

New Collection of Somali Folktales

Suzanne Lilius

Human beings, graced with the capacity to speak, use oral language (in addition to body language) for all sorts of communication: disseminating information, giving orders, paying respect. But mostly we love telling stories. Storytelling constitutes an integral part of a living oral tradition. When such a tradition gains access to a written language, among the first things people write down are folktales that are then spread further, in various ways. One form of dissemination is through schoolbooks; another is the reading material produced for literacy campaigns. For people who are not accustomed to reading, the reading process is facilitated if they recognize the content. Many of the folktales are not only well known but also much loved. Even if the stories in themselves are not familiar, at least the form is understood. This awakens the joy of discovery. Reading becomes more attractive and the effort pays off. A parallel movement of writing down folktales takes place when people collect and translate stories, making them available to people of other cultures. Folktales, more than any other stories, are implicitly seen as offering keys to the culture where they originated.

At the same time as the tales are given a permanent form outside of those who tell them, something else is also happening. From constituting an endless collection with as many variations as the tellers, the wealth of stories is little by little reduced to the much smaller number of those regularly found in writing. Furthermore, the richness of variation typical of oral stories is reduced, as the written version comes to be regarded as the “correct” form. The speed of this process depends on how the written stories are spread, and how the balance between

written and oral culture generally evolves in the society. A totally new stage in the process of writing down stories takes place when people have to flee their country for various reasons, including civil war, natural disasters, and so on. In order to communicate the culture of their country of origin to their children, people will again write down their stories. In some ways, this stage may act as a repeat of the previous ones. Somali folktales have gone through all these stages of writing.

For decades, specialists, researchers, and enthusiasts have discussed the best way to write the Somali language. Finally, in 1972, the government of Somalia decided on a form of writing using Latin characters, with some special sound/letter combinations to accommodate the particular needs of the language. Somali was also introduced as the official language of the country. In spite of reticence and apprehension from some quarters, it has proved to function well and is an enduring success. It is now one of the few positive legacies from the revolutionary period in Somali political history. The first schoolbooks in Somali, from the 1970s, all contain a number of folktales. Later, particular collections of Somali folktales were published, such as Ahmed Artan Hanghe's bilingual presentation.¹ Many of the Somali language textbooks appearing in recent years also contain folktales.² As an example of the last stage indicated above, let me only mention Ahmed Mahdi's collection, published in Finland in three volumes by language: in Somali, Swedish, and Finnish, respectively.³

Once the writing process begins, the more stories and the more versions of the stories written down, the better. A new addition in our collection of Somali folktale anthologies appeared recently, titled, *A Soothsayer Tested: Somali Folktales/Faaliye la bilkeyday: Sheekaxariirooyin Soomaaliyeed*, compiled and translated by Georgi Kapchits, who has also published it himself. Kapchits worked for a long time in the Somali section of Radio Moscow's World Service, and he is among the non-Somalis who speak the language best. A nice presentation of Kapchits and his writing, with information on how to order, is found on his homepage: kapchits.narod.ru/. (Patience: the page is slow.)

It is nowadays a well-known fact that in many Somali folktales the main character is female, such as the tyrannical queen Arraweello, the monster woman Dhegdheer, Longear, and the intelligent, quick-witted Huryo. Many stories are told about these characters. However, there are also stories about men, such as Cigaal Shilaad, who is always afraid, and Wiil Waal, brave but dictatorial, as well as animal tales about the Lion, the Hyena, and the Jackal, among others. Many of the

stories in Kapchits' book have already been published in previous collections. This is doubly justified: these are among the core of Somali folktales, but also many (if not most) of the previous publications are out of print and unavailable outside of specialized libraries and private collections. Happily enough, Kapchits has also included contributions not published before. Among these, there is a particular little gem about a blind sheep and a lion.

In the act of writing down an oral text—*reduce it to writing* is a telling expression here!—we lose gestures and the tone of voice, which must be compensated for, in some measure, by layout and punctuation. In translations, yet more things happen: words take on other shades of meaning. For example, a forest in the Horn of Africa looks nothing like a forest in Scandinavia. If you say “house” to an American, the image conjured is probably very different from the one intended in a Somali folk tale. And yet, non-Somalis can also enjoy and marvel at them. Kapchits has thought about these problems and so the book opens with a well-written presentation, introducing the reader to various aspects of Somali culture. It closes with a literary essay, analyzing one of the stories in particular, by a friend and colleague of Kapchits, Alexander Zholkovsky. Apart from all the things stories offer us in the form of the joy of telling and the insights into the culture where they have appeared, there is a particular advantage of stories in translation: they contribute to what could be called our common human cultural biodiversity.

I will not go into detail regarding the translations. The book would have benefited from better proofreading. However, Kapchits' book deserves many readers, first among Somalis familiar with their culture and among those Somali youngsters who have grown up far from their country of origin; but also among others, in particular those who are dealing with Somalis, such as teachers, day care personnel, social workers—and friends—not to mention researchers in literature in general and in Somali language and culture in particular.

Notes

1. Ahmed Artan Hanghe (Axmed Cartan Xaange), *Folktales from Somalia/Sheekaxariirooyin Soomaaliyeed* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1988).
2. See, for example, R. David Zorc and Abdullahi A. Issa. *Somali Textbook* (Dunwoody Press, 1990).
3. Axmed M. Mahdi, *Tixnaha Sheekooyinka Cawveyska Carruurta. Qaybta koowaad* (Jakobstad: Kaah Books, 1996).

Suggested further reading for those who are curious about the complicated phrase structure of Somali is Georgi Kapchits, "Sentence Particles in the Somali Language and their Usage in Proverbs." *Semitica et Semitohamitica Berolinensia* 4 (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2005).