiku Kabira's epigraph cited earlier, this essay interrogates the nature of the dissident Bantu Jareer oral poetry engaged to communicate extant social grievances of the Somali people, particularly to the leadership, about a phenomenon known in 1960s Somalia as the *Busta Rossa. Busta Rossa* is an Italian phrase which means "red envelope" but often translated as "pink slip" in literary terms. It refers to "sacking" from the public service. It was introduced by Abdirizak Hagi Hussein who was Prime Minister of Somalia (1964–1967), allegedly as a measure for ridding the service of incompetence. However, the expression *Busta Rossa* became widespread because civil servants who were sacked were so informed by a letter sealed in a *Busta Rossa*. Later, the expression was invoked for anything related to dismissal or disapproval of a person even in social situations. The use of the term *Busta Rossa* became so emotive that it even attracted diverse interpretations and a sharp divide among the political and intellectual elite.

In *Politics and the Novel*, Irvine Howe argues that "[p]olitics rakes our passions as nothing else" (2002, 24), considering our human reactions and responses which come "with an almost demonic rapidity to a detested political opinion" (Eyre 2000, 168). The related view suggests that "… sociopolitical thought does not grow out of disembodied reflection" (Geertz 1973, 194). In time, the society's distaste for the system, if not promptly contained, develops into a phenomenon of upheaval which is prone to leading the social train into disarray and absolute moral derailment. Often times, it is the literary artists that air the society's dissent against the regime of the day.

Dissident literature, particularly oral poetry, has a long history in Somalia, although the major focus in the pre-independence period was always on the pastoral version, more specifically the dissident poetry of Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, known to British scholarship as the Mad Mullah. The same pastoral version was later reinforced in post-independence Somalia with massive state sponsorship including in the mass media and in the academy (Ahmed 1995, 1996), under the ideology of a homogeneous Somali people. However, the Bantu bards' oppositional poetry, though undiscussed in eastern Africa or the Horn of Africa literary discourse, could be

classified among the category that Ahmed (1996, 115) describes as “the initiators of a newer poetic guerrilla warfare” against the oppressive or unfair current regimes. Although this essay limits its focus to a selection of subversive socio-political verses extending from Somalia’s independence in 1960 to around 2012, it nevertheless shares something in common with the dissident literature that circulated in the country. Yet, as an effective cultural art, the Bantu Jareer oral poetry contributed to the emergence of a strong communal awareness in that other victims of the *Busta Rossa* such as the Banadiri community joined in the poetic fray, using their own poetic art in their festival celebrations in Mogadishu.

Therefore, in order to engage the view of the Bantu Jareer lore, this article deviates from the totalizing locus of presenting Somalia as a country occupied by a homogenous people who share the same ethnic or cultural background. Rather, this essay presents the perspective that the agrarian oral literature is an able aesthetic phenomenon in its own right, conveying a particular consciousness—one which is not less an institution to the nomadic values supremacized by colonial writers (Lewis 1955, 1961) and later upheld and sponsored by the successive Somali regimes.

The Political Culture of the **Busta Rossa** *Syndrome*

> Culture, here, is not cults and customs, but the structures of meaning through which men give shape to their experience; and politics is not coups and constitutions, but one of the principal arenas in which such structures publicly unfold – Clifford Geertz (1973, 312).

Like a myriad of other contentious social and political subjects, Somalis are divided over the aims of the so-called *Busta Rossa*. A section of scholars (Samatar and Samatar 2002) and nationalists depict former Prime Minister, Abdirizak Hagi Hussein, and first President Aden Abdulle Osman as exemplary democratic leaders. Yet another division of the same society challenges that view. The latter group, also comprising academics and traditional leaders, narrate a different version that characterizes any leader as only human with perfections and imperfections (Samatar and Samatar, 2002, 64, endnote 36). As Ahmed (2012, 431), reviewing the edited volume of Markus V. Hoehne and Virginia Luling (2012) avers, “[t]he praiseworthy, because of the sheer magnitude of their accomplishments, are also blameworthy”.

While certain scholars hail the *Busta Rossa* as an ethical exercise introduced to curb incompetence and malfeasance in the public sector of the newly born state (Samatar and Samatar 2002), others portray it as none other than what oral artist Ismaciil Caliyoow Baxaar describes as “a masked vendetta against the southern communities”. Another contention claims that the *Busta Rossa* was an aptly orchestrated plot which saw the persecution of able intellectuals from undesirable communities in Somalia. The preceding view presents the *Busta Rossa* as the Prime Minister’s ethno-political device “to intimidate, punish and banish recalcitrant intellectuals in the civil service” (Ahmed, 2008, 7).

Drawing on the same conception, Garane (2008, 55) likens the *Busta Rossa* experience to “cultural colonisation”. Garane further suggests that the *Busta Rossa* agenda was nothing but “clanism transplanted disastrously from the country to the city”. An elderly oral historian, Sheikh Cabdi Abanuur, reiterated: “[t]he aim of the *Busta Rossa* was to eject the southerners in general, and the Banadiri and the Jareer in particular, from the civil service and the active circuit of the entire setting of the political administration”. Thus, the social debate on the *Busta Rossa* arose out of what the people saw as an enduring unfairness in the allocation of civil service positions in favour of the northern Somalis, by way of appeasement to keep them in the newly formed unity between Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland. Samatar and Samatar’s (2002, 33) statement seems to support this notion as they write about “the apparent Northern domination of the upper echelons of the new structures” as a potential factor that created resentment among the affected civil servants in the south. They reconfirm the same disparity in a footnote in which they quote their subject convincing elders from the North that: “[n]ortherners had a lot more than their share of leading civil service positions!” (61–62, fn 21).

To further explain the oppositional view, Sheikh Cabdi Abanuur refers to one of Sacdi Muumin's several verses that had become, especially among the Bantu Jareer in Afgooye town, *loci classici* of the *Busta Rossa* as an ethical anomaly of the leadership. So, in what was a prologue to provoke an ensuing discussion, *laashin* (poet) Sacdi Muumin Xasan first draws the attention of his singers to the theme of his poetic discussion:

Boogtii bixiweeyso baan loo helo waaye
Buusta Roosadiiyaan baabkeeda galaa
As remedy becomes necessary to address a stubborn wound
As equally indispensable it is to visit the *Busta Rossa* saga.[3]

The message the poem carries is heavy and deep: It behoves us to find a remedy for a recurring and stubborn wound, one that has endured in the society; likewise, it behoves us to once again elaborate on the *Busta Rossa* saga. Here, the poet equates the *Busta Rossa* with a stubborn wound, a kind of cancer that destroys only a section of the society. As the poet suggests, the *Busta Rossa* and the stubborn wound both need careful attention to excise their effects from the body, whether psycho-physical or the body politic.

Then, elderly griot Maxamed Xaaji Tolob gets in to emphasize and direct his audience to where his compatriot Sacdi Muumin was actually heading:

Bootoole Risaaq maa baabkiisa galeey
Buusta Roosadiisa beenaay kudhisneed
You seem to be heading toward the chapter on Abdirizak, the perjurer
Whose tenets of the pink slip were built on fraud and fabrication!

Tolob's remark attracts a prompt response from Sacdi Muumin who lays open the fraud in the pink slip as follows:

Buusta Roosadaadaan beenteed bixihaa
Bahdoo kaligeedaa boqolaal buriseen
It's time to debunk the deceptions knotted underneath your pink slip scheme
For, hundreds (a majority) of those sacked belong to a specific kin-group (southerners).

As is hopefully clear by now, there is a significant disagreement between conventional scholars Samatar and Samatar (2002) and the traditional intellectuals regarding the "democracy", "leadership", and fairness allegedly exercised by Prime Minister Abdirizak Hagi Hussein. For example, comparing the competency level of the northen and southen Somalis, the scholars authenticate the southern parliamentarians' better linguistic skills "in both official languages" (English and Italian) than their northern brothers as an asset to the former; yet they suggest (arguably though), that "Northern civil servants were significantly more competent than those in the South" (61, fn 19). This seems an abrupt analysis since it does not interrogate why and how the southern MPs, supposedly less learned than the trained southern civil servants, could enjoy better advantage over their northern counterparts while the southern civil servants could not exploit the same advantage against their northern counterparts.

On the contrary, the Bantu traditional intellectuals contest the fairness of the *Busta Rossa* policy, since they claim the suspended southerners were graduates rather than yokels modernized into public office. For that matter, the next three couplets reveal an exchange of verses that augment each other. First Sacdi Muumin Xasan protests against the Prime Minister's *pink slip* as targeting the learned among the southerners, hence the poet supports the theses provided above by both Ahmed and Garane. In the second couplet, Sacdi's comrade, Maxmadeey Ismaan, then follows on to elucidate the objective of the *Busta Rossa* as an evil political project aimed at uprooting his ethnic group from the civil service. The third poet, Xasan Muudeey Dhuroow, joins in the incantation by identifying the victims by ethnic tags as Buuwe and Baaroow. The two names allegorically represent the Banadiri and Bantu, in other words southerners, while the name Bulxan symbolizes a nomad imported from upcountry. So, Sacdi begins:

Bajeelo nin haastoo bariima (primo) galaayo
Baraawa (bravo) ahaayaa buusta rooso siisi

The learned with credentials as top notch in the academics
Certainly the astute are those whom you targeted the pink slip with.

Maxmadeey elucidates:

Buliitikadaa ii beentaada badnaa
Booski Buuwe joogaad buun uyeersateen
Oh, what a political nightmare! How big your deceptions! (of the pink slip)
Blowing a kin-calling trumpet for the take-over of what was Buuwe's (post).

Nuur reveals:

Buuwe iyo Baaroow waa soo bixiyeen
Bulxan booliruugaa booskooda la geeyi
Suspension was exacted on Buuwe and Baaroow (southerners)
Alas! Prey their posts fell to Bulxan, the rapacious for unlawful acquisition!

From the verses cited, the poets interpret their community's disapproval of the national leader, censuring him over the category of recruits he was replacing with the learned Buuwe and Baaroow. From a distance, the Bantu poet seems to unmask the *pink slip* to expose its hidden motives at the time of its currency. If anything, the exposure sharply disagrees with the sifted and self-censored account by the ex-Prime Minister, given intellectual currency by the scholarly work of Samatar and Samatar (2002). For, according to elderly traditional opinion leaders like Ismaaciil Baxaar, "The PM saw it as his obligation to accomplish a political vengeance against the support some SYL party members from certain southern communities had denied to motions moved by party members from his clan". The allusion here suggests that clan sentiments were not absent from the former prime minister's political manoeuvres of the *Busta Rossa*.

In the next *shurub gaagaab* (incantation of short verse style), Sacdi reveals the causes of the pink slip as follows:

Arrin horaa eed ka qabtaa
Aarsiga waa ogaadiyeey
An old wound (the motion alleged above) agitated your pink slip
Thus, I've been conscious of your looming vendetta.

As *laashin* Aadan Bilaal Cawad explains, "[a] poet is more like the eyes of the society". In the same manner, Wole Soyinka (1967, 13) qualifies the artist as "the voice of vision in his own time". For this reason, his socially delegated responsibility "as the voice of vision" or of being "the eyes of the society" beguiles the Bantu Jareer wordsmith to confront the bureaucratic vice sweeping across his social environment. He endeavours to communicate the intrinsic displeasure with the leadership, including the incumbent, as emerged in the ensuing section of the essay.

The Bantu Bard on the First President

The Somali Bantu claim that for reasons related to their ethnic background as African descendants and cultural mode of living as agrarians they have become victims of various instances of social prejudice, marginalization, and permanent exclusion from the social fabric of Somaliness (Eno *et al*. 2013; Eno 2008; Eno and Eno 2010; Kusow 2004). They also censure first president, Aden Abdulle Osman, for ignoring their grievances over atrocities and massive land appropriation by the Italian colonial administration (Ali 2004). As a consequence, the agrarian traditional leaders had a furious imprecation to deliver:

Minaa isticmaarka iiga eexaheeysid
Aadanoow Ilaahaa aarkeeya gudaayo!
Your leadership favours the colonialist by biasing against my grievances
Oh Aden, the Almighty Lord will come to my rescue!

Osman, the first president, was criticized as being weak and inarticulate in intervening in the deteriorating political system, which was being derailed due to corruption, nepotism, and intensive ethnic competition within the administration of his government. From there emerged a discourse

of his manipulation by certain clans (Gassim 2002; Dualeh 2002). Bantu rhymester Garre Oobooy joined in the discussion with a query to the president over the discrepancy:

Mashiirnimo Moowlaa midigtaada gilii
Maxaaw mininkaada umaamul-daroowi?
The Lord has placed the incumbency upon your shoulders
What then has led your abode (leadership) to the malfeasance?

Maxamed Xaaji Tolob, a compatriot bard, replies to Garre, ridiculing the president by providing a concise description of the ineffective nature of the president, specifying the reasons for his manipulation by others:

Mas'uul mici waayi muruq aan leheen
Murdud qasashoow ii maanyiraa u yaal
A toothless leader, ineffective and incapable,
Is bound for inextricable complexities he can't disentangle himself from.

The "inextricable complexities" that the poet alluded to eventually came. Aden Abdulle Osman lost the presidency to his old nemesis and a former Prime Minister, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke. The defeat was as many analysts had observed.

Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's Regime 1967–1969

Some Bantu cultural intellectuals also viewed second President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's administrative strategy towards them as flawed and somewhat a continuation of his predecessor's. President Sharmarke imposed unpopular candidates from his Somali Youth League, in order to deny the Bantu Jareer indigenes key political representation in his government. With that national philosophy, the ethnic marginalization of the Bantu was well compounded with a tight state-sponsored political silencing. As a consequence, the bards sought solace in mirroring the social sentiment by resorting to their "philosophical lyricism" (Bishop 1987, 30) and sending a strong message of disapproval to President Sharmarke, as done here by Maxmadeey Ismaan:

Soot intiin saxiixni sitiin sano waaye
Maxaan ku sabreeynaa oo noola sameeyi?
Despite six decades (long period) of voting in vain (for the ruling party SYL)
What consolation is there (to motivate us Bantu) in voting for you again?

In one such instance at the peak of one of the electoral campaigns, Maxamed Xaaji Tolob protests against the ruling party:

Dambigii gasheenaan dood niiga wadaa
Dawladii dhisteen yaa dadkeeya ka joogo?
I mean to raise stiff complaint over your crimes against me (the Bantu community)
That a representative from my kinship is absent in your government.

However, whereas the preceding couplet occurs in the form of enquiry, in the next one the poet Garre Oobooy posts his communal message to the head of state who was visiting the town amid a party festivity to campaign for a preferred candidate. In this supposedly pleasant ceremony, the poet creates what Indangasi (1992, 131) commented elsewhere as a "tragic incongruity in an otherwise happy occasion", Oobooy recites:

Cabdiyoow colaadeey luu caarifo waaye
Cunug caasiyoowi see loo celihaa
Oh Abdi[rashid]! You should be informed of my rebellion (to your politics)
That like an unruly child I unmanageably renege (against your policy).

Despite the fact that some of the artists were summoned in the Governor's office, they were not tortured. Unlike the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre during which the oppositional artists would suffer dire consequences for their views and performances, the action taken was to "advise" rather than punish. As Ahmed (1996, 123) argues, this was a time when "the poets took the government to task, offering a coherent, undiluted criticism of the government's policies ..." Further advancing

the discussion, Ahmed (1996, 123) analyses that at the time, "[i]t was a task made easier, in a way, by the pseudo-democratic principles of the first Republic".

Ahmed also tells us that whenever society experiences displeasure, the poet can commit his imagination to a lyrical mixture of prophecy and curse, affirming that "… beneath surface reality, the gifted poet could always see a different reality" (117). That fact is even better explained in the Somali Bantu culture's distinction between the terminologies *laashin* and *afyaal*. Although both terms may mean the same thing, in essence, the former means "poet" while the latter, *afyaal,* means a kind of consecrated oral poet, with much stronger connotation than our translation could evince. The *afyaal* is a thinker whose tongue bestows him with the power to both bless and curse, as well as that of prophecy (Ahmed 1996). In other words, "dissident art in Somalia foreshadowed things to come" (149). One uncanny example here is Garre Oobooy who poetically prophesied an ominous outcome in a sarcastic curse, about President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's assassination by his kinfolk:

Dulmigaan wadiinaan dareen ka qabaa
Dambaqdii walaalkaa amaay ku dishaa!
Your unjust practices overwhelm the air with my premonition
That you might be the prey of your kin's arrow.

When Radio Mogadishu announced President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's eventual assassination, *afyaal* Oobooy's prediction was fulfilled in two ways: not only was the President gunned down, but the killer was his bodyguard and close kin, and the tragedy occurred in the President's own rural home. The assassination left many people in disbelief. It also created a leadership vacuum and political turmoil as a section of the parliamentarians did not want to abide by the provisions laid down in the constitution regarding the choice of the next president. The ethnic-powered political squabbles gave an opportunity to the military to execute a bloodless coup.

The Bantu Bards and Siad Barre's Rule 1969–1991

President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke's death also prefigured the demise of party politics in Somalia and the erection of a new elite of army officers, led by Mohamed Siad Barre, to the national realm. Barre instituted a single socialist party without regard to Somalia's existing political and religious structures.

Like the preceding civilian administrations, Barre's rule accelerated the importation of a new breed of his kinfolk from the camel fields in rural Somalia into the urban centres. An anonymous Jareer traditional singer was perturbed by this overwhelming concentration of newcomers, which made him pose a poetic question to Siad Barre:

Bulxan Baadiyoowgaan waasoo badiseen
Barroow baladkeeya maan kaaga baxaa?
Migration of "hicks", the likes of Bulxan, has intensified into our abode
Oh Barre, (Mr President) is the aim uprooting us (Bantu/Jareer) from our territory?

In Bantu Jareer poetry, calling names stresses the gravity of the situation associated with the named, whether it is personal or refers to a group. It epitomizes a social verdict that condemns the concerned individual with the taunt from the bard and the chanting, stomping and recitation of the verse by singers in the rendition. Equally, it may be used to demonstrate praiseworthiness for good done to society. It could even mean an allegorical representation of a specific community or family, as in our case here. In addition, this invocation of names could also be a pan-Somali tradition (Ahmed 1996, 151) which, in our context, arose out of the spread of looting heavily exercised by both army and civilian officers ethnically connected to Barre. The lamentation by Bantu Jareer poets cuts deeper as the more accusations the Bantu made about the looting, the more and the longer they were detained without trial (Eno, 2008). Lyricist Maxamed Cali Ismaan, known as Weershe, revealed the stunning anger:

Dawladiin danaano ka soo dugsahaayi

Yaa Daarood-ohoowaay dalkeeya ku dhiibti
The state from which I was seeking some solace
Made (instead) a Daarood-wide kin-call for the looting of my nation (land).

The marginalization of the Bantu by successive Somali regimes escalated, as the next couplet by poet Maxamed Cali Ismaan shows. The poet reveals the reasons behind the practice of less promotion of Bantu officers in the armed and police forces:

Sarkaalnimadaayna saajin dhaafiweeysi
Sinji ii sankaana noloogu saluugi
Why we (Bantu) are denied promotion (beyond lower ranks) is hinged on
The prejudice against our African ancestry and the big nose that is our identity .

In the early days of 1990, *laashin* Weershe observed the pathetic situation of lawlessness in the country and the state sanctioned discrimination against the Bantu Jareer. The poet was also aware that Siad Barre was not sympathetic to rebellion poetry and rebel artists, although the precipitating murmur of the oppositional literature was “simmering below the surface” (Ahmed 1996, 149). Yet, it did not take time for Weershe to examine, under his bardic microscope, Siad Barre’s fast-diminishing future as president:

Sacab-lee tuntaa ii siimbaar dhowataa
Siyaad sanadaaneey waa la suulihaa
Whether (October) is celebrated with jubilation or not
Siad’s eradication within this year is seemingly imminent.

In Weershe’s verse we have a similar example of calling names. In this poem the poet is addressing his audience, society at large, by stating that Barre’s tenure in power was about to end. Indeed, United Somali Congress (USC) rebels occupied parts of Mogadishu at the end of 1990 and ousted Barre in a matter of weeks. But notably, what started as a sacred war to topple the dictatorial rule of “a regime gone mad” against its citizens soon became disappointing, steering the ideological motive of the war into a viciously destructive ethnic confrontation and an unprecedented state of anarchy (Ahmed 1996, xvii).

The Civil Anarchy 1991–2012

Whatever the case, the civil war aggravated the situation of the Bantu as well as other minorities. Killing, raping, forced labour and expropriation of land and property became normal occurrences. Cabdullahi Cabdulqaadir Eenoow, known as Aw-Jaalle, was disgusted with the mischievous acts of the wrong-doers. He reminds the Somali culprits of their poor condition when they first arrived in the area, and the generosity of the Bantu indigenes in welcoming the former to settle among them. The reference the poet is making is the 1977 resettlement of drought-stricken nomads in Bantu inhabited areas:

Galabtii gunteeya kuusoo gurmaheeysi
Gaajaa ku dileeysi waa garguuraheeysi
During the emergency when you were crawling with hunger
It was my community that rescued you out of starvation.

Later came the formation of administrations which were clan based. Rather than improving the situation, things deteriorated to the derailment of the ideals of society and its survival. Of the various types of administrations established in the country since the overthrow of Siad Barre from power in January 1991, the Bantu claim they have not experienced an equitable inclusion in the transitional governments or the current federal government. Instead, the Somalis crafted an apartheid-like system of power sharing known as “4.5”, which deliberately marginalized the Bantu as aliens. Accordingly, the poet challenges that the “4.5” system is against the oft cited egalitarianism of the Somali society:

Soomaali ‘hal waaye’ maleegu siraayo
Sedki oon lahaay waa iiga saluugti

We will not be duped anymore by the myth of self-sameness
For you have denied my share, violating my right for equality .

The poet Weershe ventures in to criticize the 4.5 power-sharing system and notes:

Kuwii fadhigooda foor-faayf ka dhigeen
Facshir ii fadeexo maay ka faansadaan!
Immoral lawmakers instituting a parliament on the basis of 4.5 (segregation)
Lack ethical values to exercise above the ills of moral indignity!

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to theorize the cultural divide that exists in Somalia, giving an insight into the social domination and cultural oppression of the Bantu Jareer. It demonstrates how the Bantu traditional intellectuals discuss, communicate, and archive the immorality and social decay that lay in the socio-political life of the elite in power and the Somali society at large. The essay shows how the social artists censured the state, society and the few academics who gave little consideration to find the facts from various sources. The essay has also provided evidence of the mismatch between a state-wished homogeneity which is unreal and a proof of the multiculturality of the society. Our essay further supports the academic view regarding the inseparability of literature, politics and society as a triple counter influential phenomenon. By drawing on some political lyrics, the essay has demonstrated the consciousness of the traditional intellectuals as indispensable interveners in the socio-political debate in the country, ably interpreting and weaving the societal emotions into meaningful and accessible cultural knowledge. By extension, this essay contributes to East African literature and aesthetics, showing the literary treasure hidden in a version of what constitutes Somali literature, particularly the untapped literary wealth in the oft degraded and disdained Bantu Jareer cultural art. This essay challenges Somali scholars and the wider East African and African scholars to investigate such poetry by learning the dynamics bestowed upon a community and the aesthetics of its culture.

Notes

1. This paper was first presented at the "East Africa at 50: A Celebration of Histories and Futures" Conference held at the University of Nairobi, 10–12 September 2013, and co-organized by the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, and the English Department, Stellenbosch University.
2. Ali Jimale Ahmed is, by coverage, the first Somali scholar to utilize a detailed, written critical analysis of the interconnections between Somali politics, society, and culture from a literary perspective. For more on this discussion and Ahmed's critical study on Somalia and Somali literature, read his edited volume *The Invention of Somalia* (1995), and *Daybreak is Near: Literature, Clans, and the Nation-State in Somalia* (1996).
3. This translation and the others in this article are by the authors.

References

Ahmed, Ali J. 1995. "Daybreak is Near ...: Won't You Become Sour?" In *The Invention of Somalia*, edited by Ali Jimale Ahmed, 11–24. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Ahmed, Ali J. 1996. *Daybreak is Near: Literature, Clans, and the Nation-State in Somalia.* Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Ahmed, Ali J. 2008. *"Introduction"*. In *The Road Less Travelled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa,* edited by Ali J. Ahmed and Taddesse Adera, 1–18. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Ahmed, Ali J. 2012. Review of *Milk and Peace, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics, Essays in Honour of I.M. Lewis*, edited by Markus V. Hoehne and Virginia Luling. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75(2): 429–431.

Ali, A.Q. 2004. "Land Rush in Somalia". In *Putting the Cart Before the Horse: Contested Nationalism and the Crisis of the Nation-State in Somalia,* edited by Abdi M. Kusow, 155–176. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Andrzjewski, B.W., and I.M. Lewis. 1964. *Somali Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Barber, K. 1993. “Inhabitable Words: Text, Metatext and Criticism in Yoruba Oral Praise Poetry”. *In Literary Theory and African Literature,* edited by Joseph Gugler, H-Jurgen Lusebrink and Jurgen Martini, 89–112. Munster, Hamburg: Beitrage zur Afrikaforschung.

Berns-McGown, R. 2008. “Meditations on a Poem: Weaving Literature on the Loom of Authenticity”. In *The Road Less Travelled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa,* edited by Ali J. Ahmed and Taddesse Adera, 255–368. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Bishop, L. 1987. *The Poetry of Alfred de Musset: Styles and Genres.* New York: Peter Lang.

Dualeh, H.A. 2002. *Search for a New Somali Identity.* Nairobi: H.A. Dualeh.

Eno, M.A. 1984. “The *Istunka* Festival: A Traditional Mock Fight at Afgoi”. *Heegan*, July 20. Print copy available in the Library of Congress, USA.

Eno, M.A. 1986. “All Roads Led to *Istunka*: A Grand Mock-fight at Afgoi”. *Heegan,* August 8. Print copy available in the Library of Congress, USA.

Eno, M.A. 2008. *The Bantu Jareer Somalis: Unearthing Apartheid in the Horn of Africa.* London: Adonis & Abbey.

Eno, M.A., and O.A. Eno. 2009. “Intellectualism amid Ethnocentrism: Mukhtar and the 4.5 Factor”. *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies.* 9, 137–145.

Eno, M.A., and O.A. Eno. 2010. “A Tale of Two Minorities: The State of the Gaboye and Bantu Communities of Somalia”. *In Minorities and the State in Africa,* edited by Michael U. Mbanaso and Chima J. Korieh, 113–142. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

Eno, M.A., M.A. Ingiriis, and O.A. Eno. 2013. “Discrimination and Prejudice in the Nucleus of African Society: Empirical Evidence from Somalia”. *African Renaissance* 10 (3–4): 13–36.

Eyre, B. 2000. *In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Garane, G. 2008. “Solipsism of a Tattooed Memory: The Impossible Soliloquy in William J. F. Syad’s Les Naufrages du Destin”. *In The Road Less Travelled: Literatures on the Horn of Africa,* edited by Ali J. Ahmed and Taddesse Adera, 55–78. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Gassim, M.A. 2002. *Somalia: Clan vs. Nation.* Sharjah, UAE: M.A. Gassim.

Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Hill, M. 2010. “No Redress: Somalia’s Forgotten Minorities”. Minority Rights Group. http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=10370.

Howe, I. 2002. *Politics and the Novel.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

Indangasi, H. 1992. “Teaching Oral Literature in Conditions of Theoretical Pluralism”. *In Reflections on Theories and Methods in Oral Literature,* edited by Okoth Okombo and Jane Nandwa, 130–143. Nairobi: Kenya Oral Literature Association.

Ingiriis, M.H. 2012. “Redefining Somaliness through the Bantu-Jareer Community: The Absent Somalis in the Somali Socio-Political Landscape”. *In Politics and Minorities in Africa,* edited by M. Fois and A. Pess, 71–100. Rome: Aracne.

Kabira, W.M. 1992. “The Oral Artist and the Gender Dimension”. *In Reflections on Theories and Methods in Oral Literature,* edited by Okoth Okombo and Jane Nandwa, 50–65. Nairobi: Kenya Oral Literature Association.

Kusow, A.M. 2004. “Contested Nationalism and the crisis of the Nation-State in Somalia: A Prolegomenon”. In *Putting the Cart Before the Horse: Contested Nationalism and the Crisis of the Nation-State in Somalia*, edited by Abdi M. Kusow, 1–14. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Lewis, I.M. 1955. *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho.* London: International African Institute.

Lewis, I.M. 1961. *A Pastoral Democracy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luling, V. 2002. *Somali Sultanate: The Geledi City-State over 150 Years.* London: HAAN.

Luling, V. 2008. “‘The Law Then Was Not This Law’: Past and Present in Extemporised Verse at a Southern Somali Festival”. In *The Road Less Travelled: Reflections on the Literatures on the Horn of Africa,* edited by Ali J. Ahmed and Taddesse Adera, 283–304.Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Mbugua wa Mungai. “Kwani? Inaugural Annual Lecture II (10th Anniversary Special): Kenya, Kwani and Imagined Words by Yvonne Adhiambo Owour”. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oo9sjgzN_eg.

Mukhtar, M.H. 1995. “Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction”. In *The Invention of Somalia*, edited by Ali Jimale Ahmed, 1-27. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

Nur, A.H. “Somaliland: A Short Briefing Paper”. *Somalilandpress*, July 16. http://somalilandpress.com/somaliland-short-briefing-paper-32226

Ogunjimi, B., and A. Na’Allah. 2005. *Introduction to African Oral Literature and Performance.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Okpewho, I. 1992. *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Prins, A.H.J. 1952. *The Coastal Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu – Pokomo, Nyika, Teita.* London: International African Institute.
Puccioni, N. 1937. *Le Popolazioni Indigene della Somalia Italiana.* Bologna: L. Cappelli.
Samatar, Abdi I., and Ahmed I. Samatar. 2002. "Somalis as Africa's First Democrats: Premier Abdirazak H. Hussein and President Aden A. Osman". *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 2 (4): http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol2/iss1/4.
Soyinka, W. 1967. "The Writer in an African State". *Transition*, 31: 11–13.
"Support for Kenya Somali Claim for Asiatic Status". *The East African Standard*, August 18, 1930.