

Heellooy Heelleellooy: the Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry. By John W. Johnson.

Pp. xviii + 209, foreword by B.W. Andrzejewski, preface, bibliography, index. Indiana University Publications, African Series, vol. 5. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974. \$10.00 paper.

Reviewed by Lee Haring.

Students of African oral poetry will welcome this new volume, which presents the history and context of an important Somali genre and includes many texts and translations. The book is cursed in its title, which will be unpronounceable except by the specialist but is drawn from the opening formula that gives the genre its name, heello. Thenceforward it is clear, solid, and interesting.

The standard work on Somali poetry hitherto is R.W. Andrzejewski and I.M. Lewis, Somali Poetry, an Introduction, in the Oxford Library of African Literature. Mr. Johnson, who became interested in his subject while a Peace Corps Volunteer (1966-1969), fortunately had the encouragement and help of Mr. Andrzejewski, who was in Somalia at the time and who now contributes an introduction. By concentrating on modern Somali poetry, Mr. Johnson has added considerably to our knowledge. Contemporary developments are often the most neglected part of cultural studies, but for Mr. Johnson they are the heart of a concern that embraces such matters as the influence of radio and tape recorder on the transmission and structure of the heello.

The heello is the main sort of modern Somali poem or folksong; it was formerly chanted and is now usually sung. The opening formula, heellooy heelleellooy, "heralds a light poem, often to be used with the dance, more often still with a theme centered around love" (p. 32). Deriving from traditional oral compositions chanted without accompaniment by Somali herdsmen, the heello has as its immediate ancestor the belwo, which originated in town. The name of Cabdi Sinimo is associated with the development, which added drum accompaniment to the singing. As mixed social gatherings and recitations by members of both sexes were introduced, a tendency towards more equal status for women began to be felt. The heello proper begins with the composition in 1955 of "Jowhara Luula," occasioned by the Ethiopian-British agreement to transfer the rich grazing lands of the Hawd in Northern Somalia to Ethiopian control. "With the loss of the Hawd and Reserved Area, then," Mr. Johnson writes, "and with the composition of this poem, the new genre was firmly established as the voice of the elite. The modern poem as a political device . . . became the tongue of those who demanded and began the drive for independence" (p. 89).

Mr. Johnson does not confine himself to the political significance of heello; he also carefully analyzes its structural, poetic, and linguistic features. The poetic form lengthens, mostly through repetition, as the heello is used for dancing and as its commercial value on radio begins to appeal to creators and reciters. The longer the radio time, the more money. An important development, which Mr. Johnson calls "Heello B," using lute accompaniment for its political theme, is introduced by Cabdullaahi Qarshe. To an American reader inured to songs in folk and pseudo-folk style, one innovation by Cabdullaahi seems more significant than Mr. Johnson makes it: after his prominent period of the 1960's the tune of the heello can no longer be drawn from a small stock of traditional tunes but must be composed afresh. The Woody Guthrie stage, so to say, is succeeded by the Bob Dylan stage.

Later, such themes as the uniting of the former British and Italian Somalilands into the newly independent Somalia and the problem of the lack of a written Somali language stimulated topical, metaphorical heello; both these examples are quoted and translated. Mr. Johnson collected many of these during the period of their composition and is able to sketch political and social backgrounds clearly. After suppression from 1967 to 1969, the heello revived with more repetition and greater length.

A chapter of style analysis identifies the love themes, hopeful or unsuccessful, of the earlier heello and the political themes, anticolonialist, patriotic, and pan-Somalist, of the later. Mr. Johnson discusses the conventional images, positive, negative, mixed, and "situational," and points to the unification of some heello by a substructure of imagery.

Since music is not discussed, Mr. Johnson has cast his history and analysis of heello in the terms of literary criticism. It would be interesting to have further study of the music. Aside from that, within its well-defined historical limits Mr. Johnson's book is a very good indication of how popular poetry and song mirror the concerns of a culture and follow its move from tradition to a period of urban elites, radio, and political difficulties.