

## **Silent Voices: The Role of Somali Women's Poetry in Social and Political Life**

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Oral literature plays a very important role in Somali culture and has done so for thousands of years. The Somali language is spoken in Somalia, Djibouti, the Somali regions of Ethiopia, and the northeastern region of Kenya. Before 1972 there was no written script; since then, the writing of the Somali orthography has not had much effect on the composition and dissemination of oral poetry. The majority of the Somalis, largely nomadic pastoralists, still remain illiterate. Even a literate populace has little relevance, however, since learned poets such as Hadrawi, considered the best male poet of the present generation, continue to transmit and publicize their poetry orally. Through their performances before live audiences or through their recordings of poetry on cassette or videotape, the oral dissemination process continues unabated. Somali literature is therefore still predominantly oral: it is orally composed, memorized, and recited.

One cannot adequately summarize here the function of oral literature or poetry in the society, because it affects the daily lives of most Somalis wherever they are. Poetry, proverbs, riddles, and other genres are used as acts of communication and as a form of education (elders to the young). They play a significant role in traditional courts and in tribal and political affairs.

In times of conflict, poets adopt the position of journalists, spokespersons, and politicians rolled into one. Poets from different sides of the conflict exchange poetry that is performed at assemblies and traditional courts. These poetic compositions are also passed to different settlements and communities by word of mouth through the professional memorizers and reciters. Proverbs are used in everyday verbal exchanges in both rural and urban societies. Riddles are more commonly used by nomads, who continue to test each other's knowledge and intelligence by presenting complicated oral puzzles to one another. Last but not least, other forms of

oral literature are performed or listened to purely for entertainment.

In this paper women's poetry will be examined. Somali classical poetry—the type of poetry best suited to address issues of serious interest—is divided into four main styles: Gabay, Geeraar, Jiifto, and Buranbur. According to this classification, based on the way the poem is chanted and the rhythmic pattern of words, the Gabay, Geeraar, and Jiifto are seen as male genres while Buranbur is considered the female style (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1974).

During the last few years I have been looking at works of poetry by different Somali poetesses and have concluded that the style adopted by a poet or a poetess depends on that particular artist. There also seem to be regional influences on the artist's style. For example, women from the northwestern regions of Somalia (now Somaliland) who were involved in the struggle for nationalism and who fought against the repressive régime of Siad Barre have composed in the so-called male styles of Gabay and Geeraar. In the past, there have also been examples of poets who employed the Buranbur style. Buranburs by a poet named Haynwade, who was from the central regions of Somalia, were recited by Aden Artan in 1987 when I was recording poetry by women on the struggle for liberation (Jama 1991). Poetry by women concerning matters of political interest, such as clan politics, the liberation struggle, modern government politics, the armed struggle against the régime of Siad Barre, and civil war, is not in wide circulation.

The main medium of publicizing and disseminating poetry is oral memorization and recitation. It is the reciters who pass their favorite poetry from one area to another and from one generation to the next. As Andrzejewski puts it (1985:37), “let us say, a hundred people can memorize a text from one performer, and that each of these hundred can perform it to a hundred more, and so on. In a very short time a story or poem can be known to several thousand people, without recourse to printing or to the radio.”

However, this otherwise effective medium of transmission does not work for women artists. The position of memorizer/reciter has always been a male role; because of the restrictions imposed on women by Somali society, there have never been professional female memorizers/reciters. The reciters commit to memory only poetry by male verbal artists, viewing the act of memorizing poetry by women as demeaning and insulting. As a result, women do not receive exposure through the traditional network.

Since the Somali script was instituted twenty years ago, attempts have been made to document in writing orally composed poetry. However, traditionalists and scholars who made such an effort concentrated strictly on poetry by men. The little poetry by female artists collected so far happens to treat subjects associated with what are seen as female roles. These include work poetry, which has now become a folk form without individual authorship, and children's lullabies. But no effort has been made to collect and document verse on "serious, political" themes usually understood as belonging to the male domain and thus reserved for men. So once again, female artists have been let down by another potential medium for publicizing their poetry.

Recently, women artists have benefited from alternative modes of publication, some of which have not been available in the past. Among these are circulation through audio tape and radio transmission, as well as public performances to large audiences (made available due to the sad circumstances of the civil war and the resultant refugee situation).

In this paper I will be looking at examples of poetry by Mariam Haji Hassan and other women whose work has been promulgated through radio transmissions. Some of the work by Habiba Haje Aden, who gained fame by recording her poems on cassettes, will also be cited here. And finally, I will demonstrate how a group of women called Allah-Amin ("those who trusted Allah") managed effectively to reach a large audience through their live performances.

### **The Role of Radio in Publicizing Poetry by Women**

Over the last two decades, most of the publicity for women's poetry came about through Radio Mogadishu, controlled by the government. The national radio frequently broadcast poetry composed by well-known poets and poetesses. The Siad Barre régime used poetry and other forms of oral literature to convey its message to the public. Criticism against the government or its policies was not allowed; in fact, it was a criminal offense to speak against the government. Thus, poetry broadcast contained references to equality of the sexes, the benefits of socialism, and praise for President Siad Barre.

During the first years after the military took power and adopted socialism, poetry was performed before live audiences. The recitals

occurred at meetings and gatherings as well as public rallies held in support of the government. After independence, Somali women felt that though they had participated in all the struggles that led to it, they did not receive any recognition for their efforts. Women were not given opportunities in the newly independent Republic of Somalia. When the Siad Barre régime took power in the 1969 coup, it promised equal opportunities for all, particularly for women.

In 1975, the Islamic inheritance law was amended to provide equal inheritance shares for men and women. This innovation angered the Islamic fundamentalists; as a result, ten male religious leaders were executed by the government. That same year the Somali Women's Democratic Organization was formed and afforded extensive publicity by the government. At least during the first eight years of the Siad Barre régime, women participated in government rallies, gave speeches at orientation centers, and composed poetry in support of the régime. One of the poetesses whose compositions were frequently broadcast by Radio Mogadishu was Halimo Ali Kurtin. In one of her poems, aired in the seventies, Halimo explores the history and role of women in Somali society. In the following stanza, from her long poem, she talks about how women were ignored by the elected government that took power after independence:<sup>1</sup>

*Haddii haweenku nafsadoodii oo dhan aanay hurin,  
Hiil iyo hoo waxay lahaayeenba aanay hibayn  
Hodanow calankeena waligeen ma aan heleen  
Hashii markay noo dhashoo caano lagal habcaday,  
Haweenku se wali hamuuntoodii ay quabeen*

If women did not sacrifice their lives,  
If they did not offer everything they had  
We would never have attained our flag  
When the she-camel gave birth and gave so much milk,  
Women were still left in hunger.

In that same poem Halima explains why women offered their support to the régime of Siad Barre:

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<sup>1</sup> The Somali alphabet is read the same way as the Latin, except for the letters “c” (which sounds like “a”) and “x” (which sounds like “h”).

*Anagoo meel halisa maraynoon habowsannahay,  
 Hiyi kacnoo, ciil la hoganoo hantina lahayn  
 Hillaac noo baxayoo habeen noo dhalatay  
 towradeenan heegganka ah,  
 Siyaad hoggaaminayoo ciidankeenna haybadda leh,  
 Haweenku hanbalyiyo salaam hooyo nimay baxsheen.*

We were lost and at a very dangerous stage  
 Our emotions were aroused, bent with anger  
 and left with no possessions, we were,  
 Then lightning occurred one night and our  
     revolution was born  
 Siad was leading the charismatic army,  
 Women are sending greetings and salutations.

Women composed poetry about various subjects in line with the military government, which was then claiming to be socialist. Female artists recited poetry on the theme of equality, self-sufficiency, and socialism. Hawa Aaje Mohamed is another whose poems were broadcast by Radio Mogadishu. Here are lines from her poem, in English translation, on the benefits of self-sufficiency:

If we don't neglect our prosperous land  
 If we are not afraid of hard work  
 If we join forces  
 If we move in hundreds and hundreds  
 If the collective farmers compete  
 The imported rice would grow  
 Onions and garlic will ripen  
 potatoes and pumpkins will pile up  
 The flour we make pasta from will be available  
 We wouldn't be able to finish the maize in  
 Bakaraha [a market in Mogadishu]  
 Then we will compete with half the world  
 Then we will have our fill of prosperity  
 That is when we wouldn't need to beg others  
 The Party will assist us so hurry up  
 And the community of socialists must join hands!

In spite of the contributions made by women in the Siad Barre régime, they felt that the government was not sincere about the promises it made and that its call for equality was only lip-service. There were women

members of the Central Committee of the ruling party during the twenty-one years the government was in power. Several of them were appointed vice ministers. But none had been nominated to a full ministerial position, though most of these women were university-educated and had enough experience in politics. I met and talked to a number of former members of the Somali Women's Democratic Organization who felt that women were used by the Siad Barre régime just as they were used during the struggle for liberation. In a report, Rhoda Ibrahim and Zamzam Aden of the Somali Relief Association in London wrote of the adverse effects this régime had on women: "the changes of some Quranic verses about women by the government resulted in great misunderstanding of the situation of women. It also provided naturally prejudiced men with the ammunition needed to undermine women's position in social development" (Ibrahim and Adan 1991). Most of the women who supported the régime in its early days changed their attitude when they realized it was not really helping them at all. There were also those women who were opposing it from the beginning. One of them was Mariam Haji Hassan.

I met Mariam and recorded her poetry firsthand in August 1991 in Nairobi, Kenya. She had been involved in the struggle against the Siad Barre régime from the start. In 1978, Mariam was one of the founding members of an opposition group, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). At the time, she was in exile in Kenya after her husband had been detained by the government. During 1979, immediately after its formation, this group started broadcasting from a clandestine radio station named "Kulmis" (meaning "a meeting place"), which was based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mariam was one of the first artists to have her work heard on Radio Kulmis, which also broadcast news items and political songs. These programs were of course aimed at raising the political awareness of the Somali people and increasing support for the armed opposition against the military government.

This did not amount to a conscious attempt on the part of the poetess to find a way of publicizing her poetry. In fact, she was not really aware of her talent until 1979, when the managers of the new opposition radio appealed to artists to participate in the struggle. Mariam responded to that appeal, composing her first poem and sending it to Radio Kulmis, which broadcast it under the alias Araweelo Ararsame. She did not use her real name, fearing for her family's safety back in Somalia.

Mariam's poetry was very effective. It was listened to not only for

its artistic expression, but also for the political messages it carried. Here, such poetry plays two functions in the social and political activity of its listeners—entertainment and consciousness-raising. In the following poem, the author makes use of traditional imagery and symbolism by comparing the national flag with a she-camel named Haybad (“Charismatic”). In Somali culture the camel is a very precious animal; not only does it provide meat and milk, but it is highly respected by the nomads for its strength, stamina, and robustness. Most importantly, it is a conspicuous status symbol for the Somalis. Mariam describes the suffering of Haybad in this way:

*Haybad oo noo dhashay oo noo haleelo rima.  
 Horweynteedii la daaqda oon hurgumo ku qabin,  
 Haud caleenliyo ku foofaysa haro biyo leh  
 Karuurkeedii ka hanqanoo ku haqab la'nahay,  
 Koox aan huurna iska saaraynin baa hantiday,  
 Haar bannaan iyo abaar bay ku heeggantahay,  
 Midkii haaneed yidhaa by harraatidaa;  
 Illaah baan ka hadlin mooyee hammay qabtaa.*

Haybad just gave birth and rich with milk,  
 peacefully she grazed with her herd  
 in the fertile Haud region.<sup>2</sup>  
 We had so much of her sour milk  
 Then she fell into the hands of ruthless people.  
 She ended up in a desert area  
 Now she kicked anybody who comes near her  
 If only Allah made her talk, she would tell all of her worries.

In this poem the metaphor of the she-camel represents the nation, the national flag, and the Somali identity. The poetess attempts to portray the suffering of the nation under the military régime (from 1969 to 1990) utilizing Haybad as a vehicle.

In her poetry Mariam employs simple language that is readily understood. In another of her poems, for example, she addresses what she calls *guddi*, which means “committee.” This term was well known during the régime of Siad Barre. “The committee” could be interpreted as the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), which was the highest decision-

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<sup>2</sup> In eastern Ethiopia.

making committee in the ruling party (Somali Socialist Revolutionary Party) of Siad Barre. Here are some lines from the poem:

The committee has let us down,  
 They eliminated the strong and the intelligent.  
 They detain the young as they reach puberty  
 The process of avenging these wrongs must begin  
 We must support those preparing to fight.

Despite her contributions to the fight against Siad Barre's oppressive régime, Mariam did not gain any recognition from her male colleagues in the SSDF. However, as an artist she benefited from the radio transmissions of her poetry. Broadcasts by Radio Kulmis brought Mariam's work to millions of Somalis who otherwise would not have heard it.

Traditionally, classical poetry is publicized by professional memorizers/reciters, who are always male. It is they who play the crucial role of passing it orally from one area to another and from one generation to the next. Though men have male reciters who follow their favorite poets' compositions, memorize them, and recite these poems to audiences, there are no women who play a similar role. Somali culture and the Somali way of life impose a number of restrictions on women. This problem is compounded by the fact that male reciters shy away from performing poems composed by women; they see it as demeaning for a man to stand up in front of an audience and recite poems by women. There is also a problem of communication between the male memorizers and the female artists: the memorizers would have little access to women except those in their own family, whereas they would have full access to male poets.

Most commonly, women perform their poetry before their female family members, relatives, or friends, who may memorize it and recite it, probably to other female friends. There are very few other occasions in which poetry by women can be recited. These include special gatherings like engagements or weddings, and in modern times, celebrations to mark Independence Day. As a result of this apparent vicious circle, poetry by women tends to die with its author and is not passed down like that of men (Jama 1991).

Radio transmission of poetry has provided those poetesses an opportunity to bypass the restrictions imposed by the society, particularly by the memorizers. Radio has become a viable tool for dissemination of poetry in general, but in particular that composed by marginalized segments

of the society. Mariam H. Hassan herself points out the power of radio in one of her compositions addressing the former president, Siad Barre:

Those inside the country and the ones outside  
 The Somali people have been warned.  
 The radio which is broadcast around you conveys the reality  
 The discussions aired are far from fabrication.

### **Dissemination of Poetry by Audio Tapes: The Case of Habiba**

Habiba H. Aden is another poetess who made use of new technology such as cassettes. She has in fact reached even wider audiences than those afforded by radio: her poetry was recorded, then distributed in large numbers in the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Yemen. On cassette Habiba's poetry has reached as far and wide as America and Australia. When it comes to classical poetry, Somali men usually listen to classical male poets. It is surprising to find men in large numbers sitting around a cassette player airing a female voice. But that has been happening in recent years, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where Somali men listen to poems by Habiba both for entertainment and in appreciation for her talent.

Habiba recorded this particular collection of poems in the Gabay and Geeraar styles from 1988 to 1990, when a bitter civil war was raging in the north of Somalia. Naturally, the events surrounding her at the time were reflected in her poetry. The thematic content of her poems is mainly concerned with particular battles, encouragement for those in the war zone, and appeal to other Somalis to join the armed struggle to overthrow Siad Barre's government.

What is most interesting about Habiba's poetry is her utilization of classic Somali linguistic devices, her intimate acquaintance with the language, and her developed cultural knowledge. She uses highly allusive language. In Somali culture, the more indirect and subtle the expression, the more it is appreciated. Listeners enjoy poetry not only for the message the poet/poetess is trying to get across, but also for the mystery associated with solving the coded message. For the audience it is like solving jigsaw puzzles. Andrzejewski explains the importance of indirect language in Somali culture in this fashion (1968:74): "It is considered to be a sign of refinement and wisdom not to come directly to the point but to present to

the audience one's statements or proposals by means of allegorical images, veiled expressions and cryptic allusions, which are subsumed under the term *guudmar* which literally means 'moving over (or above) the surface'."

Habiba draws her rich imagery from living things in the pastoral environment, animals in particular. One of her most popular compositions is called "Dhabannohays" ("Irony"), which has been compared with some of the best poems in classical poetry passed down from previous generations. If she were to be rated, I was told by a Somali elder who would fall into the category of modern literary critic, she would be in the same class as Sayid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan (alias the Mad Mullah), who was a very talented poet and freedom fighter during the colonial period. The language used in this poem is of a very high standard. Those who have managed to decode it assert that it describes some of the major crimes committed by Siad Barre and his supporters. But if one looks at the literal meaning, Habiba is merely talking about animals. In this particular stanza from her poem, she is referring to a hyena:

*Dhurwaagii dhaylo cune,  
illayn dhiig uu cabiyo  
baruur uu dhuuqsadiyo,  
dhallaanyo cun buu barte  
Dhabtii buu daahaya,  
Haddana dhabar muuqda iyo  
dhirbiicaa la arkaya,  
Kuyee waa dhabannohays.*

The hyena which eats the lambs  
is used to drinking blood  
and grasping its rump  
for it's used to eating young goats  
it hides the truth  
But the evidence can be seen.  
It is ironic, they said.

Poems such as the above have been very effective in mobilizing support for the guerilla war effort of the Somali National Movement in the north.

Not all of Habiba's compositions are metaphoric. In her famous poem entitled "Somali," she addresses all Somalis to stop the genocidal war against the people in the north and unite against the government in power. The following translated extracts are from that poem:

Somalis, misfortune has taken place  
 in this generation  
 Those who fed me, the ones who deceived and  
 those who consoled me  
 Those whose hearts are with me but are trapped  
 by the enemy  
 The ones who are suffering and cannot give support  
 I am addressing you all  
 Somalis, I am aware of all the good deeds done for me  
 Every man reaps only what he sows.

Habiba is appealing to the hospitality, generosity, and help Somalis traditionally give each other in times of need or trouble. Some of her poems address all Somalis and appeal to their sense of patriotism, while most of them emphasize the evils of tribalism. Her poem entitled "Qiyas" ("Assessment") is on the subject of clanism and how the régime of Siad Barre exploited it to divide the Somalis, one of the few nations in the world with one culture, religion, and language. Here is a selection from "Qiyas":

Each time he wants to attack or harm a clan  
 He offers false accounts of a situation to appease the rest.  
 He claims that they were going to bring in strangers.  
 He tells the public that colonialists were behind them  
 After all these lies you then carry weapons for him;  
 The way you are dividing yourselves is no good.  
 Why don't you think as one nation and plan accordingly?  
 The loss of your kinship and the wounded nation  
 O Somalis, why don't you check your losses?

When the artist composed her poems, it was probably sheer anger at what was happening around her that made her express her feelings in an aesthetic form. But such poetry has fulfilled many functions in Somali society. A poetess like Habiba, who comes from a family well known for their talent, is now respected by all listeners regardless of gender. I believe that one of the reasons her poetry has broken the barriers of sex and segregation lies in the content, specifically its relation to the civil war that was raging in the country. But another very important factor is the exposure through tape to a significantly wider audience, increasingly male,

in particular expatriate Somali men working in the Arabian Gulf states.<sup>3</sup> This is an advantage to poetesses of her generation denied to those of the past.

### **The Role of Direct Performance before Large Audiences: Poetry by the Allah-Amin Group**

When Habiba was composing the above poems, there existed a group of Somali women called Allah-Amin. They were active in the north, where fighting between the Somali National Movement (SNM) and the government began more than two years before the final collapse of Siad Barre's government. Members of Allah-Amin worked in areas controlled by the SNM forces during 1988-1990. They were involved in activities aimed at helping the population of northern Somalia who had been displaced by the war, including thousands of refugees camping around the cities in that region. Allah-Amin, whose members were all female, were doing voluntary work—tending to the wounded, nursing, cooking, and running children's schools (mostly under trees). In addition, they maintained a cultural group who composed and performed poetry and songs before the refugees.

Because Allah-Amin's output was a collective effort, their style of poetry differed from that of Mariam and Habiba. They were ingenious in adapting old and traditional lyrics from work songs or religious poems. In group performances a solo singer chanted their new compositions while the chorus repeated familiar lines from old tunes. This system of dissemination worked very well. The traditional work songs are well known for their lively rhythms, and the group's poems were accompanied by clapping and wailing. At the same time the content of their poems was powerful and adept at touching the emotions of the listeners. The themes were mainly sad, serious issues reflecting the very real war situation.

Work poetry is usually recited by women when performing their customary tasks such as churning milk, weaving mats, or pounding grain. Such poetry has been known to be used by women particularly to express their opinions as well as to advise their daughters about their futures,

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, expatriate workers made significant financial contributions to the struggle against the Siad Barre government.

marriage, housekeeping, and so on. Traditionally, women have used work poetry to express social or political matters, as John Johnson explains (1991): “to mediate social tensions in the extended family and . . . to debate social and political issues both overtly and through the use of veiled speech.”

If we look at a few lines from a milk-churning poem, we see that the poem is not about churning: it concerns a woman who feels that her husband is *Qorqode*, a man who interferes in the kitchen, a traditionally female domain. The term is in fact used as an insult to men. The woman who speaks the following lines obviously feels that her husband does not trust her with her part of the house work. She is even afraid he may divorce her because of his mistrust. The poem is addressed to the milk container, which is personified and named Bullo:

Bullo, my sister,<sup>4</sup> please churn,  
 So that I wouldn't be accused of taking the butter  
 So that I wouldn't be thrown out and suffer hardship  
 Bullo, my sister, please churn.

The use of work and other forms of oral literature as a medium of communication is thus not new. Allah-Amin has been innovative by adapting work and religious songs to the new situations of contemporary politics. I point out that though most of the members of Allah-Amin were literate and could read and write the Somali script, all their poems were orally composed and performed, like those of most Somali verbal artists.

The Allah-Amin group performed their poetry before audiences not merely to entertain them, but to encourage them to fight. Some of their poems, in fact, go a stage further by cursing the enemy. In Somali culture there is a belief that such things work; poets are believed to have magical powers to effect curses as well as blessing. But most importantly, curse poetry, which is known as *guhaan* in Somali, serves as a psychological release of otherwise repressed frustrations and tensions. It is the next best thing you can do to your enemy besides killing him. The following lines are from a curse poem by Allah-Amin:

*Hoobaalayow hobalayow hoobaalayow heedhe*  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*

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<sup>4</sup> Refers to the milk container.

Big mouth, may you be struck by leprosy  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 You killed and destroyed the lives of millions  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 We remember the hundreds of heroes murdered  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 May you be caught in the name of Allah and his Quran  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 May you be struck by misfortune and meet your end  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 The men who raped Bureqa and the beautiful Rodha  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
 May you and your allies go to hell  
*Hoobaalayow hobalayow, hoobaalayow heedhe*  
*Hoobaalayow heedhe, hoobaalayow heedhe.*

The first line and the repeated chorus lines do not express anything distinctly meaningful. They are only there to embellish the poem and make it more interesting. The repeated lines also act as a breather, giving the solo singer time to gather her thoughts or even improvise new lines. When one listens to the above poem, one can be deceived by its seemingly innocuous nature until one grasps the very powerful content of the solo lines.

In another poem the group borrowed the tune and the chorus line from a religious poem and modified it with their own compositions. The repeated chorus line is an Arabic prayer, which means “God save our beloved Mohamed [the prophet]; may peace be upon him.” But the content of the solo lines is not theological; rather it is meant to encourage the fighters to keep on fighting and to attract new recruits for the guerrilla warfare. The religious prayer used in the chorus lines can be said on nonreligious occasions. Since Somalia is a predominantly Muslim country, almost everybody knows common prayer lines. Usually the recitation of such lines at meetings and other gatherings creates an atmosphere of unity and cohesiveness. As a rule, whenever the name of Allah and his prophet are mentioned, everybody stops and repeats it. Thus it serves as a way of attracting people to listen to the intended message conveyed by the soloist. Here are a few lines from the poem by Allah-Amin:

*Allahu musali wasalim alaa Habibi Mohamed alayhi salaam*  
 O brothers, fight and put your swords in their big bellies.  
*Allahu musali wasalim alaa Habibi Mohamed alayhi salaam*  
 Take up arms and burn your enemies, Allah will reward you

*Allahu musali wasalim alaa Habibi Mohamed alayhi salaam*  
Muslim or non-Muslim, you have the right to fight if oppressed.  
*Allahu musali wasalim alaa Habibi Mohamed alayhi salaam*

One of the most interesting features about Allah-Amin's performances before large public gatherings is the participation of the audience. I have been told by a relative of mine, who witnessed some of the occasions on which Allah-Amin performed their poetry, that such meetings were electrified by the songs and clapping, as well as by the cries of the listeners. On one occasion when the poem to encourage people to fight was recited, the audience were singing the chorus lines and some of them were shouting encouraging words such as *waa sidaa, sidaa weeye* ("that is it, that is the way it should be"). But when a poem built around a curse, like the above, is performed, the reaction and the participation of the audience may take a different form. Usually, if people are in accord with the sentiment of a curse or a prayer, they will say something to make it more effective. In this context, I think the audience would participate in the condemnation of their enemy by saying something like "Amen, amen" after each line that represents a curse. Recitations of this kind would be very effective when the audience can relate to the content; such occasions are identified by a close relationship between the performer and the audience. The Allah-Amin Women's Group has managed to perform before unusually large audiences, made possible only because of the circumstances of the civil war. Their poetry has played an important social and political function in the lives of their listeners.

During 1990, the Somali National Movement captured the whole of the northwest region from the army and supporters of Siad Barre, who was finally overthrown in Mogadishu at the beginning of 1991. In May of that year, the independent Republic of Somaliland was declared and a new interim government was formed. This new government did not include a single woman. Yet again, women, who constitute more than fifty percent of the general population, were ignored. To add insult to injury, more and more restrictions are now imposed on women in Somaliland by the Islamic fundamentalists who gained strength during the years of the civil war. As far as I know, Allah-Amin are not currently active. The restrictions imposed on women in Somaliland have sadly led to a termination of this group's pioneering work. Most of the Somali women I met are unhappy about the way they believe they have been used by men in different

struggles. Men have been willing to have women as partners in the crucial times when their participation was needed, but they seek to exclude women from sharing in the fruits of these struggles.

## **Conclusion**

Somali women's poetry plays a fundamental role in shaping society, educating children, conveying messages in political affairs, and raising consciousness. Over the years women have been involved in struggles for land, liberation, and freedom from oppression. They have not only participated physically in such struggles, but have also taken a major part in the cultural struggle and the "war of words" by composing poetry and other forms of literature, as the conflict demanded. However, their poetry did not attract much publicity and they consequently did not receive the recognition they deserved. This neglect was mainly due to the fact that they were largely ignored by the male memorizers, who have paid no attention to female artists in the past and continue to do so in the present.

In recent years, poems by female artists have reached a wider audience through radio. However, the stations concerned were selective and partial in the poetry they broadcast. The national radio run by the government was interested only in poetry in praise of the government and its policies, while the opposition radio was interested only in poetry denigrating the state and supporting the armed struggle against the government. Having said that, it is indisputable that this medium has provided an outlet for women to publicize their poetic compositions. Clearly there is a role for non-partisan radio stations in assisting the dissemination process. The Somali Section of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has been instrumental here. During the last few years the Somali Section has been regularly broadcasting poetry and song on a wide range of subjects by new and unknown as well as established female artists.

The written Somali script has helped a great deal in recording and preserving oral literature. But the scholars and traditionalists involved in this work in the past have paid very little attention to women's poetry, particularly that treating the themes of politics, nationalism, war, and civil strife.

It can be said that Somali society still has no place for female

memorizers and reciters. Potential memorizers and reciters find themselves severely restricted by a male-dominated patriarchal society that continues to trivialize women's cultural expressions. Somalia remains largely a pastoral nomadic society; a female memorizer traveling alone would not be tolerated.

However, there are other ways women can avoid this vicious circle. Female artists can follow the footsteps of Habiba Haji Aden and record their poetry on cassette. These cassettes can then be distributed both inside and outside the country to reach the ever-expanding Somali diaspora. I would also suggest, in the future, that women seek as much publicity and circulation as possible. They must become involved in the work of recording and writing poetry specifically by women, making use of the written Somali script. Female traditionalists, scholars, and writers will, I believe, be more effective in recording and transmitting poetry by women. Given the history of indifference and hostility from men, a female facilitator will hopefully offer a more sympathetic and understanding ear to the work. Until these important links are forged and alternative forms of dissemination found, female poetry will continue largely unheard and the voice of Somali women will remain silent.

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