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Poetry's Political Future(s): Deliberating Democracy and Justice in Somaliland

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Abstract

In February 2017, a poem titled "Muddici" ('Plaintiff') by Hargeysa-based poet Weedhsame went viral on social media. The poem accused members of Somaliland's government of corruption and quickly elicited a series of supporting and opposing responses. Together, these poems formed a debate "chain" (*silsilad*) that became known as *Miimley* ('in M'). Beginning from the premise that forms of popular art both reflect and inform processes of sociopolitical change, this paper explores the poetic and political "future(s)" charted by the content and form of *Miimley*. Placing *Miimley* in the *longue durée* of Somali poetic debate, I specifically consider how the future is implicitly and explicitly evoked in the content of poets' verse, and how the participatory dynamics of the unfolding of *Miimley* index and foment emergent forms of democratic engagement. I ultimately suggest that the futures invoked in *Miimley* balance respect for "tradition" – especially Islam and poetry – with a desire for more just and inclusive politics.

Keywords: Somaliland; oral poetry; poetic debate (*silsilad*); corruption; democracy; future imaginaries

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About the author

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In late February 2017, Xasan Daahir Ismaaciil "Weedhsame" shared an audio recording on Facebook. In a steady poetic cadence, he lambasted the governing authorities of his native Somaliland for their alleged misuse of public funds. Titled "Muddici" ('Plaintiff'),[1] his poem expounded a list of grievances related to corruption and inequality, before concluding with an invocation of a near-future when injustice might be overcome:

Maalin aan fogeyn bay	In a day not far away
Irbadaha ku mudanee	these psychological tricks
Miyirkeeda doorshiyo	which drove them to insanity
Falka loo maleegiyo	this political conspiracy
Sixirada muqleeyiyo	these social ills produced through magic spells
Minka inan-gumeedka	this haunted house for the sub-humans –
Laga meerin doona	they will be set free from it
Maalin aan fogeyn baa	in a day not far away
Iyadoo mudduciyoo	the plaintiff and
Muruqiyo awoodlihi	the workers
Ragga mooro-doogee	[against] those who exploited them
Madhshay xoolaheedii	and used up their resources
U midoobi doontaa.[2]	will unite.

Composed in the wake of a controversial deal to develop the port of Berbera – brokered by the outgoing President Siilaanyo and beset with allegations of bribery – the poem struck a chord. It spread quickly across social media, and by early March had launched a poetry debate "chain" or *silsilad* (from the Arabic *silsila* 'chain'). Over the next two months dozens of poets contributed to a debate known as *Miimley,* so named because all the poems alliterate with *miin* (m). Some poets staunchly defended the government and accused Weedhsame and his supporters of undermining Somaliland's progress. The overwhelming majority, however, joined a growing chorus of "witnesses" who used their verse to call out corruption and demand change.

In this article, I take up this special issue's call to document the alternative futures imagined and produced in East African expressive art by exploring the future(s) charted in *Miimley*, in two senses. First, I explore the future as imagined and invoked by *Miimley's* poets in their verse. If, as Samatar (1989, 49) suggests, "[a]s Somalis feel, so do their oral poets sing", then *Miimley* represents incredibly fertile ground for investigating the anxieties and aspirations of a generation of men and women who came of age after the 1991 collapse of Barre's regime. These are urban young people whose lives have been indelibly shaped by Somaliland's status as an unrecognized state (and consequent limited access to international markets), and by the broader promises and crises of neoliberalism on the continent (Goldstone and Obarrio 2017). *Miimley* does not disappoint on this front: its contributors provide poignant commentary on a variety of sociopolitical-economic ills facing Somalilanders, while implicitly and explicitly advocating for a future in which these problems are transformed.

[1] Throughout this paper, the titles of poems are placed in quotation marks (e.g. "Muddici"), while the titles of debate chains are italicized (e.g. *Miimley*). All poems were originally published as audio or video files on Facebook and/or YouTube and later transcribed and translated.
[2] Xasan Daahir Ismaaciil "Weedhsame", "Muddici", February 27, 2017 (Facebook).

Second, I consider what the participatory form of *Miimley's* unfolding reveals about the present and future of poetic debate and, by extension, the future of democratic participation in Somaliland. Here I begin from the premise that popular arts both *reflect* and *inform* processes of social change. As Karin Barber (2007, 41) puts it, genres are "bearer[s] of social relations" and may even be harbingers of a consciousness not yet fully formed (Barber 1987; Fabian 1998). In a context where poetry has long been a key medium of political expression *and* a direct form of action, I thus explore how gendered and generational shifts in poetic practice might index and bring about new modes of democratic engagement. In so doing, this article contributes to broader discussion in the study of African popular art about the "reworking" of classical genres in ways that "muddle distinctions between the modern and the tradition" for the purpose of moral instruction (Thomas and Cole 2009, 18). It also speaks to conversations about the multifaceted ways that "innovation" and "tradition" may be variously deployed in political claim-making projects (Woolner 2016; Chonka 2019).

My data and analysis reflect the medium of the debate and the realities of conducting research during a global pandemic. My research began organically on social media. During my doctoral fieldwork on love songs in Somaliland (2015–16), I befriended several poets, including Weedhsame. Then, in 2017, my Facebook feed was overwhelmed with recordings of poems, making the debate impossible to ignore. In a preliminary mapping of *Miimley's* unfolding on social media, I collated poem recordings and gathered information about participation dynamics. With the invaluable help of a research assistant, I then carried out a preliminary analysis of the chain, compiling information on key themes, arguments, imagery, and rhetorical strategies. This textual analysis comprises the bulk of this paper. When travel restrictions eased, I visited Somaliland and interviewed 14 contributors (including three women) of varying ages and life experiences.[3] These conversations added nuance to my understanding of poets' biographies, compositional choices, and motivations for participating in *Miimley.*

This article opens by contextualizing *Miimley* in the *longue durée* of Somali poetic debate. Here we begin to get a sense of poetry's political significance, and how shifting literary practices index and foment broader sociopolitical transformations. It is also against this background that *Miimley's* "future" begins to take form. I then situate *Miimley* in the current sociopolitical climate and discuss the dynamics of the chain's unfolding. Next, I provide a fuller analysis of the chain's poetic content. By way of conclusion, I discuss *Miimley's* immediate political future – which included a presidential election – and reflect on the possible political and poetic future(s) revealed by the content and participatory form of the debate.

The political-literary context: A century of poetic debate

In a setting where there are genres of poetry for nearly every occasion – from camel-watering to weddings to warfare – poetry has long played a central role in Somali sociopolitical life.[4] Variably used to fan the flames of violence, negotiate the resolution of conflict, and make claims to political power, scholars have highlighted that poetry is not only a crucial medium of political

[3] These included: Weedhsame, Cabdullaahi Xasan Ganey, Daaha Cabdi Gaas, Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, Layla Sagal Cali, Cabdishakuur Meecaad, Ibraahin Xasan "Sangal", Cabdiraxman Haldhiis, Cabdi Cali Xirsi, Cabdiraxman Baas, Aadan Cadde, Cabdirishak Axmed Cali "Caateeye", Siciid Gahayr, and Maryama Xurmo. Interviews primarily took place in Hargeysa and Gabiley in August-September 2022 and September 2023; one interview occurred in London in October 2019 and one via WhatsApp in August 2022.

[4] A full discussion of the profound significance of poetry is beyond my current scope, but see Abokor 1993; Hassan, Adan and Warsame 1995; Ahmed 1996; Kapteijns 1999; Gadhweyn 2009.

expression but is itself "a formidable means of 'politics'" (Ahad 2015, 26; Laitin 1977; Samatar 1982). Debate chains (*silsilado*) represent an important part of this political-literary tradition. Often emerging at times of political crisis, *silsilado* comprise poems that take a multiplicity of views but are "linked" by their common theme, poetic form, and mutual address. The tradition of poetic debate, however, is not static. Alongside broader sociopolitical-technological changes, the themes *silsilado* address, the language and voices they accommodate, and their means of dissemination are constantly evolving.

One of the best-known 20th-century chains dates to the 1920s and is known as *Guba* ('The One That Burns') for its inflammatory nature (Afrax 2013, 111). Following the anticolonial war led by poet-warrior Sayyid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan, tensions in the region were high. This was especially the case amongst the neighbouring Dulbahante, Ogaaden, and Isaaq clans, who were in competition for grazing land and water (Andrzejewski and Galaal 1963). *Guba* began when the Dulbahante poet Cali Dhuux composed an incendiary poem intended to provoke the Ogaaden into retaliating against the Isaaq, whom he saw as a common enemy. The poem concluded with this provocation:

***D**aa'imo haddaydaan ahayn, **d**agan xaqiiniiye*	If you are not weaklings, your chance for revenge has come
***D**agaalna waan jeclay xaajo aad, **d**ib ugu aydaane*	I want you to fight, in an issue which should concern you.
***D**oqonyeey ka kaca meeshan aad,*	Arise, you fools, from the place where you (idly) sit,
***d**acayda laallaadin!*	your lips drooping![5]

Eleven poets responded with twenty poems that attacked the virtues of neighbouring clans and defended the honour of their own groups, often by invoking Islamic values.[6] The poems were spread by word of mouth over several years. While many of the insults hurled were severe, Andrzejewski and Galaal (1963, 19) suggest the chain allowed for "letting off steam": rather than resorting to physical arms, poets could shore up their group's honour in verse, and no new fighting erupted. All the poems use the long-lined *gabay* metre: each line comprises two parts that feature an alliterative word (note the "d" words in the poem above). Historically, *gabay* was considered the most prestigious (male) genre, reserved for topics like politics and philosophy. In this way, *Guba* represents a "classical" pre-independence chain: (male) poets speak for their clan, using *gabay* to debate the relative merits of each clan (Afrax 2013).

Perhaps the best-known chains of the 20th century are two debates that emerged during Barre's rule (1969–1991): *Siinley* ('in S') in 1972 and *Deelley* ('in D') in 1970–80. A lot had changed in 50 years. In 1960, British and Italian Somaliland gained independence and united to form the Republic of Somalia. After a decade of democratic rule, Barre came to power in a bloodless coup. Barre attempted to implement a project of "scientific socialism" that, in theory, rejected the kind of clannism encouraged in *Guba* and sought to unite Somalis into Greater Somalia. While his ascendance was originally welcomed by some, rifts soon emerged among those unhappy with the perceived power imbalances and favouritism towards Barre's support base (which was, to an extent, based on clan). Barre's increasingly repressive tacts also caused frustration. The merits of Barre's rule and vision of "Greater Somalia" were the central topics of *Siinley.* Initiated as a tape-recorded exchange between Maxamed Ibraahin Warsame "Hadraawi" and Cabdi Aadan Xaad ("Cabdi Qays"), *Siinley* involved 20 poets (including one woman, Caasha

[5] From Andrzejewski and Galaal (1963, 24–25), with minor adaptations.
[6] See Andrzejewski and Galaal (1963) for texts and translations, and Barnes (2006) for a discussion of *Guba's* enduring significance.

Jaamac Diiriye) who composed 33 poems (Shaacir 2020). To bypass Barre's censorship regime, *Siinley's* language was heavily veiled (Afrax 2013, 113). The government nevertheless imprisoned several contributors.

Deelley, by contrast, took place with the regime's tacit acceptance. Following a disastrous war with Ethiopia (1977–78) and an unsuccessful clan-based coup attempt, a group of poets were invited to start a debate about the evils of clannism, in part to discourage opposition groups forming along these lines. Launched by Maxamed Xaashi Dhamac "Gaarriye", this chain comprised 67 poems, again featuring a single woman, Saado Cali Warsame (Idaaja and Khooli 2001; Ducaale 2017).[7] The language of *Deellay* is notably more straightforward, partly because the censorship regime was relaxed to facilitate the debate and partly because Barre's grasp on power had shifted after the Ethiopian war. Gaarriye's opening poem, for instance, includes this clear rebuke for clannish thinking:

***D**oxoryow ab-tiriyaa,*	Fool that loves to reckon lineages
*Armaad **d**ogobka qiiqa leh,*	Take care, that with your smoking brand
***D**errintaad ku huruddiyo,*	You don't set fire to your sleeping-mat
***D**ushaaduun ku hurisaa?*	Along with yourself![8]

Significantly, while the government wanted to leverage *Deelley* to its own advantage, most of the participants – including Gaarriye and Hadraawi – were deeply critical of the regime. The chain ended tragically when the regime killed one contributor, Cabdi Iidaan Faarax.

Emerging in a much-changed political climate, *Siinley* and *Deelley* both reflected and helped to foment significant shifts in literary and political practice. Both chains were spread by cassette, which allowed poems to circulate farther and faster, while bypassing state-controlled radio censorship. Both chains included much broader participation than *Guba* and both were composed in *jiifto,* a short-lined genre that requires a single alliterating word per line (note the "d" words in Gaarriye's poem). During the 1960s and 1970s, *jiifto* came to replace *gabay* as the preferred form of an emerging political elite. Significantly, several commentators attribute the ascendence of *jiifto* to the fact that it is reportedly easier to compose, which made it popular amongst a younger, urban generation of unestablished poets keen to participate in political debate (Idaaja and Khooli 2001, 8; Afrax 2013, 113).[9]

Concomitant with this shift came a change in the poet's expected role in the postcolonial nation-state. While the poets of *Guba* composed as clan spokesmen, the poets of *Siinley* and *Deelley* spoke more generally on behalf of "the people". This shift is reflected in the saying "abwaan qabil ma leh" ('the poet has no clan'), and also in Hadraawi's description of *Deellay* as a "forum for the united voice of the nation" (Afrax 2013, 113–114). Nevertheless, *Siinley* and *Deellay* remained deeply rooted in pre-existing poetic practices: their argumentation is steeped in invocations of Islamic morality and pastoral imagery and idioms. Of particular note are recurrent references to the she-camel "Maandeeq", a metaphor for the nation-state that entered

[7] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the fact that Caasha Luul Maxamed, a UK-based Somali poet, conceives of her contemporary poem "Tahriib" ('The Sea Migrations') as an addition to *Deellay* (*https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/the-sea-migrations*).

[8] Somali from Ducaale (2017, 105–106); English from Ahad (2015, 95). Given the Somali and English are from different sources, this is not a line-by-line translation.

[9] Other poets and listeners have suggested to me that *jiifto* was preferred by poets who could compose *gabay* but wanted to reach a broader audience, as *jiifto*'s short lines are more accessible to *listeners.*

popular discourse in the late colonial period to shore up patriotic sentiment and that was later deployed to lament the failures of statehood (Ahad 2015, 72).

While *Miimley* clearly shares features with *Siinley* and especially *Deelley*, two lesser-known chains – *Hurgumo* ('Festering Wound') and *Dood-wanaag* ('Graceful Debate') – also serve as important points of comparison. Composed in 1978 just prior to *Deelley*, *Hurgumo* was also prompted by the war with Ethiopia and the unsuccessful coup. It aired from Ethiopia via Radio Kulmis, which was run by Somali anti-Barre resistance groups (Ahad 2015, 64). In terms of form, *Hurgumo* is closer to *Guba:* it used *gabay*, its participation was limited to four men aligned with specific clans, and much of the debate involved hurling insults (one poet memorably takes aim at the Isaaq as "crazed by the narcotic effects of the qaat plant"), while shoring up the honour and prestige of the poets' own clans (Samatar 1989). This chain was in fact part of the impetus for *Deelley's* strong anti-clannism message.

Dood-wanaag stands in sharp contrast, as it explicitly prohibited any mention of clan. And though it shares some features with *Siinley* and *Deelley*, it also differs in significant ways. Inspired by Hadraawi's "peace march" in 2003,[10] this chain was initiated by Netherlands-based poet Maxamed Cali Cibaar. Specifically referencing *Deelley*, his initial poem invited others to join him in a "graceful debate" (Afrax 2013, 116–117). This chain occurred entirely online, with 46 *written* submissions of *jiifto* poems, all by men in the diaspora. Poems were shared via a dedicated website after being vetted by a formal editorial committee against specific criteria: in addition to "d" alliteration, poets were prohibited from mentioning clan or using insults and were encouraged to "enlighten the society and warn them of the horrors of civil war."[11] The chain thus mainly contains poems that chastise "rabble-rousers" and elaborate on poetry's peace potential (Issa-Salwe 2010, 10). The controlled nature of the debate, however, led Gaarriye to suggest that it "choked" the poet's "creative mind" and obstructed the essence of a *silsilad* (in Issa-Salwe 2010, 13). Whether or not one considers this chain to be a debate, it provides a compelling point of comparison for *Miimley* in the discussion to come.

A new *silsilad* unfolds

Having considered the evolution of poetic debate over the last century, we are in a better position to understand the continuous and innovative features of *Miimley.* I will start with some context, and an overview of the chain's unfolding.

Following a war between Siyaad Barre's regime and the Somali National Movement (SNM) in the 1980s, Somaliland (re)declared independence from Somalia in 1991. Although still unrecognized, for more than three decades Somaliland has functioned as a de facto state, complete with its own constitution, government, and democratically-elected president. Significantly, Somaliland's postwar political project has leveraged both "modern" and "indigenous" modes of conflict resolution (see Woolner 2016). The country's early stability, for instance, was negotiated in a series of grassroots-led reconciliation conferences during which elders from different clans brokered peace between opposing groups. The current parliament comprises a lower house of elected officials and an upper house of appointed elders (the *Guurti*), while the judicial system incorporates aspects of British penal code, shari'a, and customary law (*xeer*). With very little international assistance, Somaliland has achieved impressive levels of stability and democratic

[10] Hadraawi travelled the length of Somalia reciting poetry to encourage peace.
[11] The dedicated website for *Dood-wanaag*, featuring the text of all the poems and guidelines for submission, is available here: http://www.somalitalk.com/maanso/index.html.

consolidation. Most Somalilanders I know are consequently staunchly patriotic and rightly proud of Somaliland's postwar achievements.

Despite Somaliland's successes, in 2017 several interrelated political-economic frustrations were simmering. President Siilaanyo had announced he would not seek re-election, but he was elected to a five-year term in 2010, so elections were two years overdue. Unemployment rates among young people, including university graduates, were high. Many young graduates have described to me feeling "stuck", unable to marry or plan for their future due to financial precarity – and, indeed, one *Miimley* poem describes youth's domestic condition as one with "no future". This lack of domestic future prospects was also contributing to high rates of *tahriib,* a dangerous land-sea journey towards Europe (see Ali 2013, 2016).[12] Feelings of disillusionment were further compounded by the fact that MPs seemed to live extravagant lifestyles but had failed to gain political recognition. Furthermore, while "youth" is a malleable category (Durham 2004), age matters in Somaliland's political process: the voting age is 16, but members of the House of Representatives and Guurti must be 25+ and 45+ respectively. Notably, the minimum age of MPs was lowered from 35 during Siilaanyo's term after a youth-led campaign, but running for office requires significant financial backing (Verjee et al. 2015), so "youth" representation in parliament remains limited.

In this context, Siilaanyo's deal with Dubai Ports World (DPWorld) crystallized feelings of resentment. Most people supported a deal in principle, as Berbera's port represents significant revenue potential, especially given its proximity to landlocked Ethiopia. Given that most international actors are hesitant to bypass the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu and deal directly with Somaliland, a bilateral trade deal of this scale also represented a major political feat. But the specific deal Siilaanyo brokered handed majority control to Ethiopia and DPWorld. The House of Representatives initially voted down the deal, but then changed course amid speculation that MPs had been paid off. People close to Siilaanyo's administration were also set to profit disproportionately, and Siilaanyo was allegedly promised a villa in Dubai. The general climate was thus one of frustration, animated by the idea that Siilaanyo's deal was a wasted opportunity that would exacerbate existing socioeconomic and political cleavages.

Enter here Weedhsame, and the poem "Muddici". Weedhsame told me, and says as much in the poem, that he was "compelled" by political circumstances and his duty as a poet to bear witness to injustice in verse (Weedhsame, interview, August 29, 2022). The 306-line *jiifto* poem holds no barbs: it is a stinging, straightforward critique of the governing authorities, whom he accuses of embezzling public funds, selling off national assets, and enriching themselves at the expense of the poor. It also includes a call for people to wake up and demand justice. Significantly, Weedhsame was mentored by Gaarriye, the poet who launched *Deellay.* He is widely considered one of the most accomplished poets of his generation, as evidenced by his 300,000+ Facebook followers. His status as a preeminent poet who speaks for "the youth", and his wide social media following, undoubtedly contributed to the rapid spread of his poem.

Unlike *Deelley* and *Dood-wanaag*, which included invitations to participate at the outset, Weedhsame did not intentionally start a debate. "Muddici" became the first link in a new chain with the contribution of two additional poems in early March. The first was Cabdullaahi Xasan Ganey's "Marag" ('Witness'). Like Weedhsame, Cabdullaahi was well-known as a poet. Notably, his father is Xasan Ganey, a celebrated poet who participated in *Deellay.* In 2017, Cabdullaahi was living in Minnesota, but he had been following Somaliland politics and sharing ideas with

[12] For poetic reflections on *tahriib*, see Caasha Luul Maxamed's poem mentioned in note 7, or Weedhsame's "Galiilyo" ('Catastrophe') (https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/catastrophe)

Weedhsame. He had drafted a poem on a similar theme, but after "Muddici" was released he decided to re-write it in "m", because using a common alliterative sound would draw more attention to both poems (Cabdullaahi Xasan Ganey, interview, August 20, 2022). He also suggested to me that he felt compelled to compose in part to channel people's frustration into poetry, rather than things like street protests, which often end with violence. Cabdullaahi specifically picked up on Weedhsame's title "Muddici" and presented his argument as a courtroom trial. The poem features a series of downtrodden witnesses who query the behaviour of politicians. They are rebuffed by the President's spokesperson, who is caricatured as having "greasy lips" as a result of eating taxpayer's money, and who offers unconvincing excuses and praises the President. The poem concludes with the judge rescheduling the verdict to a later date.

The third poem-link, Daaha Cabdi Gaas' "Mudacaale" ('Defendant/Accused'), takes a contrasting view. Daaha's poem begins with a stinging rebuke of Weedhsame and Cabdullaahi's poems, describing them as "metres after metres" and "random words" that do a disservice to poetry's "higher purpose". He suggests that their critique bolsters the case of foreign powers who do not want Somaliland to succeed and that they have betrayed their duty as poets to "stitch [people] together". He concludes with this invitation:

*Haba **m**iir dillacdee*	Let it be public
*Nin waliba **m**a dii gabay*	everyone recites a poem
***M**idhkii uu ka odhan laa*	let them say their two cents
*Haku doodo **m**imkii*	let them argue their point
*Garta **m**idho dhalkeedana*	the verdict
*Alle **m**agan dadkaa niqi.*[13]	God will decide.

Based in Qatar at the time, Daaha was *not* previously known as a poet. However, by composing a poem in "m" that challenged Weedhsame and Cabdullaahi, his poem garnered a lot of attention. And by taking a contrasting view, it was also this poem that made *Miimley* a debate (Daaha Cabdi Gaas, interview, August 31, 2022).

Daaha's invitation was quickly taken up in a wave of poetic responses. The fourth poem, Sakariye Awaare's "Maxkamadda" ('The Judge') featured a judge who weighs each side's arguments, but is more convinced by the Plaintiff. Then, in Weedhsame's words, the debate moved "out of the courtroom" to include a broader range of characters and arguments. *Miimley's* main forum was the Facebook pages of its early contributors, who shared poems they were sent, including opposing positions; these were not the "echo chambers" that some scholars who write about social media and democracy worry about (Sunstein 2018; cf. Barbera 2020). Additional poems were posted directly on Facebook or YouTube. The chain continued until Ramadan began in May, when its key contributors declared it "closed", as its divisive nature was deemed inappropriate for the holy month (Weedhsame, interview, August 29, 2022). By that time, 22 men and three women had exchanged 41 "official" poems. A further 83+ "unofficial" poems also circulated, including contributions by an additional 60+ men and five additional women.[14]

Before considering the content of *Miimley*, I will highlight several inter-linked ways that its participatory dynamics departed from earlier chains. The first is its mode of transmission. While

[13] Daaha Cabdi Gaas, "Mudacaale", March 11, 2017 (Facebook).

[14] Importantly, the number of contributions varies depending on how you count/who you ask. I have taken official poems to be those shared by Weedhsame, Cabdullaahi, and Daaha via Facebook, which they later compiled in writing. Unofficially, many more poems circulated on social media; these were compiled by a local NGO.

Dood-wanaag occurred online, *Miimley* is the first chain to have circulated via social media (and at a time when internet connectivity in Africa had become far more widespread). Participants noted several consequences of this. To begin with, *Miimley* circulated far more quickly and widely than any previous chain (and came to an end faster). Furthermore, compared to *Dood-wanaag's* static website, which featured vetted written content, *anyone* could post a poem to Facebook or YouTube and/or react to or comment on others' posts. This made *Miimley* more interactive, and allowed Somaliland and diaspora-based poets and listeners to participate in real-time. The expectation to respond quickly, however, meant that poets wrote and recorded poems in a day or even in a few hours. Several poets thus lamented that many poems were not very "deep", and a lack of formal gatekeepers meant that not all of the poems were "good".[15]

Another notable way *Miimley* departed from earlier chains was in the broad and varied participation it inspired, which was enabled by social media and by the form of the chain: not only did it use *jiifto,* but poets noted that it is comparatively easy to alliterate in "m". Even though it lasted less than three months, *Miimley* surpassed even *Deellay* in the number of contributions, when "unofficial" poems are included. Participants' bibliographies were also notably varied. While most participants were considered "youth", they represented a cohort diverse in age and life experiences. Many contributors, like Weedhsame, were born in the 1980s and displaced by war as children. A significant number were notably younger, born and raised in Somaliland after 1991. Participants included teachers, social workers, university students, a geologist, a local councillor, and a former MP. Most were in cities in Somaliland, especially Hargeysa, Gabiley, and Burco. A notable number were also abroad, especially amongst those who defended the government. Interestingly, several Somaliland-based poets highlighted that this may have been the case because diaspora-poets sometimes have a romanticized view of Somaliland from afar.[16]

Finally, while the number of female poets was limited, *Miimley* involved significantly more women than previous chains: *Guba, Hurgumo*, and *Dood-wanaag* include no women, while *Siinley* and *Deellay* each feature a single woman. It is also worth noting that the women who participated in *Siinley* and *Deellay* both had unusual access to the public sphere – one was married to a politician, and the other was a popular singer. This was *not* the case for *Miimley.* Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, for instance, was barely 20 years old and completely unknown as a poet before *Miimley*. Several men I interviewed spoke of her skill with a sense of shock and awe, suggesting she was arguably *Miimley's* most talented poet. It was her skill, not any prior connections, that mediated her participation and impact. For her part, she explained being compelled by political circumstances to compose poems that simply "burst" out of her (Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, interview, August 18, 2022).

Significantly, except for the former MP, participants' demographics contrast sharply with those of Somaliland's politicians (nearly all men over 40), and the poets I spoke with were notably proud of the types of voices *Miimley* accommodated. Indeed, several male poets I interviewed were pleased that women featured so prominently, praising the quality of their verse and the fact that members of a "marginalized" group were speaking for themselves. They were also proud that, for the most part, poets took positions that "transcended clan": Siilaanyo's defenders

[15] It is worth noting that this is not a new critique. Said Samatar, for instance, described the poems of *Deellay* as "a disconcerting example of literary gobbledygook" (1989, 36).

[16] While this claim needs further verification, it resonates with observations about the homeland-fetishizing nostalgia observed in "diasporic imaginaries" elsewhere (Axel 2002; Kunreuther 2014), and amongst Hargeysa's diaspora returnees (Woolner 2023, 173–200).

included poets from several clans, and members of his own sub-clan were amongst his sharpest critics.

On one level, these participatory trends lend credence to the idea that social media platforms can provide space for otherwise marginalized voices to be heard (Ortiz et al. 2019) and deepen the "participatory ideal" of democratic politics (Dzisah 2018). They also substantiate observations about the incredibly important role of social media engagement in Somali politics (Issa-Salwe 2008; Chonka 2019). It is, however, worth highlighting that the discrepancy between "official" and "unofficial" contributions evidences a form of (informal) gatekeeping still at work. Although *Miimley* lacked *Dood-wanaag's* editorial committee, the core contributors informally controlled which poems reached a large audience. While some unofficial poems were simply unknown to the core poets, others were explicitly rejected (or not reposted) because their poetic quality was deemed to be poor. Intriguingly, Weedhame's second poem also contained a subtle poetic challenge: instead of a single alliterative sound, each stanza alliterated in "m" plus an additional letter, which makes composing *jiifto* considerably more difficult (Weedhsame, interview, August 29, 2022). Cabdullaahi and Daaha responded by making things even more challenging, composing responses that alliterated in "m" and "d" throughout. Against a broader trend towards greater inclusivity, this double alliteration is a novel innovation that effectively works to subtly restrict participation.[17]

On the whole, the unfolding of *Miimley* undoubtedly reflects – and demands – growing calls for more inclusive political participation, especially for women and youth. But this participation is still mediated in ways that reflect a tension in broader gendered and generational negotiations of who may participate in political deliberations, and on what terms this participation takes place (cf. Woolner 2016) – and a profound and enduring respect for poetry itself. These dynamics, importantly, are also reflected in *Miimley's* poetic content, and I now turn to a closer analysis of the tone, argumentation, imagery, and "future" invocations deployed by *Miimley*'s poets in their verse.

"Everyone recites a poem": The contours of a debate

On trial: The witnesses and their evidence

While *Miimley* quickly moved beyond the "courtroom", the debate's tone, arguments, and imagery were established by its early contributors. This tone is one in which two clearly defined sides, roughly representing the "Plaintiff" and the "Defendant", are at loggerheads. For those who side with the former, the Plaintiff becomes nearly synonymous with "the people", and the poets clearly align themselves with the poor and the marginalized. From Weedhsame's opening poem onwards, they make their point by directly levelling accusations against the Defendant. This includes outright listing of grievances, presenting pieces of evidence, asking rhetorical questions that blame corrupt politicians, and describing those politicians in repugnant terms. The overriding complaint among most poets is that elected MPs and other government officials, including the President, have become rich at the expense of the rest of the country, and that their corruption has blinded them to their people's plight. They are accused of selling national resources (like the port and airport) for their own gain, "eating" (i.e. misuing) taxpayers' money,

[17] This practice has also been observed in love songs (see Jama 2021). I should also note that two other poets did respond in kind, though these poems were not counted amongst *Miimley's* official contributions. These include Maxamud Haybe Galaal's pro-government poem "Ha iyo Miim" and Siddiq Muxumed Jiir's anti-government poem "Miim iyo Dh wadaalay".

"milking" the future of the youth, and otherwise exploiting the resources of the nation (often glossed as "Maandeeq").[18] Politicians are additionally criticized for perpetuating clan divisions and "instrumentalizing genealogy".[19]

As evidence of their corruption, poets deride politicians' nice cars, clothes, and houses, the fancy hotels they visit, and their full bellies. For their sins, politicians are repeatedly described as "marauding gangs", over-indulgent "bribe-takers" or "thieves", and as "bloodsucking" and "hungry" (i.e. greedy).[20] Politicians are also frequently likened to various animals, including beasts that scavenge (hyenas), hunt (lions), or threaten people's sense of well-being (snakes); animals known to be cunning or deceptive (like lizards); and ants, who are known to gorge themselves. They are occasionally denigrated for being bad Muslims on the basis of being hypocrites or exploiting the poor. The unequivocal effect of these descriptions is that politicians are to be loathed for compromising the future of Somaliland for their own short-term gain. Sakariye Awaare's "Maxkamadda" encapsulates many of these practices:

Maxastiyo carruurtii	Civilians and children
Codka ugu miciintuu	trusted them with their votes
U maraayay dhaartuna	despite swearing under oath
Miyir beelka gaajada	hunger [i.e. greed] clouded his judgement
Dad iyo duunyo madhaatoo	devastating humans and animals
Abaaruhu masruufteen	victims of droughts
Isna mowdhar iyo guri	but him [the MP], with his car and his house
Maatada xilkoodii	the votes of the vulnerable
Ku hantiyay milyaanyoo	used to amass millions
Dhiig miirtayaashii…	blood suckers…
Maddiile iyo af miishar	grifter and charlatan
Masaskiyo abbeeso	snake and cobra
Halaqyada bulshada mira…[21]	predators that walk on their stomachs, sucking the life out of people…

As well as directly levelling accusations, the debate also features a series of "witnesses" who testify for the Plaintiff or whose life circumstances are presented as evidence of wrongdoing. These include several generic and pitiable characters: Cabdullaahi's first poem, for instance, features "the wretched", "the mentally challenged", "the orphans", "the pauper", "the disabled", "the ragged", "the weakest and the hopeless", alongside the "frustrated voter". These witnesses also include more elaborated and usually urban characters who face different forms of injustice. For example, Maryama Xurmo's early contribution "Maati" ('Dependents') features a frustrated jobseeker looking to support her mother, the widow of a Somali National Movement (SNM) fighter/martyr who received no compensation for her husband's sacrifice.[22] The young woman is thwarted at multiple turns, first due to clan discrimination, later for not providing sexual favours. Another recurrent witness is the young mother who sells trinkets on the roadside but

[18] See, e.g., Aar Jaamac, "Ma Muraad Kala Jira", April 15, 2017 (Facebook).
[19] See, e.g., Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, "Muran-diid", March 15, 2017 (Facebook).
[20] See, e.g. Cabdullahi Xasan Ganey, "Marag", March 11, 2017 (Facebook).
[21] Sakariye Awaare, "Maxkamadda", March 13, 2017 (Facebook).
[22] Maryama Xurmo, "Maati", March 15, 2017 (YouTube).

struggles to make ends meet. This witness features in the poetry of men but is especially poignantly presented by Layla Sagal, who takes on the voice of this character:

Hooyo maagtay baan ahay	I am a discouraged mother
Miciin wayday baan ahay…	I am a person without help/assistance…
Suuqa meerta baan ahay	I wander the marketplace
Ma heleelo heesiyo	[with] no time for songs and
Suugaan midhkeedii.	composing poetry.
Muunigaan gudaayoon	I get up early in the morning
Raadiyaa masruufki	in search of daily meals
Maatadu cunaysoo	for my children to eat
Milicdaan wareegaa	I wander around under the scorching sun
Milix iyo xabuubiyo	salt and little things
Waxaan iibiyaa muus…	and bananas I sell …
Maararawga camalkiyo	my work does not provide enough income, just a pastime

She places blame squarely at the feet of corrupt politicians:

Waxa moodka iga quba	what snatches my livelihood
Malafsade cid kaashada	is a corrupt scavenger, supported by power
Muusanoow muxuu tari	wailing is a lost cause
Mar haddii dhulkeennii	so long as our country
Laga miidhay samihii	is skinned of good things
Oo maalin iyo layl	and day and night
Cadligii la mooso[23]	justice is buried

Another recurrent character let down by the government is the educated youth who has left on *tahriib*. Aar Jaamac, for instance, paints this troubling picture:

Minyartii mudnaydee	Our precious youth
Mustaqbalka sugaysee	who were waiting for a better future
Iskuuladda ka soo mudhay	graduated from our schools
Markay quus ma guurtiyo	when they realized
Manfac xumada tabteen	how deep the lack of food was
Meel umma tilmaamine	it disoriented them
Maan koodu yidhi soco	the mind told them to move
Miyir li'l dhaqaaqee	without considering the hardship ahead
Miciin biday badwayntiyo	they threw themselves into the ocean
Macaluushu dubaatee…	wrapped in hunger…
Meeyday dawladoodii?[24]	Where is the government?

Together, these witnesses offer moving commentary on the stagnant future prospects of Somaliland's youth and give a forceful testimony against a government seen to be failing them.

[23] Layla Sagal, "Hooyo Maagtay", March 20, 2017 (Facebook).
[24] Aar Jaamac, "Ma Muraad Kala Jira".

In response to the stinging accusations levelled against the government, a group of poets, led by Daaha, offer a different view. Poets here do not necessarily speak for the Defendant, but instead offer alternative interpretations of the Plaintiff's evidence, align themselves with the cause of national unity, and challenge the wisdom of the debate itself. Arguments on this side take the following forms. Firstly, poets are quick to point out that, compared to its neighbours (notably Somalia), Somaliland enjoys a good level of peace and stability, as well as freedom of expression and democracy.[25] They also highlight that its leaders are working hard to develop the country. Daaha puts it thus:

Waxa muuqda wacaniyo	Even though [progress is] clear as daylight
Ma qiraan wanaagee	they never admit positive strides
Dad mucaarid wada-noqoy…	opposition is the stand *du jour…*
Hadba xaajo murugtana	[but] each time we find ourselves before a tough time
Maarayn yaqaanee	they [the government] know how to fix it
Dhibta say u moosaan,	how to solve our problems,
Marag dunida uga tahay	the world is witness [to the fact that]
Mudanaha xil-qaran sida	these are legitimate [elected] national leaders;
Miyay maanta Xamariyo	should they be compared to Xamar [Mogadishu]
Mooryaantu dhaantaa?26	and its marauding bands?

Furthering this view, poets point out things like new buildings and roads, elections, and the constitution as evidence of Somaliland's progress.[27] Some poets acknowledge that there are problems, namely drought and poverty, but rather than blaming the government they highlight that drought is a natural disaster and that Somaliland's unrecognized status has left the government strapped for cash.[28] Several also highlight that it is the people who elected these leaders, so rather than criticizing them they should focus on building a better-functioning opposition.[29] Another popular tack is to evoke a sense of national duty, highlighting that Siilaanyo is an SNM veteran who helped liberate Somaliland; he should be treated with respect, not heaped with criticism.[30] Finally, poets criticize *Miimley* itself, suggesting that the debate is undermining Somaliland's stability. Daaha encapsulates this perspective, drawing on familiar imagery in this stinging rebuke:

Miishaar afwayniyo	like a sharpened saw
Mindi inaad afaysoo	as though you were sharpening a knife
Maandeeq hashaadii	for your she-camel Maandeeq

[25] See, e.g., Daaha Cabdi Gaas, "Mudacaale"; Sharmaarke "Qolombi", "Miidhaale", March 15, 2017 (YouTube); Ibraahin Xasan "Sangal", "Minhaaj", March 28, 2017 (YouTube); Hodan Maxamed Ceelabe, "Muhasho", May 6, 2017 (YouTube); Maxamed Haybe Galaal, "Ha iyo Miim", May 10, 2017 (YouTube).
[26] Daaha Cabdi Gaas, "Mudacaale".
[27] See, e.g. Sharmaarke "Qolombi", "Muran-tirra", March 23, 2017 (Facebook); Cali Kabadhe, "Hadda Maandeeq", March 28, 2017 (YouTube).
[28] See, e.g. Mustafe Bagasse, "Ma Guraan", March 25, 2017 (YouTube); Nimco Xasan Axmed "Waddani", "Miisaan", April 2, 2017 (YouTube); Cabdirisaq Maxamed Jamaac "Zeko", "Miisan", 2017 (YouTube); Maxamed Haybe Galaal, "Maqan", April 4, 2017 (YouTube).
[29] See, e.g., Maxamed Case, "Muxafiid", March 24, 2017 (YouTube); Cabdirisaq Maxamed Jamaac "Zeko".
[30] See, e.g. Baashir Sacaad Faraax, "Miisaan", March 20, 2017 (Facebook); Maxamud Haybe Galaal, "Maageer", March 24, 2017 (Facebook); Daaha Cabdi Gaas, "Mudan", March 20, 2017 (Facebook).

Muruqyadda ku goysaa,	her ripped apart muscles
Wax ka dhigan masaalkaa	you use as your evidence
Maskax kii la bidayoow!	[when] the people expected you to be their conscience!
Maxaadhkaad ku tolilayad[31]	You were supposed to stich them together

Two features of *Miimley's* argumentation are worth highlighting here. The first is that poets on both sides use several well-established rhetorical strategies, while also drawing on their own lived experiences. For example, the presentation of a cast of characters, deployed in a manner designed to elicit a specific emotional response (either pity or disgust) is common to other chains. Gaarriye's opening poem of *Deelley* features orphans and widows, while Hadraawi's second poem describes a loathsome cast of characters who have benefited from nepotism as "those-who-lick-their-lips" ("debno-leef") and "the fat-loving ants" ("dufan-jecel") (Ahad 2015). Invoking "Maandeeq" ('she-camel-as-nation') also clearly situates *Miimley* in a much longer conversation about Somali statehood, though the nation-state in question is now Somali*land,* not Somalia. However, when the characters and evidence move from the generic to the specific, they proceed from the lived experiences of predominantly *urban* poets. While pastoral idioms still abound, the inclusion of urban characters is a departure from *Deelley*, which Ahad (2015) suggests is notably silent on urban (and agrarian) experiences.

The second noteworthy feature is *Miimley*'s sharp and straightforward tone. This is, on the one hand, a feature of the contemporary political climate and the relative respect for freedom of expression that Somalilanders enjoy. While certain types of expression, notably those seen to undermine Somaliland's claims to independence, occasionally land poets and artists in jail, critique of the government itself is generally permitted.[32] Indeed, when I once asked Weedhsame if he veils political criticism in love songs (as was common under Barre's regime), he said there was no need because he could "criticize Siilaanyo to his face". The language of *Miimley* is far more straightforward than that of *Siinley*, and more in line with that of *Deelley.* This time, however, this directness was permitted because of a respect for free speech, rather than the government's weakening hold on power. And whereas the viewpoints and language accepted by *Dood-wanag*'s editorial committee limited its tone and themes, *Miimley*'s participants were free to express various viewpoints (within the confines of the genre, of course). A number of poets also highlighted that despite its failures (and some attempts to bribe poets to be quiet), the government did not retaliate: not a single poet was injured or put in jail for their verse.

Miimley's straightforward tone, however, is equally a feature of the continued status of poetry as a privileged communication medium, where forms of critique that might not be possible otherwise are permitted (more on this below). As another researcher remarked to me, "journalists have been jailed for much less!" And it is not difficult to ascertain what *Miimley*'s contributors think about poetry. A concurrent and explicit debate about poetry is a significant feature of the chain itself, to which I now turn.

[31] Daaha Cabdi Gaas, "Mudacaale".

[32] Under Siilaanyo, for instance, members of Xidigaha Geeska were arrested after performing in Mogadishu, where they purportedly waved a Somali flag. The jailing of poets and journalists has been more common under Biixi than Siilaanyo, including the arrest of Naima Abwaan Qorane for "anti-national activities" (see Burke 2018).

A knife that cuts deep: Poetic critique and meta-commentary

When Daaha accused Weedhsame and Cabdullaahi of using poetry like a knife that cuts the flesh of a she-camel, he was not simply rebutting their arguments. He was deploying a well-established feature of poetic debate: deriding the poetry of one's opponent. In so doing, he also opened *Miimley* up to a parallel debate about the proper uses of poetry. Indeed, from Daaha's poem onwards it is hard to disentangle critique of the issues from a debate about the merits of different poets' contributions. Significantly, poets highlighted to me that *Miimley* does *not* include the clan-based insults common in *Guba* and *Hurgumo,* or even personal attacks. Poets nevertheless *do* draw on well-trodden rhetorical strategies to speculate about their opponents' motives and critique their poetic abilities. These critiques reveal a compelling picture of the contested yet enduring significance of poetry.

On the Defendant's side, the poets make several types of recurring critiques. One is that the Plaintiff's poets are motivated by fame. One poem, for example, reproaches Weedhsame and Cabdullaahi for "imitating" Hadraawi, Cabdi Qays, and Gaarriye, who went to jail for criticizing Barre and subsequently became famous.[33] Others accuse Weedhsame and his supporters of being ignorant of the SNM's anti-Barre resistance struggle and/or of Islam, based on the rationale that good Muslims do not sow discord or unjustly criticize their leaders.[34] They are also called childish,[35] described as "lambs playing",[36] or criticized for blindly following the crowd.[37] The most forceful and frequent critique, however, is that these poets are misusing poetry itself. Here, poets suggest that those who critique the government are undermining national unity and misleading the youth. Some poets are accused of "putting a fire between brothers"[38] when they should be focusing on developing solutions to immediate problems, like drought. They are told to stop using poetry as a "weapon" to wound the nation and consider the effects of their words.

The loudest rebuttal from the Plaintiff's side is that Weedhsame and company are respectable poets who are using poetry in exactly the way it should be used: that is, to raise awareness about injustice and promote the interests of "the people". In attack mode, poets suggest that it is Daaha and his followers who are misusing poetry, as they have "hijacked" *Miimley* as a space to air the grievances of the vulnerable. Layla Sagal puts it simply:

Waa gole masaakiin	this is the poor people's forum
Masiirkoodii wayday	[for those who have] lost their rights
Miciin loogu raadshee	this forum's true work is to fight for their rights –
Miyaad duudsiyaysaa?[39]	are you trying to hijack it?

Similar to the strategies of the Defendant's poets, the other main lines of attack revolve around the questioning of poets' motives. Daaha and his supporters are accused of being motivated by clan and/or money; several poems explicitly suggest they are being paid to defend the government.[40] They are also accused of wilfully ignoring the truth and blindly following the gov-

[33] Sharmaarke, "Qolombi", "Miidhaale".
[34] See, e.g., Cabdirashiid Axmed Maygaag, "Maamuus", March 22, 2017 (Facebook).
[35] See, e.g., Ibraahin Xasan "Sangal", "Minhaaj".
[36] Jibril Dhaalaliya, "Mudana Hadlay", March 28, 2017 (YouTube).
[37] See, e.g., Baashir Sacaad Faraax, "Miisaan".
[38] Ismaaciil Ibraahim "Xarago", "Malkada Halaga Dego", April 16, 2017 (YouTube).
[39] Layla Sagal, "Hooyo Maagtay".
[40] See, e.g., Cabdi Cali Xirsi, "Murdiso", March 27, 2017 (YouTube); Cabdiraxman Haldhis, "Maayad", March 31,

ernment, described as "empty vessels making noise", and compared to various (unintelligent) domesticated animals (mainly sheep).[41] They are also warned that their actions will have consequences, like a hyena who digs up a dead body and is confronted with a terrible odour.[42]

Significantly, the accusations thrown on both sides about their opponents' "misuse" of poetry take place within a larger debate about poetry's proper purpose. Both sides agree on a few principles. By far the most recurrent description is that poetry is (like) a double-edged blade or sword. It can be used as a weapon to fight for one's cause, but also to wound and destroy, so poets should wield their verse carefully. A second recurrent idea is that poetry has a unique ability to illuminate "the truth". Good poetry is likened to "day", "light", or the "sun", in contrast to the dark night.[43] There is also a certain inevitability to poetry's truth-revealing nature: poets on both sides say you cannot hide the sun with your palm.[44] Poetry is elsewhere described as a "flood",[45] "heavy rain",[46] and a dam that has burst.[47]

A third recurrent idea is that poetry has a "higher purpose", but there is disagreement over what this purpose might be. On the one side, poetry is described as "the poor people's forum" or a place for those who have lost their rights.[48] The poet's role, in this view, is to "give voice to the voiceless", to raise awareness about injustice, and to "shine a light" on difficult problems, even if it causes short-term discomfort. On the other side are those like Daaha, who argue that poetry should "stitch [people] together" rather than divide. The poet's higher calling is to promote unity, not sow discord. Poetry that criticizes the government rather than celebrating Somaliland's successes thus does a disservice to poetry's higher purpose.

These competing visions are not easily reconciled. They reflect deeper tensions in Somaliland about the best way to advance the country's development: either address domestic socioecomic problems so citizens can thrive or focus efforts on gaining international recognition. These competing visions also reflect a long transformation in the role of poets from being clan spokespersons to being the "voice of the people" (see Woolner and Weedhsame 2024). This vision was already clear in the debates of the 1970s, especially in Hadraawi's description of *Deellay* as a "forum for the united voice of the nation" (Afrax 2013, 113–114). The fact that being motivated by clan is perceived as a character flaw in *Miimley* demonstrates the extent to which this ideal has taken hold. Ambiguity remains, however, in what it means to speak "for the people", as the ideals of justice and unity are not always easily reconciled.

Where these visions of poetry converge, however, is in a profound and enduring respect for poetry itself. Several Somali scholars have lamented a decline in poetic acuity and appreciation since 1991 (Afrax 1994; Samatar 2010), and outlets for creative expression have diversified to include things like novels and social media content (Chonka 2019). But for *Miimley*'s contributors and audience, poetry remains a privileged and almost transcendental medium. This is a medium that, crucially, lets people say things they might not otherwise be able to say, and that in

2017 (Facebook).

[41] See, e.g., Cabdiraxman Haldhiis, "Milay", March 17, 2017 (Facebook); Sakariye Awarae, "Maxkamadda"; Khayre Axmed Taani, "Lagama Maar-maan", April 7, 2017 (YouTube).

[42] Cabdi Cali Xirsi, "Mahadho", May 15, 2017 (YouTube).

[43] See, e.g., Cabdillahi Aadan Samatar, "Maan Dhaaf", March 16, 2017 (Facebook); Cabdiraxman Haldhiis, "Milay".

[44] See, e.g., Sakariye Awaare, "Maxkamadd"; Hodan Maxamed Ceelabe, "Muhasho".

[45] Sakariye Awaare, "Maangaab", March 22, 2017 (Facebook).

[46] Mustafe Bagaase, "Ma Guraan".

[47] Sakariye Awaare, "Maxkamadda".

[48] Layla Sagal, "Hooyo Maagtay".

so doing makes space for a deliberative reckoning about the present and future of Somaliland's democratic sphere.

God will decide: Imagining and invoking the future

By voicing frustration with various socioeconomic and political challenges in the present, *Miimley*'s poets make an implicit claim to a future in which these challenges are transformed. At the same time, many poets also *explicitly* invoke the future, to varying effects – sometimes to forewarn, other times to inspire. The future(s) that the poets describe paint a variegated picture of the relationship between action, responsibility, and consequence and the possible paths that might be taken in pursuit of these future visions.

The most frequent way that *Miimley* poets invoke the future is with a sense of foreboding meant to highlight that politicians and poets alike will one day be held accountable for their actions. Sometimes this future is near, such as when politicians or poets are threatened with jail time if they do not change their ways.[49] More often this is a longer-term future that centres the Day of Judgement, when God as the ultimate arbiter will decide each person's fate. This future is, for some, a day to look forward to: the exploited will be redeemed, the righteous will be rewarded, and God will compensate those whose property has been looted. It is also a day to be feared, as God does not leave bad deeds unpunished. Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, for instance, taunts politicians with this warning:

Mudo haw shin dhaaftoo	Let it be for awhile
Hayska maalo xoorkoo	let him enjoy
Ha macaanto tiisiyo	his sweet little period
Maashiyo dhunkaanshani	its agenda and poison
Mar dilaaci doonee	will come to light
Xaqu miirmi doonee	finally justice will prevail
Nin macaashay waa hore	he who took advantage, enriched himself
Meer meeri doonee	will pay, and find himself a beggar
Mahadhada xasuusta leh	and the annals of history
Laga maydhan doonee[50]	will be the judge

Beyond politicians, these warnings are also levelled at poets on both sides of the debate, for either sowing discord or not defending the marginalized. Cabdulqaadir Qalinle, for example, issues this terse warning to poets who unthinkingly defend corrupt leaders:

Taariikhdu waa marag	History is witness
Ku markhaati noqotee	it could become your testimony
Ha is gelin mugdiga iyo	don't fall into darkness and
Baalkeeda madowga ah.[51]	end up on the black side.

It is important to note that these warnings are not fatalistic, as no one's fate has been finalized. Politicians and poets are thus implored to remember Judgement Day, reminded that history will

[49] See, e.g., Siddiq Muxumed Jiir, "Mas-Galaalan," March 22, 2017 (Facebook).
[50] Deeqa Nuux Yoonis, "Muran-diid".
[51] Cabdulqaadir "Qalinle", "Is-moodis", March 16, 2017 (Facebook).

record their acts, and warned to take care. There is, by extension, still time to repent and change the course of one's life, both on earth and in the afterlife.

Against this somewhat foreboding longer-term future, *Miimley* features descriptions of a nearer (earthly) future, when current sociopolitical and economic challenges will be overcome. When described by the Plaintiff's supporters, this is a future where justice is realized: where corruption is stamped out, resources are shared equitably, prosperity is enjoyed by all, and the political system meets the people's needs. This future is sometimes invoked with a sense of optimism. Poets predict "brighter days" ahead and describe scenes of prosperity and abundance, often featuring rain and flourishing plants.[52] At other times this future is presented alongside concrete suggestions for how it might be realized. Cabdullaahi's second poem, for instance, highlights that "progress and prosperity" need accountability, transparent leadership, good management, and a national plan that does not rely on foreign aid.[53]

Importantly, realizing a future of justice and prosperity requires input from both politicians and "the people", alongside God's grace and blessing. Politicians are warned to stop exploiting people and to lead with honesty and integrity. But "the people" are also called upon to become more aware of injustice, to unite against oppression, and to take responsibility by electing better leaders. Poets on both sides highlight the importance of unity, and specifically suggest the need to set aside clan politics for the sake of national development. A number of poets explicitly call for God's guidance and ask for God's blessings in these pursuits: one poem prays to God to help people "understand the right things",[54] while two others ask God for a "kind, responsible leader who will reunite us"[55]. And, again underscoring the continued importance of poetry, a number of poets highlight that *Miimley* itself has a role in creating the will to bring this future about in several interlinked ways: by raising awareness about injustice and fomenting a desire for change; by putting the country's leadership on notice; and by imploring people to consider the consequences of their actions.

If there is one thing that can be said about the future envisioned in *Miimley,* it is perhaps that it is a *conditional* one. It is a future that depends on God's grace and good blessings, as well as God's judgement. But it is also a future over which listeners, poets, and politicians have a role to play in the present, as they strive towards justice. As Layla Sagal puts it:

Naxariista mawluhu	God's mercy
Waxa ay maftuuxdaa	comes and brings
Mahiigaan darooraa	torrential rain,
Dhulku uu magoolaa	green everywhere
Marka daacadnimadiyo	only when honesty
Xaqa laysku maamulo.[56]	and justice become the guiding principle.

[52] See, e.g., Sidiiq Muxumed Jiir, "Kala-Maan", April 13, 2017 (Facebook); Muktaar Xuseen Yeey, "Maguurto", April 15, 2017 (YouTube)
[53] Cabdullaahi Xasan Ganey, "Miyir Sida", March 19, 2017 (Facebook).
[54] Hodan Maxamed Ceelabe, "Muhasho".
[55] Nuura "Qalaanjo", "Majaraha Ha Baal Marin", April 15, 2017 (Facebook); Mukhtar Xuseen Yeey, "Maguurto".
[56] Layla Sagal Cali, "Hooyo Maagtay."

Miimley's political and poetic futures

Six months after *Miimley* concluded, Somalilanders had a very real opportunity to shape their political future. In November 2017, they went to the polls to elect a president. Although two years overdue, the election itself ran relatively efficiently, and was deemed to have been free and fair by international observers. The election followed a campaign that, in many ways, echoed both the tone and the issues that defined *Miimley*. The campaign was highly divisive and played out on social media and in the country's streets: virtual and physical spaces were dressed in the colours of the three main parties, while poets and musicians expressed support for different candidates in poetry and song. For their part, the three candidates had to make a case for themselves as "good" leaders with a plan to address several issues *Miimley* raised: corruption; the fair distribution of national resources; and advocating for international recognition. And although highly divisive – to the point that social media platforms were forced offline in the week surrounding the election – when the votes were tallied, the losing candidates conceded defeat and called for unity.

Somalilanders did not vote for wholesale change: they again voted for Kulmiye, the party of the outgoing President. They did, however, vote in a new leader, Muuse Biixi, who has heeded some of the warnings given by *Miimley's* poets. Indeed, when I asked Weedhsame about the outcome of the chain, he mused, "we put those politicians on notice". Some Kulmiye supporters were reportedly so worried by *Miimley* that Weedhsame was offered a bribe to stop the debate and several politicians came to speak with some poets about their concerns. Now in power, Biixi has taken on board at least some of the poets' criticisms. Most notably, he is seen to be less corrupt than his predecessor. But his term has been mixed – and, compared to Siilaanyo, he has been less tolerant of criticism.[57] Perhaps most significantly, most poets I spoke with were of the view that Somaliland's party system, which is based on a delicate balancing of (sub)clan alliances rather than ideological/policy differences, is no longer fit for purpose. Until this changes, hopes for wholescale political transformation are limited.

Deploying an artform critical to negotiating political power, the poets of *Miimley* used their verse to highlight a range of sociopolitical and economic challenges facing Somalilanders. Insofar as they put these issues in the spotlight at a moment of political transition, the poets of *Miimley* might claim some credit for shaping their immediate political future. But the future of justice and prosperity envisioned in *Miimley* has certainly not (yet) been realized. Nor should this be expected. The relationship between popular art and sociopolitical transformation is never this simple. As Barber (1987, 32) states, "the tension between (…) continuity and a deliberate, conscious creation of qualitatively new forms is one which is never finally resolvable or determinable." I would suggest that "forms" applies equally to poetic practices and political formations. Given this, I will conclude with some tentative reflections on the poetic and political future(s) of *Miimley* revealed in its content and in the form of its unfolding.

I will start, perhaps counterintuitively, with a look towards the past, since *Miimley's* "future" is one that is steeped in long-established poetic tradition and cultural values. Whereas youth elsewhere on the continent have deployed radically new forms of expression to resist the status quo and lay claim to alternative futures (cf. Bosire 2019), the poets of *Miimley* made their point using a centuries-old medium of debate. Indeed, the popularity and persuasiveness of *Miimley*'s poetry rested squarely on its poets' abilities to deploy well-established rhetorical

[57] Several poets and journalists have been jailed during his tenure. This was in fact the impetus for the 2022 *silsilad* "*Liinta xoorka leh*" ('lemon foam', a reference to tea with lemon squeezed into it made for prison inmates). This chain, however, did not rise to the same level of notoriety as *Miimley*.

strategies, deeply resonant pastoral imaginaries, and the invocation of Islamic morality as a framework for motivating behavioural change. This is in many ways unsurprising, given that Somaliland is a context where "tradition" and "heritage" are frequently deployed to make claims to sociopolitical inclusion, in spheres as diverse as postgraduate education (Woolner 2016) and musical performance (Woolner 2023, 173–200). Given this, it is hard to imagine making future claims, in verse or otherwise, that are not deeply embedded within what have been called the "twin pillars" of Somali heritage, poetry and Islam (Samatar 1982, 8).

At the same time, *Miimley* makes an unequivocal demand for change. Providing an uncensored view of the aspirations and frustrations of predominantly urban young people, *Miimley*'s poetry makes straightforward demands for better political leadership, more accountability, and a fairer distribution of jobs and resources. *Miimley*'s poets also envision a future characterized by prosperity and justice, though they do not speak with one voice when it comes to prioritizing political recognition or supporting people's socioeconomic welfare. In a context where poetry is itself a form of politics, I would also suggest that the very form within which *Miimley* unfolded makes several more subtle future claims. The straightforward tone and argumentation of *Miimley* reveal a generation of technologically savvy young people not afraid to speak their minds. In speaking their minds, they lay claim to a future of free speech, democratic debate, and respect for poets. *Miimley* also makes both explicit and implicit claims for a political future less defined by clan, and a future where the voices of young people, women, and otherwise marginalized groups are more able to speak for themselves.

While such visions will not be realized overnight, there are tentative signs that such a future may slowly be coming to fruition. In contrast to their frustration with the national party system, several poets – including Weedhsame – proudly recounted to me their involvement in the 2021 mayoral election in Hargeysa. The winner was a man "elected by the youth, not by clan", a first in this context. His commitment to using public funds for the public good, furthermore, was evident in the extensive roadwork projects that made navigating the city complicated during my visits in 2022–23 (but which were ultimately promising for future road users). Additionally, although their prospects of winning are slim, one of the parties contesting party status in the 2024 elections is, for the first time, led by a woman.

This is, of course, a future still in the making. And inasmuch as poetry is not just a form of expression but also a form of action, this is a more inclusive political future that the poets of *Miimley* themselves are endeavouring to create.

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