

On the Concept of “Definitive Text” in Somali Poetry

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Introduction: Concept of “Definitive Text”

The concept of text is one central to the study of literature, both oral and written. During the course of the Literature and Performance workshops organized by the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for Asian and African Literatures, the word “text” has been used widely and in relation to various traditions from around the world. Here I shall consider the concept of text and specifically what I refer to as “definitive text” in Somali poetry. I contend that the definitive text is central to the conception of *maanso* poetry in Somali and is manifest in a number of ways. I look at aspects of poetry that are recognized by Somalis and present these as evidence of “the quality of coherence or connectivity that characterizes text” (Hanks 1989:96). The concept of text understood here is, therefore, that of an “individuated product” (*ibid.*:97). Qualitative criteria both extra- and intratextual will be presented to support this conception. On the intratextual side, I, like Daniel Mario Abondolo, take “inspiration from the intrinsic but moribund, or dead and warmed-over, metaphor of *text*, i.e. ‘that which has been woven, weave’ (cf. texture) and see in texts a relatively high degree of internal interconnectedness via multiple non-random links” (2001:6). This inspiration is rooted in Western European language, but I find strong resonance in “Samadoon” by Cabdulqaadir Xaaji Cali¹ (1995: ll. 147-52; trans. in Orwin 2001a:23):

¹ In this paper I shall use the Somali spelling of names unless I am referring to an author who has published under an anglicized spelling of his or her name. For the reader unfamiliar with the Somali orthography most sounds are pronounced more or less as in English apart from the following: *c* is the voiced pharyngeal fricative, the ‘ayn of Arabic; *x* is used for the voiceless pharyngeal fricative; *q* is used for the uvular stop, which may be pronounced voiced or voiceless according to context; *kh* is the voiceless uvular fricative (only found in Arabic loanwords); and *dh* is the voiced retroflex plosive.

*Iyo doonnanaystaye dabuub duugleh hadhitaanka
Iyo seben dawaaddeed khad taan qun ula daaweystey
Nudantayaan dacfaray saabintiyo dabaqyo seesaasha
Iyo tay digrii lagu helyey hidin digtuuraadda
Iyo taan hoggeed duur xulleba daadshey humintiisa
Waataan daabicin baryo ‘e maanta iyo deelka*

my poetic engagement the verse long lasting
that will remain whose ink I befriended
I mastered plaiting it as a wicker basket
with its lid and holder
the one awarded a degree and even a doctorate
whose every metaphoric hole I learned to stitch
I’ve not made it public these last few days
but now today and ‘d’²

On the extratextual side, arguments relating to composition, performance, memorization, and the use of writing will be presented with a view to contributing to the discussion of issues dealt with in the Literature and Performance workshops. In support of these extratextual issues I shall also consider some intratextual characteristics with a view to contributing more widely to discourse on the concept of text and literary experience in general.

The Somali concepts will be presented through a consideration of the distinction between two types of poetry: *maanso* and *hees*.³ The contrasting characteristics of these two types of poetry do, I believe, provide strong evidence for assuming that Somalis have, and have had for some time, the concept of a definitive text. Of course, in doing this I do not pretend to be telling the Somalis what they know already. Rather, in presenting the discussion in this way, I wish to show that I am not dealing with a conception based on the written word and imposed upon the material by a Western academic but with a concept intrinsic to the Somali understanding of *maanso*.

² This translation is printed here as in Orwin 2001a, where reasons for the typography may be found. The “d” here refers to the alliterative sound and is thus a reference to the poem itself.

³ Note that the term *hees* used here is its “traditional” usage. There is a type of poetry that in general is called *hees*, or more specifically *hees casri* (“modern *hees*”) that we shall discuss later.

Features Common to All Somali Poetry⁴

All poetry in Somali, whether *maanso* or *hees*, is both metrical and alliterative. The metrical system in Somali is a fascinating, quantitative system in which there is a large number of patterns, each type of poetry following a particular one. The units patterned in Somali meter are vowels and consonants. The system as a whole is complex and beyond the scope of this article, so an example of a metrical pattern is presented here, namely the pattern used for *gabay* poetry of which the poem above by Cabdulqaadir is an example. In the following template the symbol \cup indicates a position that must be filled by a short vowel syllable, and the symbol $\underline{\cup\cup}$ indicates a position that must be filled by either a long vowel or two short vowel syllables. The vertical line indicates the caesura found in the *gabay*, and the bracketed short vowel syllable at the beginning indicates an optional anacrusis.

(\cup) $\underline{\cup\cup}$ $\underline{\cup\cup}$ \cup $\underline{\cup\cup}$ $\underline{\cup\cup}$ \cup $\underline{\cup\cup}$ | $\underline{\cup\cup}$ \cup $\underline{\cup\cup}$ $\underline{\cup\cup}$ \cup

Further to the patterning of vowels, there must be two long vowels in the second part of the line, and there is a constraint on syllable-final consonants and the types of consonants that may occur between the two short vowel syllables when any position of the type $\underline{\cup\cup}$ (other than the first) is rendered by two syllables.⁵

All Somali poetry is also alliterative. That is, in each poem, each line or half-line, according to the genre, contains a word beginning with the alliterative sound. Such words must be ones with some lexical content, that

⁴ The term “poetry” here is being used without further discussion. Suffice it to say that there are linguistic and extra-linguistic features of utterances that disassociate such utterances from general discourse and that, having been disassociated, can be named as *gabay*, *heesta kebedda*, and so on. The term poetry in English has no precise analogy in Somali, but I feel that its use here does not detract from the arguments I present.

⁵ For further information on these matters see, among others, Johnson 1996 (and further references therein including those to the work of Cabdullaahi Diiriye Guuleed, with whom Johnson worked closely on these matters), Banti and Giannattasio 1996, Orwin 2001b, and Maxamed 1976 (Maxamed wrote other articles on metrics after this one, which I regard as the most important; for further references to his work see Orwin 2001b and Lamberti 1986:61-62). Aside from published sources, my own knowledge of Somali metrics was deepened by working in Hargeisa in 2001 with Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac “Gaariye,” to whom I am grateful.

is, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or verbs. There are some cases where alliteration may be changed or in which it is not used at all, but these are not often found and do not affect the arguments made here.

The Distinction Between *Maanso* and *Hees*

The terms *maanso* and *hees* refer to two categories of Somali poetry; each individual type of poem in Somali may be said to belong to the category of *maanso* or that of *hees*. To help the reader in the forthcoming discussion, we might initially describe *maanso* as poetry whose composer is known, which is composed prior to performance and must be presented verbatim. On the other hand, *hees* (apart from modern *hees*, on which see below) is poetry that is generally performed in association with work or dance; the composers of *hees* are not generally known and there is not the expectation of verbatim performance. The reader may wish to consult the table below for further information at this stage. The distinction has been discussed in the literature on Somali poetry. As early as 1905, J. W. C. Kirk hints at the difference when he divides “songs” into “Gerar, Gabei, and Hes” (170). B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis (1964) divide the poems in their book into three types, presenting them in different sections: classical poetry, traditional, and modern songs.⁶ Although they do not use the terms *maanso* and *hees* specifically, the distinction they make may be couched in those terms and the types of poetry placed in their categories recognized in terms of *maanso* and *hees* by Somalis. The *gabay*, the *jiifto*, and the *geeraar* are described as “classical” and as being “composed as conscious and studied works of poetic art which, if well received, win lasting fame for their authors” (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964:47). Of the *buraambur*, a type of poetry composed only by women,⁷ they state: “The place of the *buraambur* is somewhere between the three ‘classical’ types already described, and the lighter and less elaborate poems” (*ibid.*:49). Equally their treatment of the *heello* and modern *hees* reflects the status of these, which will be discussed in more detail below. The traditional *hees* they describe as “dance and work songs” (*ibid.*:51): “The words of these songs are simple and lack the imagery

⁶ They also have a section on religious poetry in Arabic. There is religious poetry in Somali also, but this is a category that I shall not deal with here. I have written on religious poetry elsewhere (2001c); see also Kapteijns and Mariam Omar Ali 1996 and Abdisalam Yassin Mohamed 1977.

⁷ Apart from very few examples, which are very specific and will not concern us here.

found in the “classical” poems, while the lines vary greatly in length and are few in number. Their authorship is seldom known, and most of them appear to be of considerable antiquity.” In a later work (1985), Andrzejewski used another way of presenting verbal art, coining the terms “time-bound” and “time-free,” with the first term referring to “items which can in some way be placed on the time scale, and the second . . . those which cannot.” His “time-bound” category coincides to a large extent with *maanso*, as is evident when he says (1985:339):⁸ “Poems within the time-bound stream have an important distinctive characteristic; their reciters are expected to memorize them verbatim, as accurately as possible, avoiding any improvisations or deletions, and are also bound by custom to give the name of the original oral author before each recital.”

A further influential categorization was made by John William Johnson (1974:26-46) who coined the term “miniature genres,” referring to a group of poetry types that are associated with dance and that are “employed most often by youth in circumstances where youth are to be found” (28). He discusses these types in relation to the development of the *heello* to which we shall return below.

Said Sheikh Samatar mentions the distinction as follows (1982:74): “Somalis divide their poetry into two general categories: poetry (*maanso*) and song (*hees* or *heello*). *Hees* are modern songs and have their origins roughly in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, while *maanso* is a more traditional form whose roots fade, as do other genres in the literature, into the penumbra of unrecorded times.” Here he restricts the term *hees* to the modern variety, which developed out of the *heello* (see below) and does not discuss the work and dance songs, the traditional *hees*.⁹ Thus the way he presents the distinction, while not analogous to the way I am presenting it, does not refute what I state here.

The two most extensive published discussions of *maanso* and *hees* are by Ahmed Adan Ahmed and Axmed Cali Abokor. Ahmed Adan states that (1984:333): “Andrzejewski and Lewis classify *Maanso* according to form. This is basically the same approach that will be utilized here.” This is a reference to Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964:46): “The Somali classify their

⁸ In the same work (339) he also divides Somali poetry into the following periods: the Golden Era (the pre-colonial period), the Era of Fire and Embers (1899-1944), the Era of the Lute (1944-69), and the New Era (from 1969).

⁹ Said Sheikh Samatar also uses the “function” of a poem as a classificatory device when, for example, he states that he “wish[es] to limit the remainder of the discussion to three classical genres which are of vital concern to this study: the diatribe, the provocation and the curse” (1982:74).

poems into various distinct types, each of which has its own specific name. It seems that their classification is mainly based on two prosodic factors: the type of tune to which the poem is chanted or sung, and the rhythmic pattern of the words.” However, it must be said that Andrzejewski and Lewis also state (*ibid.*:47) that “in addition to their distinctive prosodic features, types of Somali poems are further differentiated by their average length, their diction and style, and their range of subject matter; and while some poems are accompanied by hand-clapping or drumming, others are always recited without any accompaniment at all.” Returning to Ahmed Adan, in addition to the *gabay*, *geeraar*, *jiifto*, and *buraambur*, he also includes in the *maanso* category the *wiglo* and *guurow*. In this he is following the clear categorization presented by Sheekh Jaamac, who includes *masafo*¹⁰ in his group of seven *maanso* types.¹¹ Ahmed Adan further states of the *heello* that it is “now the most utilized genre of *Maanso* throughout Somalia” (1984:335). Thus for him *heello* is definitely a *maanso* genre and one would assume consequently that modern *hees* would also be.¹² Interestingly, Sheekh Jaamac does not include *heello* or modern *hees* in his classification, which is divided up into *maanso* and *hees*—the latter of which is for him is just *hees hawleed* and *hees cayaareed*, “work song” and “dance song,” respectively. He gives good concise definitions of these two types of *hees* (Jaamac 1974:iv):

Hees hawleed waa heeska hawsha lagu qabto, hawshaasu hawl
xoolaad ha ahaato ama hawl farsamo ha ahaatee.

Hees cayaareedna waa heeskii sacab ama jaanta loo tumo ama
durbaan loo garaaco oo looga jeedo farax, maaweelo iyo madaddaalo iyo
wixii la mid ah.

Work song is the song to which work is undertaken, whether that
work is with livestock or handicraft.

¹⁰ The *masafo* and *jiifto* are very closely related types. See Banti and Giannattasio 1996:89 and Orwin 2001b:104-5 for some further details.

¹¹ 1974:iv. Sheekh Jaamac also mentions the possibility of other *maanso* types (1974:v): “Haddaba haw malayn inay intaas ku koobantahay. La arkee inay jiraan kuwa aannaan aqoon ama aanaan maqal” (“Though do not think that it [*maanso*] is restricted to that. It might be seen that there are those of which I do not know and have not heard”).

¹² Note that at the time of publication of his article, and I assume at the time of writing, the use of *heello* had declined and modern *hees* was the most popular form of *maanso*. It may be that he was using the terms somewhat interchangeably.

And dance song is the song with which clapping or footstamping is done, or for which a drum is beaten and which is intended for expressing happiness, amusement, entertainment, and so on.

Axmed Cali Abokor provides yet a further slant to this issue (1993:19):

Each genre has its own aesthetic and social function, but some are regarded as higher in status than others. In this regard Somali oral poetry, particularly the northern pastoral poetry, is generally divided into two categories, classical and modern. Classical poetry is older and has a unified scansion system within each genre. The modern poem, called *heello*, resembles Indian song patterns, from which it is derived, and is not the concern of the present volume [*sic*].

Classical poetry he further divides into *maanso* and *heeso*¹³ categories (*idem*): “The *maanso* category, denoting serious poetry, includes the genres of *gabay*, *geeraar* and *jiifto*, all composed by male adults and all dealing with important political and social matters.” So here he contrasts the modern *heello* and subsequent modern *hees* with “classical” poetry, which, for him and unlike Andrzejewski and Lewis, is all poetry that is not “modern” in form, that is, not that which can be described as modern *hees* or *heello*. However, within his classical poetry he includes the *maanso* and *hees* categories. The most recent discussion on *maanso* in particular is that of D. Morin (1999). Setting the discussion of Somali poetry within the wider context of detailed discussion of other literary traditions in the eastern Horn of Africa, Morin presents the *maanso* as being defined primarily by its illocutionary intent (1999:133): “Le *maanso* définit le format d’un discours uniquement orienté vers la restauration des droits du groupe, ce que Zaborski a justement appelé sa ‘structure profonde’” (“*Maanso* specifies the format of a mode of discourse that is oriented solely toward the restoration of the rights of the group, something that Zaborski has rightly called its ‘deep structure’”). He presents the *maanso* very much in its social context and sees its creator, the poet, as follows (*ibid.*:135): “Le *gabayaa* officiel n’est pas le demiurge créateur, détenteur du Verbe, instrument d’un quelconque dévoilement du Sens, mais un acteur engagé dans le combat collectif, dont le discours est instrumentalisé par le clan” (“The official poet is not a creative demiurge, the keeper of the word, the medium for revealing meaning, rather an actor engaged in the collective struggle in which the discourse is an instrument of the whole clan”). We do not have the space to

¹³ *Heeso* is the plural of *hees*; the plural of *maanso* is *maansooyin*.

go into all of Morin’s arguments and ideas, but the interested reader is encouraged to read his work as it provides much detailed insight into poetry in the eastern Horn of Africa.¹⁴

From this review of the literature we can see that there is certainly agreement on a fundamental distinction within Somali poetry between *maanso* and *hees* and also that the modern *hees* is a category that does not seem to quite fit in very easily; I shall return to this matter below. Lidwien Kapteijns and Miriam Omar Ali reflect upon the differences in the ways people have regarded the categorization when they state (1999:3):¹⁵

The reader must know of four fundamental ways of distinguishing oral texts from each other: (1) by genre, (e.g., whether the texts are poems or prose narratives); (2) by whether Somali society considers the genre to which a text belongs “prestigious” or “nonprestigious”; (3) by whether a text belongs to what Andrzejewski has called the “time-free” or “time-bound” stream; and finally (4) by period.

By oral texts Kapteijns includes folktales and proverbs as well as poetry. She does not mention form specifically as a means of determining classification (or as a mark of classification), but mentions the “prestigious” versus the “nonprestigious” types, thus highlighting this dichotomy as a basis for categorization over form. As we have seen, the use of this perspective as a means of categorization is mentioned by others and is one of the most important factors when considering the difference between *maanso* and *hees*. But what exactly does it mean and how is that difference manifest?

Extratextual Characteristics of *Hees* and *Maanso*

Axmed’s *Somali Pastoral Worksongs* (1993) is the first major study of “traditional” *hees*,¹⁶ although in his book he concentrates only on work

¹⁴ It is important to mention here that Morin provides an etymology for the word *maanso* (1999:48): “Emprunté à l’arabe *manzūm*, pour désigner la poésie, le terme générique *maanso* envisage un vers mesuré (*miisaan* ou *hal-beeq* [sic]), symétrique, relevant d’une équation numérique” (“Borrowed from Arabic *mansuum* to mean poetry, the generic term *maanso* implies a measured verse (*miisaan* or *hal-beeq* [sic]), symmetrical and a matter of numerical counting”). NB: “*hal-beeq*” should read *hal-beeg*.

¹⁵ This last categorization is based on Andrzejewski’s ideas (1985:339) on Era of Fire and Embers and so on (see n. 8 above).

¹⁶ See also Said A. W. 1992 for a collection of work songs.

songs (*hees hawleed*) and does not discuss dance songs (*hees ciyaareed*), which still await proper study.¹⁷ In his book he presents the most extensive discussion of the characteristics that distinguish the traditional *hees* from *maanso*, presenting points we have mentioned above from the literature. In this section I shall describe the extratextual characteristics and expand on these with regard to what they tell us about the idea of definitive text.

The contrasts to be discussed may be conveniently, if a little simplistically, presented in the following table:

<i>Hees</i>	<i>Maanso</i>
Poetry of women and younger men	Poetry of older men
Lesser status	Higher status
Associated with work and dances	Associated with serious commentary
Unknown composer generally	Known composer always
Open to change reasonably freely	Memorized and recited verbatim
Regarded more as entertainment	Regarded as more socially important
Generally short poems	Generally longer poems than <i>heeso</i>
Individual <i>heeso</i> may be joined together in a single performance	One poem is recited on its own at a time
A large number of constituent genres	Fewer constituent genres

As we can see from this table, the perception of the two categories revolves very much around the notion of status. *Hees* poems are performed by those who are politically and socially less powerful, namely women and younger men,¹⁸ whereas *maanso* poems are generally composed and performed by older men (as I understand it, this normally means men older than around their mid-thirties although in urban areas there are young people composing poems that are very much *maanso*). It may be assumed that it is the status of the person composing and/or performing that leads to the types of poems themselves being regarded as of greater or lesser status. The fact that *heeso* are associated with particular work and dance activities that are not undertaken by older men is also a corollary of the link between the status of the people who perform them and the status of the poems themselves, and shows the way in which the categorization is bound to status within the

¹⁷ For some information on some of the dance *hees* types, see Johnson 1974:26-46 mentioned below.

¹⁸ The precise status of children's songs, although obviously not *maanso*, is something that still needs further investigation. At present I shall simply assume them to be part of the traditional *hees* category, which is my current understanding.

society. This contrast is reinforced, I suggest, by the way in which men perform *maanso* poetry. Whereas with *hees* the performance is generally accompanied by activity, whether work or dance, the performance of *maanso* traditionally involves nothing other than the reciter and the audience. The manner of recitation is also significant. The performance of *maanso* is not something to which the reciter brings an affective contribution; rather the recital is such that the words are allowed to speak for themselves. This is not to say that a good clear voice or a reciter who is particularly adept at the traditional chant, known as the *luuq*, is not prized.¹⁹ But I would say a good reciter adds nothing more than a good frame adds to a painting. It is the words that are of primary importance, as is the painting rather than the frame. In other words, the nature of the act of performing *maanso* is something that foregrounds the words themselves. It dissociates them from any particular activity, even to the extent of dissociating them from the performer, who is merely the vehicle for their presentation: in essence, he (or sometimes she) brings nothing more to the performance than the clear presentation of the words.

Knowledge of the composer is also related to the issue of status. Although *heeso* must have been composed by individual artists at some time in the past, they have become part of the heritage of the people as a whole.²⁰ They may be performed without mentioning anything of their compositional context and, as part of this general heritage, may be changed, something which is not possible with *maanso*. When the latter are performed the composer must be acknowledged and the reciter must present the poem verbatim, without change. It is these features that are central, from the extratextual point of view, to the notion of definitive text in *maanso*.

The idea of verbatim memorization has long been acknowledged in the literature on Somali poetry and is a feature that caused some controversy in the 1960s when Andrzejewski made it known to the wider, nascent world of oral literature studies at a time when the oral-formulaic theory was enthusiastically being hailed by some as defining oral poetry.²¹ Ruth Finnegan (1977:73ff.) provides a useful discussion of this situation and, following a quotation from Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964:45-46), concludes (75): “In this case, then, memorisation is indeed involved, and the

¹⁹ That is, when the *luuq* is used, which is not always the case nowadays.

²⁰ This is not to say that new *heeso* are no longer composed; see Johnson 1995 for some examples.

²¹ The major work on oral theory is Lord 1960.

concept of a ‘correct’ version is locally recognised.” In other words, she accepts the idea of a “correct” version, that which I am calling a definitive text here. Of course, given the imperfect nature of human memory, one does find variations among performances of *maanso* poems, but these do not detract from the concept of a definitive text. Andrzejewski has, perhaps more accurately or more pragmatically, called this feature of *maanso* poetry “the goal of verbatim memorization” and says of it: “Poetry reciters were expected to memorize and reproduce the oral text of a poem word for word; to delete, to substitute or to add any new material was discouraged. As a concession to the frailty of human memory some degree of deviation from this rule was acceptable provided that it was not attributable to the wilful intention of the reciter” (1982:74).²² We see here that it is the concept that a poem *should* be recited verbatim that is the most important idea. In other words, the fact that variations may be found does not detract from the central concept of the goal of verbatim memorization, which implies the presence of the conception of a definitive text in the minds of the Somalis.

The fact that the composer of the poem must always be acknowledged supports this line of reasoning. Any definitive text is the product of an individual who has created that text and with whom the text is forever associated through what Said Sheikh Samatar calls “an unwritten copyright law, no less strict than those observed in literate societies” (1982:64). Said amusingly goes on to describe a situation he witnessed when a reciter claimed some lines as his own when they were not. This led to the reciter leaving “town in a hurry rather than linger around to face the laughter and ridicule which were certain to greet him upon discovery of his unsuccessful antics” (*ibid.*:67). This graphically illustrates the point and shows the seriousness with which this “unwritten copyright law” is maintained by the Somalis. Related to this feature is the fact that *maanso* poems are recited as separate events rather than, as with *heeso*, a number of poems being possibly sung within a single, continuous performance.

We see from these extratextual characteristics that the concept of the definitive text of a *maanso* poem is something well established in Somali cultural knowledge. I shall now go on to present some intratextual characteristics, which I suggest further support the notion of definitive text.

²² See also Said S. S. 1982:73, Johnson n.d., and Orwin 2000:199-200 for some further discussion on these matters.

Intratextual Characteristics

In an earlier study (Orwin 2000) I presented a practical stylistic analysis of a poem by the poet Axmed Ismaciil Diiriye “Qaasim” in which I showed that various aspects of language were used in such a way as to mould an aesthetic object that thereby communicated its “message” in a powerful and engaging way. I suggested that the poem presented itself as a coherent whole that opened with a metaphor embodying the theme of the poem and ended with a sense of resolution and closure. The whole was held together in a dynamic way by the “relatively high degree of internal interconnectedness via multiple non-random links,” to repeat Abondolo (2001:6; see above). This sort of poetic “texture” is something that I have found present in other *maanso* poems and, although indigenous critical discourse does not articulate such features in the way I did in the analysis of Qaasim’s poem, we do see a reflection of recognition of this type of structure present in Somali critical discourse on poetry. This is the idea of a *maanso* poem being constructed in three parts: *arar*, *dhexdhexaad*, and *gebaggebo*, which we might translate as “introduction,” “middle section,” and “end,” respectively.²³ The expectation of these parts of a *maanso* poem implies the expectation of “totality or coherence,” a convention recognized by Jonathan Culler (1975:171) as characteristic of Western European lyric poetry. I am suggesting therefore that the way in which language is used in a *maanso* poem is such that it underpins the idea of it being a coherent and individuated definitive text. When this is considered along with the fact that each *maanso* poem is inherently associated with the composer who wrought that text, we see the bases for the concept of a definitive text.

The sense that a poem is a coherent whole in its own right is reflected in the way in which a poem may have a “life” away from the immediate context of its composition. Said Sheikh Samatar refers to this phenomenon when he observes that Somalis see “their verse in two senses: the immediate and the transcendental. While a poem commends itself for its sense of the immediate and the relevant, it derives its enduring validity from another quarter: from the fact of its permanency and its comforting qualities in an impermanent and uncomfortable environment” (1982:58). He is stating that, for the Somalis, a *maanso* poem can be that “individuated product” described by Hanks and be so to the extent that it can be meaningful not only in its original context, but in contexts further away in both time and space.

²³ Much of what I have learned about this critical discourse has been from Maxamed Cabdullahi Riiraash, a broadcaster and connoisseur of poetry in Djibouti, to whom I am grateful.

When considering this approach to textual form in light of the distinction between *maanso* and *hees*, I see interesting potential similarities with the concept of autonomy of Western tonal art music discussed by D. Clarke (1996). Clarke defines musical autonomy as “the notion of music emancipated from the service of song, dance or ritual, and thus able to be apostrophised as something possessing an essence and objectivity of its own” (14). Within this essence and objectivity, meaning is manifest through the “internal discursive process” (*idem*), an idea he derives from what he terms music’s *discursive function*, which he in turn bases on the famous *poetic function* of language proposed by Roman Jakobson, whose fundamental notion is summed up in his famous *scriptum* (1960:358): “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” In this way a piece of music (Clarke 1996:16)

might evoke relationships *in absentia* with similar material from other work But through the more powerful rhetoric of its internal discursive processes, the work claims this dimension of significance for itself as part of the temporal unfolding of its own structure. Paradigmatic relationships now draw their significance primarily from within the work, and only secondarily from within a broader stylistic vocabulary.

I suggest that in Somali *maanso* poetry it is possible that a similar process is found. Here the broader stylistic vocabulary is the language of poetry: the metrical and alliterative language and the use of imagery specific to the pastoralist way of life and its associated meanings. Within a specific *maanso* poem, however, these stylistic requirements are not simply followed because they must be, but are appropriated by the poet and used aesthetically to the extent that the “paradigmatic relationships now draw their significance primarily from within the work” (*idem*). This conception also sums up the way I have described language as being used in Qaasim’s poem (Orwin 2000). Taking this line of thought further, Clarke presents the internal discursive process as part of the autonomy of music. Is it possible that the presence of the “internal discursive process” in Somali *maanso* poetry is such that we may say similar things of it, especially since it is performed away from the service of any particular activity such as those to which *heeso* are performed? Note here the use of the word *perform*, since *maanso* poems must be understood as being originally composed within a specific context from which they derive their “sense of the immediate and the relevant” (Said S. S. 1982:58, quoted above). In other words, *maanso* poems may have a quality of autonomy similar to that of Western tonal music.

The attribution of autonomy is not to deny the essential link with the social, political (in the widest sense of the word), and cultural context in which any *maanso* poem is *composed* (a point made by Clarke in relation to music also; see 1996:17). Rather, autonomy is a quality inherent in a *maanso* poem, a quality that allows it to potentially transcend (to use Said’s term) both the original context of its composition and the related context-specific expectations of listeners who are present at the time and place of its original composition and performance. In order for such transcendence to take place, the *maanso* poem needs to be a self-contained entity, in other words a definitive text. I do not wish to push the analogy with autonomy in Western tonal music too far since the performers of this music unquestionably bring an affective contribution to their performance, and the writing of a score is important in both the process and presentation of the composition of much of this music (see below on writing and Somali poetry). This discussion could be couched in more literary terms based on ideas from a number of sources, but there is not the space to go into this at present. I bring these thoughts on autonomy into the discussion because music is a heard form of cultural expression, as is Somali poetry, and I feel that pursuing such possible similarities, in the spirit of the AHRB Centre’s Literature and Performance workshops, may help us toward a better understanding.

The Development of Modern *Hees*

I have mentioned modern *hees* in this discussion, along with its somewhat ambiguous situation relative to the *maanso* versus *hees* categorization. Modern *hees* developed from the *heello* type of poetry, which itself developed out of *belwo*. The history of the *belwo* and the *heello* has been extensively treated by John William Johnson (1974), who discusses the important influences on the development of the *heello*. First, there was the urban setting in which it was performed and appreciated, a setting furthermore that saw men and women join together to perform and enjoy the poems, something frowned upon by some who in turn composed poetry against the new form (see, for example, *The Evils of the Balwo* in Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964:151-53). However, the form proved particularly popular and, after initially being mostly love poetry, it began to reflect the political aspirations of the younger generation of urban Somalis; in the 1950s the *heello* became the main vehicle for political comment in the struggle for independence. Its popularity was also enhanced by the fact that

this poetry was performed to the new strains of Somali instrumental music²⁴ and was communicated through the new medium of radio. Remember that instrumental music had not been used by the pastoralists, apart from the use of (often makeshift) drums.²⁵ The *heello* was thus a type of poetry that was performed in a novel manner, became the preserve of the younger generation, and to an extent shared *hees* characteristics. However, the lyrics were formulated by known composers and could not be changed; thus, from the “textual” point of view, this poetry displays characteristics of *maanso*. As the *heello* developed into modern *hees*, different meters were used by poets, including non-prestigious meters of traditional *hees*, work songs, and dance songs. Maxamed Xaaji Dhamac “Gaariye,” for example, used the meter of a children’s song, *maroodi cadhoole* (“Elephant with Tusks”), in a poem on the very serious topic of nuclear weapons and the cold war.²⁶ Despite these traditional *hees*-like stylistic features, the poems can be long and are often carefully crafted to the extent that they display the qualities of the “internal discursive process” mentioned in the previous section. Thus we see in modern *hees*, along with certain characteristics of traditional *hees*, the strong presence of characteristics of *maanso*. The features that have led me to assume the concept of definitive text in *maanso* are all present, and so one may conclude that the idea of definitive text is as much a concept associated with modern *hees* as it is with types of poetry recognized as *maanso* before the development of modern *hees*. The fact that modern *hees* demonstrates a multifaceted identity leads us to understand the somewhat varying way in which it has been categorized by others, as mentioned in the literature review above.

Use of Writing in Somali Poetry

The use of writing in the composition and publication of Somali poetry is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although the language was first written in an official script only in 1972, a number of people, both Somalis

²⁴ This new vehicle had developed quickly after the initial impetus of the founder of modern Somali instrumental music, Cabdullaahi Qarshe (see Abdirahman 2001).

²⁵ In the central and coastal regions of the Somali territories the *shareero* had been, and continues to be, employed (see Giannattasio 1988:160).

²⁶ See Orwin and Maxamed 1997:95-96 for details of this metrical pattern and an extract of another modern *hees* by Xassan Cilmi.

and non-Somalis, had used writing prior to this time. I shall not present a history of the use of writing in Somali here, but rather describe instances of the way in which it has been and continues to be employed both in transcription and in composition by Somalis.

One of the first books to appear following the adoption of the official writing system was the collection of poems composed by Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan and published by Sheekh Jaamac Cumar Ciise (Jaamac 1974). Prior to the publication of the book, Sheekh Jaamac had spent some 20 years collecting and transcribing the poem texts from a number of sources, all of which are listed in the volume (see xiv-xv). What is interesting from our perspective is that there seemed to be no notion that writing the poems down implied a loss of any sort. That is to say, the transcription was something that was not in any way problematic for the collector:²⁷ the poems were there, the people who knew the poems knew the definitive texts, and these could then simply be transformed from “oral definitive texts” into “written definitive texts.” The introspection and thought that have, quite rightly, gone into Western academe’s consideration of what it is to transcribe and how to properly transcribe was simply not an issue in this case. This is a particularly interesting example in that Sheekh Jaamac, although highly educated inside his own culture, had no Western-style education and came into contact with Western scholarship through his encounter with the anthropologist I. M. Lewis.²⁸ The transcription of poems

²⁷ As he mentions in his book, he originally wrote them down using the Arabic alphabet, and it was in 1972-73, with the help of Axmed Faarax Cali “Idaajaa,” that they were rendered in the new Somali script.

²⁸ Lewis wrote of this encounter (1999: “Afterword,” vi-vii):

One of my most fruitful encounters was with Aw Jama Umar Ise, who has become the justly celebrated oral historian of Sayyid Mohammed Abdile Hassan and his poetry (Ise 1974 [=Jaamac 1974]). When I first met him in Las Anod District in the 1950s, Aw Jama was a typical Somali “bush” *wadaad*, an itinerant sheikh of a somewhat fundamentalist disposition and extremely suspicious of me and my activities, moving as I did among the Dulbahante nomads, seeking information about their customs and institutions and writing down their genealogies. Like most un-Westernised Somalis whom I met, his initial assumption was that I was a British spy, and I found him somewhat menacing in early encounters I had with him. Some years later I met Sheikh Jama in Mogadishu and discovered that he had become a self-taught oral historian and was busy collecting the poetry of Sayyid Mohammed Abdile Hassan having received encouragement and equipment (a tape-recorder) from the much-respected commander of the Somali police force, General Mohammed Abshir (later imprisoned by his arch rival, President Siyad, and eventually one of the leaders of the Somali Salvation Democratic Front in the North Eastern Regions).

composed “orally” is something that also happens today, and I have met a number of poets, both old and young, who, although they compose their poems “orally,” see nothing wrong in the writing down of these poems. We may see this attitude as an indication of their conception of the poem as a definitive text independent of the medium through which the poem may be communicated: it is essentially the same artifact whether heard or read, spoken or written.

This independence of medium is something that is also evident in the way some people compose their poetry. Maxamed Ibraahim Warsame “Hadraawi,” perhaps the most well known and appreciated of living poets, always uses writing in the composition process, but still his poems, like all others, are *heard* by Somalis, not read. What is more, he does not remember the poems in his head, but reads them when performing them. This was also the case with Cabdulqaadir Xaaji Cali Xaaji Axmed,²⁹ who used writing in the composition of some of his poems. His poem *Samadoon* (see above) was one that I asked him about when I was translating it with his help (Orwin 2001a). He said that he had the idea for the poem after waking up one morning and that some of the imagery and general form of the poem were there; he then went on to use writing in composing the poem. The writing process included editing as he went along and after its completion. This editing process is well recognized in the “oral” composition process of *maanso* poetry. Another young poet, Cali Mooge Geeddi, told me in Djibouti in the summer of 1995 that when he had composed a poem he would recite it first to his wife, who would comment on it before he made it public. Although a young poet, he did not use writing in the composition process at all. What is interesting is that the forms of poetry composed with writing and those composed orally are essentially not different from one another. It is true that Hadraawi and other modern poets such as Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac “Gaarriye” did and still do use innovative forms in their poetry, particularly modern *hees*, but this is not something associated with writing; rather I suggest it is the product of the development of the modern *hees* as a form in its own right. The only possible sign of the impact of

Aw Jama explained to me that he had closely observed my ethnographic activities and, deciding that I was harmless, he had concluded that what I was doing was worthwhile, but could be done better by a native Somali speaker with knowledge of the religious background. I had thus inadvertently made a convert and we became friends and colleagues.

²⁹ A gifted young poet, Cabdulqaadir was a good friend and a patient teacher to me, for which I am grateful. Sadly, he died at the end of 2001.

writing in composition that I can see is the length of some of Hadraawi's recent poems. *Dabahuwan*, for example, is 803 lines long.³⁰ To summarize, then, we see that writing has had an impact on the practice of poetry of a few people and on the fact that “oral” poems can be written down, which “protects” them from the vagaries of human memory.³¹

We can see from this brief discussion that the use of writing has slipped into the overall practice of Somali *maanso* poetry unobtrusively. I suggest that this is a reflection of the concept of the definitive text. The Somalis already had this concept prior to the use of writing, and, as the concept is one that is not dependent on medium of communication, it allowed for writing to be easily adopted as simply another vehicle for the definitive text.

Conclusion

In this brief article I have presented arguments based on the way Somalis view their poetry. I hope to have established the presence of the concept of definitive text in Somali attitudes toward *maanso* poetry. I have looked at the extratextual attitudes toward *maanso* in contrast to those toward traditional *hees*. I have also presented, albeit very briefly, ideas pertaining to intratextual characteristics that support the concept of definitive text. These ideas have then been linked to the development of *heello* and modern *hees* and the use of writing in Somali poetry. By bringing in comparisons from Clarke's work on autonomy in Western tonal music, I hope to have shown that the idea of definitive text may be considered from a wider perspective than just the Somali and that comparative work may help to bring a deeper understanding of the creative use of language in performed verbal art, which is one of the aims of the Literature and Performance research project to which this article aims to be a contribution.

³⁰ The text of this poem can be found at: www.aftahan.com/hadraawi/dabahuwan.htm.

³¹ The act of writing, of course, does not legitimize a *maanso* text in its own right. The transcriber, just like the reciter, must be sure of the text he or she is writing down. Andrzejewski and Lewis, two very careful and trustworthy scholars, recognized the possibility that the texts they published might, upon further research, prove not to be recognized as definitive when they observed (1964:46): “Although great care has been taken in obtaining reliable versions, we make no claim that the texts given in this book should be considered as authoritative.”

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