

Radio Hargeysa and Somali Oral Poetry

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Radio broadcasting has played an important role in Somali political and social development as well as in the adaptation of the Somali language to modern needs. The transistor and the evolution of miniaturization processes in electrical engineering have made it possible for many peoples of the world including Somalis not only to purchase radios, but also to transport them easily from place to place, an especially important development for a predominantly nomadic population such as Somalia's.

But politics, social life, and language are not the only areas of Somali existence which have been influenced by the radio. Artistic developments in Somalia since the Second World War have also been greatly influenced by radio broadcasting.

Experiments with radio broadcasting began shortly after the expulsion of Italian forces from the British Somaliland Protectorate and from the Horn in general in 1941. Initially named Radio Kudu, the first station was established in 1943 with a 100-watt transmitter. In the following year, it was renamed Radio Somali, and the transmitter was increased to 600 watts. Receiving centers equipped with loudspeakers were established in several places, which became popular social gathering sites. Many Somalis assembled at these centers and listened to news broadcasts in Somali, edited from BBC releases. At these centers Somalis were exposed to Allied propaganda and new forms of oral art, particularly foreign songs. These later exerted a heavy influence on their own modern poetry.

The station in Hargeysa gradually increased its transmission power to five kilowatts by 1957. In 1955 receiving equipment for BBC relayed broadcasts was installed. By the late 1950s, less expensive and more portable radios were found in Somali-owned tea shops and homes.

During this early period of broadcasting in Somali, Radio Hargeysa clearly provided innovative programming. During this same period the modern poem, the *heello*, was being developed. These combined influences plus the political drive for independence, the development of the modern Somali theater, and the changing social consciousness of the day, particularly among women,* produce major changes in verbal art.

The modern Somali poem called *heello* is an outgrowth of an earlier genre called the *belwo* [or *balwo*]. These poems run four to eight lines in length and also include the *wiglo*, the *dhaanto*, and the *hirwo*. As a distinct and separate genre, the *belwo* first appeared in Somali society in the northern town of Boorame between the years 1943 and 1945. It spread rapidly, and by 1954 it had completely permeated the British Somaliland

Protectorate. It was also very popular in the other four Somalilands as well. Margaret Laurence remarks in her book, *A Tree for Poverty*, [1954/1970] that the "belwo and gabei appear to be the most popular types at the present time."

Unlike its nomadic-based sister genres, the *belwo* first appeared in urban areas. These genres appear to be differentiated by the melodies to which they are sung. Moreover, the inventor of the *belwo*, Cabdi Deeysi "Sinimo," was not a traditional nomadic herdsman, but a lorry driver and mechanic. The *belwo* in fact could be considered a cultural link between the pastoralist and urban Somali societies. Also unlike its sister genres, the *belwo* did not remain frozen in its structure and content but began to change soon after its emergence.

While dissemination of oral folklore in Somalia is surprisingly rapid — perhaps because of its nomadic context, the radio stations in Hargeysa and Muqdishu made it even faster. A broadcast poem spread quickly. And the new poems, *belwo* and *heello*, were played along with more prestigious classical genres almost from the beginning of Radio Hargeysa.

Radio also provided modern Somali poetry with new musical settings. Music was already part of the poetic tradition: in fact all Somali genres can be, but do not have to be, set to music. What was unique to the *heello* was the fact that each *heello* had its own; there was no melody for the entire genre.

With the coming of radio to Hargeysa, Somalis were exposed to Western, Arabian, and Indian music. These songs provided the model for the changing musical setting of the newly developing genre of *heello*.

By appearing on government radio, the *belwo* and *heello* appeared to have the tacit support of the political elite. This was extremely important, because the more conservative religious element in Somali society had originally opposed the *belwo* and the *heello*. The new *heello* became even more popular when the colonial government let the political implications hidden in the poems slip by uncensored.

A fourth influence from the radio station was perhaps the most radical of all. The very line structure of the new *belwo* and the resulting *heello* changed. Foreign musical models combined with the radio station policy of paying royalties for poems according to their length, causing the *belwo's* length to increase dramatically. *Belwo's* and *heello's* were practical for use on the air precisely because of their varying lengths. They could be used as "fillers" between other programs of differing lengths. Because longer poems made more money, line repetition became a systematic device.

Beginning with the simple repetition pattern of singing each line twice as the poem progressed, more and more complex forms eventually evolved. Structures developed in which couplets and triplets, as well as larger sets of lines ranging from four to six were repeated consecutively. Complication was added when differing combinations of these line set repetitions were

* Radio broadcasting, *heello* development, and the changing role of women are linked, for example, with the pioneering work of Khadija Cabdullaahi Dalays in the South and with Shamis Abokor "Guduudo Carwo" in the North. By first singing on the radio stations, both these women helped to establish the right of women to participate in the singing of *heello* and thus to participate in modern Somali social and political arenas. They began their radio careers in the early 1950s.

employed in the same poem. Even more complex patterns could be made from these basic repetition models when lines or line sets were repeated three and four times instead of the usual two.

It was undoubtedly the model of foreign music Somalis heard on their radio stations that provided a further device for lengthening the *heelo*. A refrain could be added to the end of each stanza, sometimes even sung by a chorus. To cite one example, a poem by Cali Sugulle composed in 1960 concerning the writing of the Somali language contained 134 lines altogether, but only 39 were unique. Ninety-five lines were repeats.

Finally, the radio stations in Somalia have exerted a much broader influence on the survival and composition of modern poetry by producing an economic basis for its performance. The stations required professional performers. Before the advent of radio, poetic composition on the Horn of Africa was, for the most part, nonprofessional. Now, with the coming of an organized and financed outlet for their abilities, the poet, the composer of music, the raconteur, and the musician could make a living wage executing their

various talents. Indeed, the addition of a paid radio orchestra in Muqdishu in 1955 and the eventual establishment of the Radio Artistes Association in 1968 bear witness to the professional atmosphere which the radio stations provided for the performance of modern poetry.

Today, the Somali Broadcasting Corporation, with stations in Hargeysa and Muqdishu, is joined by Somali language broadcasts in Djibouti, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Cairo, London, Moscow, and Rome. The influence of these stations on Somali artistic development, though perhaps not as dramatic as it once was, undoubtedly remains strong, for like their predecessor in Hargeysa, they provide an outlet for a large amount of poetry every year, and they continue to provide an economic and prestigious incentive to Somali composers and performers both at home and abroad. □

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The Development of Consciousness

A New Approach to Participatory Media

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Community developers, media planners, and people with varying political interests have long been intrigued with mass media's capacity to educate. In recent years cable television and video have given many more people the opportunity to raise and address issues that concern them.

However, media attention alone doesn't solve complex social and political problems. Community media projects often fail because they are designed and implemented without sufficient knowledge of real community needs.

Alternative media are critical if we are to influence social realities. What are some alternative media structures; in particular what are the potentials of video as a tool for social change?

Frances Berrigan explains that access to video allows people to become involved in processes of decision-making and change in their communities. She notes that community involvement in media and decision-making is often an empowering experience, and valuable as an agent of personal as well as social transformation. Berrigan points out that video is particularly useful in developing community consciousness to a "point where [people] can organize . . . articulate needs forcefully . . . [be] aware of the goals that they can achieve . . . and where the achievement of these goals can lead them." [Berrigan 1981] In short, media can both teach and be a tool for social action whenever the need arises. The following projects reveal some of the possibilities of small-scale video use as a tool to confront local problems.

The first project to confront institutional power through media was the Fogo Island project, initiated by the Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Service in conjunction with the National Film Board of Canada in 1967. Fogo Islanders were to be relocated to the mainland. Instead the community organized. The Canadian Film Board made a 16mm film which showed the islanders' desire to remain in their community. The film was then shown to government officials. Not only were the islanders allowed to stay, but their oiling economy was revived through monies located for ship-building and fishing cooperatives. [Fogo Island Project, n.d.]

Tim Kennedy, a former VISTA volunteer in the Eskimo village of Noorvik, heard of this project, and decided to integrate video and film with his work in the Eskimo village Emmonak. Having viewed firsthand the indifference of local and regional bureaucrats to Eskimo problems, Kennedy realized the need for the community to develop an identity, "consensus and strength." He also saw the need for people to communicate on their own terms, define their own problems and propose their own solutions [Kennedy 1982].

Kennedy encouraged people to "play" with a video portapac. Previously undiscussed issues and unspoken feelings began to emerge as adults shared their despair that village children were sent to boarding schools as far away as Oregon and Oklahoma to be educated beyond the eighth grade.

A film statement directed and edited by the villagers