

Institution: SOAS
Unit of Assessment: 27 Area Studies
Title of case study: Enhancing Understanding of Somali Poetry and Culture (Martin Orwin)
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The primacy of oral poetry to Somali culture cannot be overstated: It is the primary form of cultural communication and the foremost vehicle through which Somali history, cultural values and contemporary concerns are expressed and transmitted. Through his pioneering analysis and sensitive translation into English of classical and contemporary Somali poems, Dr Martin Orwin has brought Somali poetry to the attention of Anglophone audiences, participating in web-accessible poetry projects and prominent events such as 'Sonnet Sunday' and 'Poetry Parnassus'. Working with Somali poets and cultural organisations, Orwin's work has contributed to a more positive understanding of Somali culture and its place in world literature.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Dr Orwin studied Arabic, Amharic and Somali at SOAS where he has taught since 1992 and where he is currently Senior Lecturer in Somali and Amharic. He is currently the only full-time academic teaching Somali and Amharic languages and literatures in a UK university. His research on the subject of Somali poetry, of which a brief selection of underpinning publications is listed below, has sought above all to understand how Somali poetry is crafted as an aesthetic object. To this end, Dr Orwin researches the formal characteristics of varied styles of classical and contemporary Somali poetry, including its complex metrical patterns (each of which are most often exclusive to a particular style or thematic category of poetry), the recurring use of consonant sounds and alliteration.</p> <p>In support of this research, Dr Orwin has undertaken much field work in the Somali territories, particularly in and around Hargeysa, where on one occasion he apprenticed the celebrated Somali poet Mahamed 'Gaariye' for more than two months following a strict programme of word-for-word memorisation of varied genres of poems, repeated recitations and detailed formal analyses. During this experience, Dr Orwin became privy to many of Gaariye's own insights into the metrical patterns of Somali poetry and together they co-authored output b below, 'Virtual Geminates in the Metre of Somali Poetry'.</p> <p>Indeed, such collaboration is vital to Dr Orwin's approach to both researching and translating Somali poetry, and has resulted in original publications often advancing interpretations of aspects of the formal analysis of Somali poetry for the first time in any language, of which the above articles co-authored with Gaariye as well as a, e and f are examples. In relation to the metrics of Somali poetry, heated debate in Somali language media has surrounded the genesis of two variant interpretations of Somali metre, one of which is that first presented by Mahamed 'Gaariye' which Dr Orwin has shown to be the most correct and insightful approach and also the first to be published.</p> <p>All of Dr Orwin's translation work has necessarily involved the collaboration of native speakers, poets and poetry enthusiasts in the Somali territories and the diaspora and, occasionally, Anglophone poets as well. In part, close collaborations with Somalis are crucial to producing translations that convey and chronicle the very different cultures, lifestyles and concerns described in Somali poetry. For example, aspects of nomadic, pastoralist existence are often eulogised in Somali poetry, and metaphors drawn from the intricacies of camel husbandry appear with notable frequency. And it is this cultural awareness and sensitivity wrought through intensive field work and collaboration with Somalis in their own language that set Dr Orwin's translations apart.</p> <p>An example of Dr Orwin's translation, Cabdulqaadir Xaaji Cali Axmed's <i>Samadoon</i>, can be found here: http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12336 [Most recently accessed</p>

25.11.13].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- a. "Alliteration in Somali Poetry." In *Alliteration in Culture*, edited by Jonathan Roper, 219-30. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- b. and Somali poet Mahamed 'Gaarriye'. "Virtual Geminates in the Metre of Somali Poetry." In *Peace and Milk, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics : Essays in Honour of I.M. Lewis*, edited by Markus V. Hoehne and Virginia Luling, 245-58. London: Hurst & Company, 2010.
- c. "On Translating Somali Poetry." In *Translating Others*, edited by Theo Hermans, 402-413. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 2006.
- d. "On the Concept of 'Definitive Text' in Somali Poetry." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 66/3 (2003): 334-47.
- e. "On Consonants in Somali Metrics." *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 65 (2001): 103-27.
- f. "A Literary Stylistic Analysis of a Poem by the Somali poet Axmed Ismaciil Diiriye 'Qaasim'." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63/2 (2000): 194-214.

Output f was submitted to RAE 2001; outputs d and e were submitted to RAE 2008.
Outputs a and b are submitted to REF 2.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The culture of the Somalis is one in which oral poetry and song are favoured forms of expression; indeed, the language was only first written in an officially recognised script in 1972. Virtually every town has its bards and the making, copying, selling and exchange of cassettes and now digital media featuring versions of the most popular poems. Recitations are an important aspect of daily life. Both in the Somali territories and in the diaspora, discussion of poetry and literary debate are regular features of Somali language press and media.

The inherent challenges of the English translation of Somali poetry are various – the need for a sophisticated command of both languages and an understanding of subject matter drawn from a radically different culture, a knowledge of the political and clan and sub-clan affiliations and tensions that shape contemporary Somali life in addition to a comprehension of the complex of formal characteristics and modalities that condition Somali poetry. Dr Orwin's extensive research and fieldwork, command of the Somali language, connections in Somali communities and desire to create elegant, effectual works in English that move beyond literal translations have made him, perhaps uniquely, capable of producing such high-calibre, well-informed translations that have attracted the interest and respect of Anglophone and Somali audiences alike.

Many of Dr Orwin's translations of Somali poetry are freely available from online resources. His translations of nine Somali poems are on the Poetry World Map (1 and 11, below), a project sponsored by City Lore, an arts advocacy organisation in New York and partially funded by the US National Endowment for the Arts. A bilingual collection of poems and stories dating from the colonial era to the Second World War, *War and Peace: An Anthology of Somali Literature*, is downloadable from the Progressio website (2). The volume features Dr Orwin's "Introduction to the English Translations", highlighting the formal characteristics of Somali poetry and translations done together by him and Somali poetry connoisseur Maxamed Xasan 'Alto'. Alastair Whitson of the organisation Progressio, said of *War and Peace* (10):

“‘War and Peace’ was far more than just a poetry anthology. Our work in Somaliland involved supporting peace-building and strengthening civil society in a post-conflict state. The process of writing down and collecting oral literature enabled participants to capture and reflect on experiences of and strategies for peace-building in Somali society. This process itself helped build social cohesion, while the publication in a carefully edited and explicated edition served to celebrate the resilience and potential togetherness of the people of Somaliland. Significantly, the collaboration with co-publisher Red Sea Online ensured the anthology reached a broad audience among the Somali diaspora, who are the main supporters of nation-building and peace-building in the territory of Somaliland. The book’s messages also gain a regular local audience through Red Sea Online’s support for the annual Hargeisa Book Fair, which is seen as a significant socio-cultural event in Somaliland and highlights the prominent role of literature, and literary dialogue, in Somali society.”

In the UK, eleven of Dr Orwin’s translations, resulting from collaborations with Somali and Anglophone poets are available on the Poetry Translation Centre website (3). Dr Orwin’s work for the Poetry Translation Centre in particular has successfully attracted the interest of a larger community of interested translators and poets who have also begun working to translate Somali poems into English. Sarah Maguire of the Poetry Translation Centre (PTC) (4):

“In 2008 Dr Orwin co-translated a further selection of Gaarriye’s poems with British poet W. N. Herbert, that was published as a dual-language chapbook by the PTC. Since then he has acted as an invaluable consultant (...), a partnership that has led to the translation and publication of the young woman poet, Caasha Lul Mohammad Yusuf, and to translation and publication in book form of the greatest living Somali poet, Maxamed Ibraahin Warsame ‘Hadraawi’, a world-class poet who is revered by his people and who is known as the ‘Somali Shakespeare’.

Without Dr Orwin’s contribution, the PTC would not be the success that it is today. In addition, through him, many non-Somali speakers have been introduced to the brilliance of Somali poetry and countless Somalis have been able to meet their most admired poets and read their poetry in excellent English translation. Few other academics working in the humanities can have had such a broad-reaching, decisive impact on communities beyond the academy.”

Dissemination of Dr Orwin’s research and translations has been achieved through participation in radio programmes and high-profile cultural events and through extended interviews about his work on metre in Somali poetry available on YouTube. In 2010, Orwin joined host Rageh Omar and a London Somali poet on *The Bards of Somalia* (5), a BBC 4 programme broadcasted twice in August, a month with weekly listening figures of 10,368,000 (RAJAR) (6). London-based poet Abdullahi Botan Hassan, with Orwin’s help, made a translation of Shakespeare’s sonnet XII, which was performed by Yusra Warsama at the Globe Theatre’s free multilingual event ‘Sonnet Sunday’ in which 154 Shakespearean sonnets were performed in more than 20 languages. For the 2012 Cultural Olympiad’s week-long ‘Poetry Parnassus,’ which featured a performance of a poem from each of the 204 Olympic nations, Orwin provided the translation of *Central London*, a poem written and performed by (Abdullahi Botan) Hassan. The same translation was also printed on some of the 100,000 bookmarks dropped from a helicopter on the Southbank at the start of the event, and is featured in *The World Record: International Voices from Southbank Centre’s Poetry Parnassus* (7, 8). An interview with a member of the Somali community in London in which Orwin discusses his work has had more than 10,000 views on YouTube since it was uploaded in January 2010 (9).

For more than 10 years Dr Orwin has also regularly contributed to a range of cultural and educational events sponsored by members of the Somali community in London and beyond. This has included the largest annual Somali community event in London, Somali Week, which showcases Somali poetry, music and theatre. At the 2012 event, for example, Orwin took part in a panel discussion celebrating the 40th anniversary of the official Somali writing system. In collaboration with the Somali Youth Development Resource Centre in Kentish Town and Soohan Arts, an organisation working with schools in Camden, Orwin has delivered a number of talks on poetry and Somali language (on one occasion even presenting children with a Somali Language poem of his own). In recognition of these and other contributions, in 2010 Orwin was awarded the

London Somali Community's Haya Prize for his Outstanding Contribution to the Somali Language.

In all these activities, Orwin has endeavoured to communicate and promote the positive elements of Somali culture — a culture cleaved and crushed by war, famine and displacement on a massive scale — whose refugee populations are often marginalised and even maligned in their new host countries. It is in these endeavours, all too unique, that he has made a difference to how Somalis are perceived by the wider world and encouraged Somalis, and particularly those too often disaffected in the global diaspora, to cherish their contributions to world literature.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. The Poetry World Map project web page: <http://pacoarts.com/PoetLangSite/> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
2. *War and Peace: An Anthology of Somali Literature*: <http://www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/War-and-peace.pdf> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
3. Poetry Translation Centre website: http://www.poetrytranslation.org/translators/Martin_Orwin [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
4. Sarah Maguire of the Poetry Translation Centre (PTC).
5. The Bards of Somalia: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00tf9nw> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
6. RAJAR figures downloadable from: http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
7. *The World Record: International Voices from Southbank Centre's Poetry Parnassus*: <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/titlepage.asp?isbn=1852249382> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
8. Poetry Parnassus event at the South Bank Centre: <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/poetry-parnassus> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
9. An interview with Orwin posted on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMwfwJfo0oc> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
10. Alistair Whitson, Senior Creative Editor, Progressio.
11. Catherine Fletcher in New York who organized the World Poetry Map and related exhibition.