

AFRICA

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Somali Oral Poetry and the Failed She-Camel Nation State: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Deelley Poetry Debate (1979–1980).

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The subject of this book is the Somali poem-chain or “poetry debate” the title of which, *Deelley*, refers to *daal*, or “d”, the sound in which the chain alliterates. Begun in 1979 by the late Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac “Gaariye” (1950–2012), this series of poems continues to be of great interest given that it distils some of the key issues of political and social discourse of the time in which it was composed, in particular the nation-state and the idea of clanism, or tribalism as it is referred to in this book. Two collections of this chain of poems have been published (Axmed Faarax Cali ‘Idaajaa’ and Ibraahim Cawad ‘Khoodi’ (eds), 2001, *Diiwaanka Maansadii Deelley* (studi somali 12), Rome: L’Harmattan Italia; and Boobe Yuusuf Ducaale (ed.), 2008, *Deelley: Saadaal Rumowday*, Bobe Publications, Hargeisa (printed Flamingo Printing Press, Addis Ababa), as has a critical comparison of these collections along with critical discussion of the poems (Ibraahin Yuusuf Axmed “Hawd”, 2012, *Gorfaynta Silsiladdii Deelley*, published by the author, Denmark). The chain still resonates in poetry today such as in a poem by Caasha Luul Maxamed on the issue of emigration from the Somali territories: “Decades ago, poets first stated the truth of this debate: / they devised a chain of poems, which we called the Deelley. / And I’ve drafted this poem, and I add it to the chain” (Caasha Lul Mohamud Yusuf, 2012, *Poems: Maansooyin*, (translated by Clare Pollard, Said Jama Hussein and Mohamed Xasan “Alto”), London: The Poetry Translation Centre).

In the book Ali Mumin Ahad considers the *Deelley* in the context not just of the political situation of the time, but the wider and historically deeper socio-political context of the Somali territories, specifically the discourse surrounding Somali identity with respect to nomadic pastoralism and settled agriculture. There has been discussion of this issue in the academic literature which is covered in the book, but what is important about his contribution is that he considers a discourse articulated wholly within Somali society in the Somali language.

Considering the *Deelley* in light of this, he develops his arguments with reference to the language and metaphors used in the chain. He shows how these derive from the nomadic-pastoralist background of the poetic tradition from which the poems stem and how little they engage with the experience of the agriculturalists. This is linked also to the absence of poets from an agriculturalist background and is summed up in this part of the Somali population undergoing “the cultural predominance of the hegemonic discourse of the national nomadic pastoralist society” (p. 283). Among other things, support for this is presented in his analysis of the metaphorical representation of the nation-state as the she-camel (hence the use in his title). The she-camel may be regarded as the most important notion to the nomadic-pastoralist Somalis given that animal’s vital role as a source of food (camel’s milk) during even the most arduous times of drought. It is also traditionally regarded as the most important form of wealth for the nomadic pastoralists. This notion has then been projected to the nation-state as sustaining the society and

has been used, according to the author, since the 1940s (p. 175). The proper name used generically and given to the camel in many such instances is Maandeeq, a compound word comprising *maan* (mind, intellect, intelligence) and *deeq* (generosity, a generous gift).

The book develops arguments in support of this thesis based on consideration of the poem-chain as a polytext and approaching it from the perspective of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis itself is presented in great detail with particular focus on the first three poems (by Gaarriye, Hadraawi and Idaajaa respectively). These are presented with a detailed analysis of how they relate to each other with respect to their presentation of the major themes. He provides detailed exposition of language use and the ways in which these reflect the attitudes of the poets and how subsequent poems pick these up and respond to them. The following chapter gives a detailed analysis of three metaphors (the *damal* tree, the male camel and the smouldering dung) which run throughout the chain showing how they are developed from one poem to the next in which they and related metaphors appear. This chapter in particular gives a sense of the development of the whole poem-chain and is the first such analysis of any such chain. All examples from the poems are in English translation with references to the poems as presented in Axmed and Ibraahim (eds) (2001).

The complex nature of the individual poems and the intertextuality among them leads to a dense discussion which needs to be followed with care as the book is read. However, the reward is insight into the nature not only of the discourse itself, but also the use of metaphor in Somali poetry generally and the way in which poetry plays a role in serious and influential articulation of thoughts and ideas within the society.

This is an important contribution to the study of Somali poetry and society as well as a major contribution to the study of poetry in wider social and political contexts in Africa and beyond.

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