Introduction

The distinguishing mark of ‘real art’, Leo Tolstoy wrote in his much debated essay, ‘What Is Art?’, lies in its ‘infectiousness’ – a potent property, in Tolstoy’s view peculiar to art. This property enables the artist to infect others with his feelings ‘compelling [them] to rejoice in another’s gladness, to sorrow at another’s grief and to mingle souls ... which is the very essence of art’. Whatever their merits in the context of Western literary/artistic traditions, Tolstoy’s views of the infectious and invading power of art would probably have been shared by Sayyid Mahammad ‘Abdille Hasan, who may have expressed a similar sentiment regarding the power of art when he spoke of his poetry as ‘issuing forth with the blinding flash of a thunderbolt’, or, to vary the metaphor, ‘the engulfing darkness of gale winds’. For a poet to attribute an irresistible, almost mystical power to his own creations, as the Sayyid often does, may sound somewhat immodest to a Western audience, but such a claim is permissible in Somali pastoral/literary conventions where the talented poet is viewed with something akin to superstitious awe. Through the power of his poetic orations, the Sayyid, as we shall see, was thought to ‘inflict wounds’ on his enemies, and indeed those who were attacked by his literary barbs often responded as if they had received physical wounds.

The Sayyid, moreover, took pains to ascribe the power of his verse to the ‘strengthening’ hand of ‘Divine Truth’, and to a sense of mission which he claimed to have sustained not only his poetry but his person, enabling him to weather the many dangers which his stormy career exposed him to. The mission – with which he gradually became imbued – was to rid his country of alien Christian rule. Thus he sang with evident conviction: ‘I have sought and found the Prophetic guidance / [which appointed me] to tell the unbelieving white invaders: / “This land is not yours.”’ It must be said at the outset, therefore, that the standard of truth or of excellence by which the Sayyid wished his poetry to be judged
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was a religious (Islamic) truth, a circumstance which again seems to have the peculiar ring of Tolstoy's controversial proposition that ‘In every period of history . . . it is by the standard of [a] religious perception that the feelings transmitted by art have always been appraised.'

Elsewhere in his essay, Tolstoy argued that art is ‘one of the indispensable means of communication without which mankind could not exist’ – its principal function being to convey the feelings of one man to others. This too would hardly sound strange to Somali ears long accustomed to the use of oral poetry, not only as an important means of communication but also as the principal medium by which Somalis ask the abiding questions: Whence come we? What are we? Whither go we?

In dealing with a historical subject from the standpoint of oratory and rhetoric, this study may be said to have taken an unorthodox approach in historical methodology, for in essence it relies on a branch of literature, notably poetry, as the core of its source materials. What may be unorthodox is not that we seek to utilize literature in order to investigate a historical question – history and literature are known to illuminate each other – but that the type of literature employed for the task should be an oral literature, and an oral verse at that, with its bent to the lyrical and the transient rather than the historical and the permanent. Hence, our reliance on such oral data to explore a historical phenomenon may raise, methodologically, a few eyebrows, in view of the historians’ conventional bias in favor of documents and documentary sources for the reconstruction and the interpretation of the past. Yet our recourse to a strong utilization of oral verse in the attempt to chronicle and interpret the history of the Somali anti-colonial movement was not motivated by any flair for whimsical experimentation in historiographical method. Rather, it was born out of necessity.

Those acquainted with the language and culture of the pastoral Somalis will have appreciated the pre-eminent, sometimes sinister, role which poetry plays in Somali life and thought. Whereas in the industrialized West, poetry – and especially what is regarded as serious poetry – seems to be increasingly relegated to a marginal place in society, Somali oral verse is central to Somali life, involved as it is in the intimate workings of people’s lives. For reasons which we hope to elucidate in this study, the pastoral Somalis attach great value to their oral verse and cultivate it with an undying interest. Indeed the one feature which unfailingly emerges even from a casual observation of Somali society is the remarkable influence of the poetic word in the Somali cultural and political scene. The Somalis are often described as a ‘nation of bards’ whose poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life.
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In seeking to account for the unusual hold of the poetic art on the Somalis, some scholars would look to environmental factors for clues. The life of Somali nomads, it is said, is a life of wandering and danger, devoted as it is to eking out a living in a demanding environment. In the great boredom and bleakness of their surroundings, the theory goes, the Somali nomads turn to their poetry, the one thing which does not cost them anything and provides them with drama and entertainment. According to this view, without the twin inspiration of their faith and verse, the Somalis would waste themselves in fury and desperation.

This is a quaint argument, though it may have some merits. Environmental bleakness per se hardly makes for poetry or poetic creativity. To interpret the lyric verse of the Somali pastoralists merely as a survival mechanism, a feeble and self-pitying cry designed to mitigate life’s cruelties to man, is to miss the significance of the poetic craft in Somali society.

What then makes poetry such a pervasive force in Somali society? To the Somalis the question is not so difficult to answer: poetry is the medium whereby an individual or a group can present a case most persuasively. The pastoral poet is, to borrow a phrase, the public relations man of the clan, and through his craft he exercises a powerful influence in clan affairs. For unlike Western poetry, which appears to be primarily the concern of a group of professionals dealing with, more often than not, an esoteric subject matter intended for the members of what seems an elitist secret society, Somali pastoral verse is a living art affecting almost every aspect of life. Its functions are versatile, concerned not only with matters of art and aesthetics but also with questions of social significance. It illuminates culture, society and history.

In addition to its value as the literary and aesthetic embodiment of the community, Somali poetry is a principal medium of mass communication, playing a role similar to that of the press and television in Western societies. Somali poets, like Western journalists and newspapermen, thus have a great deal to say about politics and the acquisition of political power. Because it is the language and the vehicle of politics, the verse which Somali poets produce is an important source of Somali history, just as the printed and televised word performs a similar function in the West.

It is the duty, for example, of the Somali pastoral poet to compose verse on all important clan events and to express and formalize in verse the dominant issues of the age – in short, to record and immortalize in verse the history of his people. And since the poet’s talents are employed not only to give expression to a private emotion but also to address vital community concerns, his verse reflects the feelings, thoughts and actions of his age.
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While I have not proposed an explicit theory or model of the relation between political power and oral poetry in Somali traditional (non-literate) society, the general approach of this study – with regard, for example, to the kinds of questions raised, the data presented, the narrative constructed and the conclusions drawn – would seem to entail theoretical implications. Insofar as these may be of interest to students of non-literate societies dealing with questions of power and political communication, they may be expressed as follows: 1) In Somali pastoral sanctions, the power and prestige of the poetic craft must possess universal recognition and acceptance in the community; 2) such power and prestige derive from the monopolistic conditions surrounding the composition and utilization of oral poetry; and 3) in the transmission of ideas, the poetic medium must be persuasive, efficient and easy to grasp and memorize.

The widespread community acceptance of the validity and efficacy of the poetic medium in social relations seems to stem from pastoral notions of feud and vendetta, especially the institution of godob discussed in chapter 1. Among the various components which comprise the godob institution is the concept of speech vendetta – the notion that certain kinds of oratorical forms can be used for slander. To borrow a pastoralist phrase, poetic orations serve the potent task of either ‘violating or ennobling the soul’ of a person or a group. When poetic formulations are used to wound someone’s honor, a case of godob has been generated. The resulting grievance, if it is not redressed or offset by a counter poetic formulation, becomes grounds for violent hostility between persons or groups. Indeed poetic slander has been the source of many a lethal inter-clan feud, for an insult or slander in poetry is considered in pastoral sanctions to have the same effect on the victim as a physical assault.

By the same token, the power of poetry can be (and is) used to reconcile two parties who are on the brink of war. Thus, in pastoral ethos, poetry is both the instrument to precipitate and sustain feuds and a principal means to bring feuds under control.

The second point making for the power of poetry in pastoral culture concerns the monopolistic nature of the craft. In pastoral society, as in others, a relatively small number of people are endowed with the talent to compose high-quality verse – artistic genius hardly comes in abundant supply. As a result, the inaccessibility of the art to most members of the population makes it a scarce commodity, the exclusive tool of a favored few. The few, aware of the high demand for their skill and the privileged status which their trade confers on them, use their talents to maximize their social and political influence. Hence, the pastoral bard occupies a prominent place in society. Lord of the desert and the dominant voice
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of the clan, he is envied by his less endowed kinsmen. It is his coveted task to articulate and register in verse the concerns of the community and the noteworthy deeds of his people.

This brings us to the last and perhaps the most important factor to account for the influence of poetry in pastoral Somali society. Given its regular features of alliterative and metrical structure, Somali pastoral verse is easy to memorize, far more so than prose can be. The significance of this fact is easy to grasp if we bear in mind that in an oral culture where writing is unknown, except to a few roving holy men, the only libraries or reference materials men have are their memories. Thus the events which are truly memorable in clan affairs are committed to verse, first so as to underscore their importance and, secondly, so that they can better be remembered. In this way versification enables the pastoralists not only to transmit information across considerable distances but also to record it for posterity. Hence, Somali pastoral verse functions both as a social communicator and as an archival repository.

Owing to the power of their talents in social relations, Somali poets tend to be political manipulators par excellence, using their potent craft to make and unmake politicians and public men. Magicians of words, they have the wherewithal to inform and persuade the public effectively. Consequently, they are respected and feared, the pride of their clans whose panegyrics they sing and the bane of their enemies whom they slander and discredit through the artful marshaling of their sinister rhymes.

Sayyid Maḥammad ‘Abdīle Ḥasan was, or at least perceived himself to be, one such magician of words. Rooted in the pastoral tradition and gifted in the art of political versification, he sought to utilize his oratorical resource as a political weapon in his protracted campaign against three colonial powers and their Somali collaborators. Our aim in this study is to examine what the Sayyid made of his poetic talent and to assess the nature of the impact (if any) of his political verse on the course of the resistance struggle.

Chapter 1 discusses the environment of the pastoral Somalis and the peculiar factors which predispose the society to the pursuit of oratory and eloquence, and goes on to a discussion of examples of prose oratory. Chapter 2 attempts to put forth a modest analysis of Somali oral poetry with emphasis on poetic oratory, its principles and uses. We provide examples of political poets who strove – with notable success – to leave their imprint on society through the eloquence of their words.

Chapter 3 is a ‘straight’ history, enunciating the onset of colonialism in the Horn of Africa and tracing the origins and growth of the Somali Dervish resistance movement. In this chapter we present evidence that the early phases of the Dervish resistance constituted an indigenous
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response of the Ogaadeen Somalis to the imposition of Ethiopian rule in western Somalia, and that the British, who were to bear the brunt of Dervish fighting, became unwittingly enmeshed in what was essentially an Ethio-Somali problem.

Chapter 4 attempts to present an extensive analysis of the Sayyid’s verse with a view to relating it to the ebb and flow of Dervish fortunes. The Sayyid is shown to have deliberately put to use the power of ‘my mighty tongue’ in his long-lasting efforts to capture the hearts and minds of the Somalis for the Dervish cause. The extent of his success is assessed.

The last chapter begins with a critical review of the literature on the Somali Dervishes and proceeds to a discussion of the multifarious personality of the Sayyid – as a political poet striving with ‘utmost sincerity’ to present the ‘truth’ of his case to the people, as a Muslim mystic (Sufi), yearning for the quiet and contemplative life, and as a warrior chieftain of a highly militarist organization. The contradictory demands, it is argued, of these ‘inner obligations’ were responsible for the stormy, at times erratic, behavior that was to mark the later phases of his career.

As well as to historians, this study may be of interest to anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, and perhaps even more to students of oral literature, communication, oratory and related disciplines with interest in discussions of the organic linkage between language and socio-political power. Students of oral literature may, for example, be interested in the discussion of the composition, transmission and distribution of Somali oral poetry, while the place of the poet, especially his influence in group decision-making, may be of relevance to sociologists, and his powers to inform and persuade the public to studies of communication as well as oratory and rhetoric.

The principal focus of this book is however directed to African historians, in particular those interested in what Professor T. O. Ranger has called African ‘primary resistance’ to European occupation. The example of the versatility of Somali pastoral poetry and the Sayyid’s utilization of it as a weapon in the resistance struggle may shed some light on other manifestations of African resistance to imperialism. The Sayyid’s verse, as we shall have occasion to witness, represented a deliberate effort to influence opinion and action through the clever fusion of the aesthetic with the didactic. Aware of the importance of public opinion in an egalitarian society, he used his verse as a forum to inform and persuade the public and to propagate the Dervish cause.

The challenge of winning the support and cooperation of others must have been part of the tasks of every leader of African resistance. In societies with hierarchical institutions where the leader could build on
an existing structure of centralized authority, the tasks of persuasion might not have been as formidable or as crucial to the success of the resistance effort. But in segmental societies where egalitarianism or village democracy was the dominant norm, the leader had to rely more on persuasion than on coercion. As the Somali example demonstrates, he had to sell the cause to the people. Propaganda, public relations and other forms of promotional techniques must have been of paramount importance to the progress of the struggle. The promotional effort – if it is to succeed – in turn requires a medium to communicate the leader’s ideas to the masses, a medium whose power and prestige the people recognize and respect.

In the Somali case, the medium is shown to be poetic oratory. Professor T. O. Ranger showed the importance of religious media in the Shona-Ndebele revolt of 1896–7,11 though some of his propositions have since been challenged, unsuccessfully in my view.12 In the Mau Mau uprising, oaths and oathing are known to have played some role.13 A comprehensive re-examination of the manner in which these and other anti-colonial movements used indigenous tools to obtain mass participation may provide some insights into the phenomena of African responses to European imperialism.
Elements of Somali Pastoral Oratory:
Prose

1 THE CULTURAL MILIEU

While a general treatment of the range and categories of Somali oral-literary forms and genres along with their cultural significance and social functions is beyond the scope and intent of this study, a precursory look into a few arbitrarily selected themes of pastoral oratory and rhetoric may prove helpful. Although a formal study of Somali pastoral arts of oratory and skill in public speaking remains to be undertaken, few students of Somali language and culture have failed to observe the importance of artistic speech in Somali pastoral life. The works of such scholars as Richard Burton,¹ M. Maino,² Margaret Laurence,³ B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis⁴ refer to the Somalis as a ‘nation of bards’. Their appraisal is echoed by Somali commentators on numerous occasions, most notably by the late president of the Somali Republic, Dr ‘Abdirashid ‘Ali Shermaarke, who spoke of his countrymen’s lyric verse as ‘one of the two national assets of inestimable value’.⁵ The other asset the president had in mind was Islam, and in putting poetry on the same level as Islam, the president paid no small tribute to his country’s poetic heritage.

If not also a nation of nomads, the Somalis are a nation in which nomadic pastoralism plays a dominant role in the life of the people. Not only do more than half of the Somali people still continue to pursue pastoralism as the chief mode of economy, but urbanized nomads dominate the modern state.⁶ They form the class of people to whom, in another context, I have referred as the ‘transitional generation’.⁷ These are former nomads who migrated to urban centers within the last thirty years and took over control of government from the departing expatriates in the wake of decolonization. Although bred in the countryside and essentially pastoral in culture, the transitional generation, nevertheless, has a commanding place in the economy and the civil service. And despite the ring of incongruity in the phrase, the long-urbanized Benaadiris – who resent the
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supremacy of the recently-arrived pastoralists – complain of the ‘nation’s nomadic bureaucracy’.8

The prevalence of pastoralism makes Somalia unique in eastern Africa. While animal husbandry seems to be an important economic pursuit in eastern Africa as a whole, it is in Somalia alone that the majority of the population follows pastoralism. Kenya and Ethiopia, Somalia’s neighbors, both have a minority of their populations who practice pastoralism, but it is interesting to note that even here a greater part of that minority is of Somali ethnic origin or of closely related peoples.9

The distinguishing features of Somali pastoralism with respect to ecology, mode of living, social institutions and kinship systems have been ably brought out by I. M. Lewis10 (for northern Somalia) and Enrico Cerulli11 (for southern Somalia) and it would benefit the interested reader to consult their pioneering works on the subject. I will therefore limit my observations to introductory matters except where a topic of prime relevance to this study (as, for example, the discussion of camels and camel culture) is concerned. With few exceptions, all Somalis belong to one of six kinship groupings which, to adopt I. M. Lewis’ term,12 I will refer to as clan-families. Four of these – the Daarood, Dir, Hawiye and Isaaq – are predominantly nomadic pastoralists, while the other two, the Digil and Rahanwayn, are largely agriculturalist. These clan-families and their descendant clans are represented graphically on fig. 1, p. 10 and it would be useful to become familiar with them in relation to fig. 2, p. 11, which shows their territorial distribution. In the course of this discussion, we shall have occasion to refer to them, especially to the pastoralist clan-families and their sub-groupings.

The environment of the Somalis is both demanding and dangerous and, except in a few places, drought and famine, disease and pestilence, predatory beasts, and feud and war are constant threats to the people and their herds. A standard evening prayer after the flocks and herds are securely placed in the homestead kraal says, ‘O God, save us from whatever creeps and whatever gallops, and whatever springs up and whatever roars. O God, make us the grain that escapes unharmed between the mortar and pestle.’13

Yet this land of seeming danger and desolation is a promised land to the Somalis, and their folklore is replete with passionate yearnings to possess it. ‘I speak the truth’, said one of their poets in a curse-attack on Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, whose empire he felt was encroaching on the pastoralists’ traditional pasturefields:

I speak the truth: this land is our land  
Hodayo, Wardeer and the plains of Dahare14
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Figure 1. Somali clan genealogy. The two agricultural clans of Digil and Rahanwayn are on one side, and on the other, the predominantly pastoral Samaale clan-families: Dir, Daarood, Isaaq and Hawiye. According to tradition, the word ‘Somali’ (properly, ‘Soomaali’) is a derivative of ‘Sammaale’, name of the mythical founder – ancestor of the pastoralist clan-families, and etymologically comes from ‘Soo maal’, ‘go and milk’, thus stressing the pastoral ethic in the culture. For alternative possible sources of the word ‘Somali’, see I. M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy*, pp. 11–13.

Bold type indicates numerically powerful clans and sub-clans who figure significantly in the events discussed in this book. A dotted line indicates omission of genealogical steps deemed unnecessary for this chart; wavy lines indicate maternal kinship. Parentheses indicate a variant name.