

## The secret “Language of Birds” and Somali classical music

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*Marka uu qaraamigu noqdo Af Shimbireed*

When I was at the elementary school in Hargeysa, only few classmates knew how to speak our slang language, known by my generation as *Af Shimbireed* (the Language of Birds)<sup>1</sup>. Others outside our group of close-knit friends hardly understood also because of the very rhythmic, poetic alliterated and fast way we would build sentences and say muffled words. The method was simple: an *Af Shimbireed* sentence was created by saying one gibberish word and quickly adding one or two others using alliterated sounds in between two consecutive syllables of the words by shifting forward the sound of a word in melody, and quickly saying the full sentences. For instance, if we choose the alliteration ‘f’, and the syllable as ‘fa’, the following applies:

Instead of saying:

*Waar yaahe iska warran saaka?*

‘Hello, how are you this morning?’

You say:

*Wafaaryafaahfee ifiskafa wafarrafan safaakafaaka?*

Thus, the muffled words were typically longer than the original words because of the additions of new sounds which made the resulting muffled word completely indecipherable. Saying quickly the new sentence, the addressees, if they do not understand that you are speaking in *Af Shimbireed* with alliteration ‘f’, would hardly understand. Generally, it was quite difficult, if not impossible for teachers, parents and the older

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<sup>1</sup> *Af Shimbireed* (Language of birds) is also practiced by Amharic Speakers with similar techniques, and in fact is called as የወፍ ቋንቋ "Ye Wef QuanQuwa" = The language of bird. Likewise, the Saho language speaking community have the same, where they call "kimbirowwaani" = Language of bird.

generation of Somali speakers to decipher our conversations. In our school, I recall vividly with nostalgia that we sometimes used to talk mischievously in front of our unsuspecting teachers, with the inner circles of friends always making jokes about someone in the room. Some teachers would believe that we were speaking in Oromo language because, for the first time, people from the Oromo ethnic group were arriving in mass from Ethiopia as refugees or to look for job in Hargeysa. *Af Shimbireed* involved some comical situations at times too: students used to use *Af Shimbireed* to talk about sensitive curriculum topics during the biology lessons. The more traditional teachers typically avoided to address culturally awkward topics, such as human reproductive organs, in detail. On such occasions, students were able to dissect the topic at ease without attracting the attention of the teacher. Those students who struggled to follow *Af Shimbireed* conversations typically were sent out of the class as they inevitably ended up asking the teacher the wrong questions.

Others, like ours baffled mothers, would say “*haddaad ku hadlaysaa Afkii Shaydaanka!*” (now, you have started speaking in Devil’s language!). When one alliteration became easily reproducible by the group, we would immediately move as challenge to another new alliteration, and for instance if we use to the ‘c’ to muffle words, the above sentence becomes:

*Wacaaryacaahceee iciskaca wacarracan sacaakacaaka?*

One can make even more complicated sentences by choosing a new alliteration in the middle of conversation if you feel someone understood the group slang, and for instance the alliteration ‘y’ and syllable ‘yu’, and it becomes:

*Wayuuryayuuheyuu      iyuskayu      wayurrayun  
sayuukayuuka?*

*Af shimbireed* deserves to be considered in the wider linguistic context but key empirical questions need to be

answered before examining such slang in context. In sociolinguistics, a register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting [see Biber 1995, Ure 1982 or Ferguson 1994]. Does speaking in certain colloquial style by a limited number of people of the same age, especially young people, qualify as a new register<sup>2</sup>? As of today, there is no data that confirms that this was a countrywide phenomenon, but for sure in the current Somaliland it was popular. In [Biber, 1995], Biber “carries out a principled comparison of both synchronic and diachronic patterns of variation across the four languages” but this case of *Af Shimbireed* or similar ideas were not mentioned or observed in the other languages analysed by the study.

To the best of my knowledge, this generational *register* feature of the Somali of the early Seventies has never been documented. For secondary school students of my generation it was also a way to showcase that they ‘mastered’ the new Somali written language just introduced in the schools, and there was a non-written law among the kids, that this secret language should never be transcribed: you had to produce the new sentences by heart and just speak.

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Now what is interesting is that the well-known singer Xaliimo Khaliif Magool<sup>3</sup>, in some of her incredibly beautiful

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly *Af Shimbireed* qualifies for argot, “An argot is a secret language used by various groups—e.g., schoolmates, outlaws, colleagues, among many others—to prevent outsiders from understanding their conversations” [Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argot> accessed 8 March 2018]

<sup>3</sup> Xaliimo Khaliif Omar "Magool" (Dhuusamareeb, 1948 - Amsterdam, 2004), renowned singer of Waaberi National Band whose captivating voice made her the emblem of Somali female singers' voice. Goth, Bashir (2015) "Magool: The Inimitable Nightingale of Somali Music," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*. Vol. 14, Article 5. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/bildhaan/vol14/iss1/5>

*Qaraami*<sup>4</sup> songs, uses a similar technique to correct the text and to fit it into the musical rhythm while respecting the poetic scansion of the Somali poem. Cumar Dhuulle Cali<sup>5</sup>, and other renowned singer, also used sometimes similar changes.

For instance, in *Raaxeeye*<sup>6</sup> (lyrics written by Cabdillaahi Qarshi<sup>7</sup> and voiced by Xaliimo Khaliif Magool), the original *heello*<sup>8</sup> (*Belwo* Type B according to Johnson’s classification of Somali poetry in [Johnson, 1996]) wording should have been:

Gantaasha wadnaha i guud sudhane,

[1+2+1 1+1+1 1 2 1+1+2 = 14]

Halbawlaha gaadhay baan la gotee,

[1+2+1+1 2+1 2 1 1+2 = 14]

Waa geeri jacayl, nimuu galayee,

[2 2+1 1+2 1+2 1+1+2 = 15]

Waa geeri jacayl, nimuu galayee,

[2 2+1 1+2 1+2 1+1+2 = 15]

Waa geeri jacayl, nimuu galayee.

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<sup>4</sup> Qaraami. The etymology of the word is *Qaram*, from the Arabic word, love. Somalis used *Qaram* or *Qaraami* to describe the oldest modern music composition, mainly from late forties to early sixties. See Jama Musse (2022).

<sup>5</sup> Cumar Dhuulle Cali (Burco, 1941 - Djibouti, 2005), a poet, singer, musician, and Oud player.

<sup>6</sup> *Raaxeeye*, particular melody of the *Qaraami* music.

<sup>7</sup> Cabdillaahi Maxamed Maxamuud Xirsi known as Qarshi (Moshi [Tanzania], 1924 - London, 1997). A poet, singer, lutanist, musician and lyricist, considered one of the founders of the Somali modern art. Further details on Qarshi’s life, see Abdirahman Yuusuf Duale "Boobe", "The Life, Music, and Literary Compositions of Abdillahi Qarshi (1924-1997) in *Variations on the theme of Somaliness*, edited by Muddle Suzanne Lilius, Abo Akademi University; and Mohamed-Rashid Sheikh Hassan, "Interview with the Late Abdillahi Qarshi (1994) at the Residence of Oblique Carton," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Vol. 2 (2002): 65–83.

<sup>8</sup> *Heello* and *Belwo* are two categorizations among the classifications of Somali songs as described by Johnson and others. See more details [Johnson, 1996].

[2 2+1 1+2 1+2 1+1+2 = 15]

This is a metrically correct *heello* and literality translates to

*The arrow above my heart,  
Piercing my artery is why I slump forward,  
Love is death, as is a man in love,  
Love is death, as is a man in love,  
Love is death, as is a man in love.*

Now if you listen with attention, Magool actually says:

Gantaasha wadnaha i guu[**huu**]d sudhane  
Halbawlaha gaa[**haa**]dhay baan la gotee  
Waa gee[**hee**]ri jacayl nimuu[hu]galayee,  
Waa gee[**hee**][*ahaa*<sup>9</sup>]ri jacalay[*ahaa*\*], nimuu[**hu**] galayee  
Waa gee[**hee**][*ahaa*\*]ri jacalay [*ahaa*\*] nimuu[**hu**] galayee.  
Although not structured, as in our register of *Af Shimbireed*,  
nevertheless the two techniques seem to be comparable.

In conclusion, uploading these lyrics on to Somali Corpus (see *Kaydka Af Soomaaliga*), parsing gets difficult when it tries to extract the real words from the sound record, or when it tries to compare different version of the same lyrics [some of these types of problems are covered in [Jama Musse, 2016] on building Somali Corpus].

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<sup>9</sup>The [*ahaa*]\*sound here is just for the chorus and does not influence the observation here mentioned.

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