



Preserving the Traditional Stories: *The Knocked-out Eye of the Hyena*

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of preserving traditional Somali folktales by examining Dr. Georgi L. Kapchits' collection, *The Knocked-Out Eye of the Hyena*. As a renowned linguist and cultural historian, Kapchits has spent decades documenting Somali oral traditions, ensuring that the wisdom embedded in these stories remains accessible to future generations. The article delves into the role of storytelling in safeguarding Somali cultural identity and highlights the challenges posed by institutional neglect, globalization, and shifting lifestyles. By showcasing the enduring power of oral narratives, the discussion emphasizes the need to preserve linguistic and cultural heritage amid growing external pressures. The article further examines how folktales connect Somali communities to a shared past and how these narratives resonate with broader African traditions, reflecting universal themes of wisdom, morality, and cultural continuity. Through the lens of Kapchits' work, the article calls attention to the urgent need for revitalizing Somali storytelling traditions as a means of cultural preservation and intergenerational connection.

Keywords: Somali language, Folktales preservation, Cultural heritage, Oral tradition

Introduction

In the annals of human civilization, the preservation of traditional folktales stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of cultural heritage. These narratives, rich with the wisdom and experiences of our ancestors, serve as conduits through which the philosophies and sagas of bygone eras are transmitted to contemporary audiences. In this discourse, we delve into the significance of safeguarding these oral traditions, drawing inspiration from the esteemed work "The Knocked-Out Eye of the Hyena" by Dr. Georgi L. Kapchits, a distinguished Russian linguist and connoisseur of Somali language and culture.

The Somali language, a vessel of profound literary wealth, encapsulates the quintessence of a nation's identity. Yet, in the relentless march of globalization, this linguistic treasure faces the peril of obsolescence. Eminent scholars and visionary authors prognosticate a decline, attributing it to the encroachment of foreign tongues such as English and Arabic. Compounding this predicament is the erosion of the nomadic lifestyle, the primordial wellspring of the language's poetic elegance and abundance. The pressing inquiry remains: Can the Somali language withstand these formidable pressures, rejuvenate, and ascend anew, or is it destined to replicate the lamentable fate of many extinct African dialects? The unequivocal reality is that its demise would signify the disintegration of millennia-old wisdom and the philosophical bedrock of the Somali ancestors.

Presently, the fate of this linguistic heritage teeters on a delicate balance, ensnared in a tantalizing dance between decline and preservation. Two diametrically opposed forces emerge on this spectrum:

- **Institutional Neglect:** Educational establishments within the nation predominantly impart foundational subjects in foreign languages. Moreover, governmental institutions frequently employ English, French, or Arabic for pivotal communications. Ironically, these official bodies, entrusted with the custodianship of the language, appear to have abdicated their responsibilities, thereby exacerbating its marginalization.

- **Grassroots Advocacy:** Conversely, a cadre of independent writers, organizations, and publishing houses ardently dedicates itself to the production, dissemination, and promotion of Somali literature. These custodians of culture labour tirelessly to awaken societal consciousness to the impending abandonment of the language, striving to fortify and elevate its usage.

Dr. Georgi L. Kapchits epitomizes the latter faction. Embarking on his odyssey into Somali studies in 1964 at Moscow State University, he attained his doctorate in the Somali language. His scholarly repertoire encompasses eleven seminal books on Somali literature and a plethora of articles, with his erudition showcased on numerous international platforms. Among his illustrious publications are:

- **A Soothsayer Tested:** An anthology comprising 115 traditional Somali narratives.
- **To Know Something for Sure One Would Even Part with a She-Camel:** A compendium featuring 658 commonly used Somali proverbs.
- **The Knocked-Out Eye of the Hyena (Cairo, 2022) [4]:** A collection encompassing 172 traditional Somali tales.
- **A Modern Dictionary of Somali Proverbs:** An extensive lexicon cataloguing 5,000 Somali proverbs.
- **Sentence Particles in the Somali Language and Their Usage in Proverbs:** His doctoral dissertation, delving into the intricacies of Somali syntax.

In "The Knocked-Out Eye of the Hyena", G. Kapchits weaves together 172 tales, fragments of a vibrant Somali oral tradition now slipping into the shadows of memory. He identifies five luminous categories of these narratives: *mythological tales, animal tales, fairy tales, legends, and novelistic tales* (Kapchits, p. 12). Each story is carefully chosen, shaped by the dialects of the Somali storytellers who served as his guiding voices, lending the collection an authentic linguistic symphony.

These tales resonate with diverse tones—some brimming with moral insight, others shimmering with legend or pure fantasy, yet all carrying hidden currents of meaning. Africa, the cradle of humanity and the wellspring of civilizations, finds its essence reflected in the traditional Somali narrative, a mirror to the universal soul. Through these stories, the world glimpses itself, revealing an intricate tapestry of shared human experiences.

The echoes of folktales across distant lands affirm a profound unity, a thread binding humanity regardless of the vast oceans or borders that divide. Stories, like migratory birds, soar across time and space, carrying within them the collective imagination of humanity. The songs, the literature, and the stories of all peoples grow from similar roots, their branches intertwining in the universal tree of creativity—a testament to our shared capacity to dream, to narrate, and to connect.

A striking example of such storytelling is the Somali tale, *The Hole in the Sky* (p. 173), which recounts how the heavens distanced themselves from the earth. According to this legend, the sky and the earth were once inseparably close. However, a miller woman, wielding her long pestle, accidentally struck the sky, creating holes that caused it to retreat far away. Through these celestial punctures, the sun, moon, stars, winds, and the forces of weather now flow – a poetic explanation of the cosmos that sparks a child's

imagination with profound questions about creation. A parallel narrative exists among the Ashanti people of Ghana, where the spirit *Onyankopon* once dwelled just above human reach. In their version, a woman, preoccupied with pounding grains, repeatedly struck *Onyankopon* with her pestle, prompting him to retreat along with the sky.

These two tales resonate deeply with one another, bridging the distance between Somali and Ashanti traditions. The Ashanti story takes an even darker turn, culminating in tragedy. To bring the sky closer, the Ashanti people stacked countless mortars to create a towering scaffold. As they neared their goal, the same pestle-wielding woman removed a mortar from the base to place on the top. The structure collapsed, sending the mortars tumbling down, claiming many lives.

A similar motif emerges in the Somali tale, *The Heavenly Camel* (p. 175). On a dark, starlit night, a constellation resembling a camel appears in the southern sky. Determined to retrieve it, people form a human ladder, climbing one atop another. As they near the camel, the man at the top realizes he has forgotten its leash. He calls for the rope, and when the man below bends down to fetch it, the precarious ladder collapses, sending everyone plummeting to the ground.

Beyond the captivating narratives themselves, what is truly remarkable is the shared thematic structure and symbolism between these geographically distant African communities. These stories, separated by vast expanses, serve as a testament to the interconnectedness of human imagination and the universal threads of myth that bind cultures together. In addition to mythological narratives, there exist compelling stories rooted in the shared legends of various African tribes. Among these, the Araweelo series holds particular fascination, resonating deeply with both Somali and neighbouring communities. Araweelo is remembered as a formidable queen known for her disdain towards men. Under her reign, no man was spared from her wrath, as she subjected them to castration and reversed traditional gender roles, compelling men to undertake tasks historically assigned to women, such as cooking and fetching water.

For many Somalis, Araweelo is more than a legend; she is regarded as a historical figure. Authors Drake-Brockman and Ralph, in their book *British Somaliland* (p. 13, 169), identify Araweelo as belonging to the Habarje'lo, a Somali tribe. Similarly, other African traditions recount female rulers, such as Furra of the Sidamo people (Oromo tribe). According to Markos Tekle (p. 67) and Seyoum Hameso (p. 16), Furra governed as a queen for seven years during the 15th century, embodying a legacy of leadership within the Sidamo, Hawella Gadire lineage.

In Sidamo, women have a saying: "*Never show a man raw meat and churned butter because it wanes when prepared, and they will ask you where the rest is.*" According to Sidamo traditions, this proverb originates from Furra, who imparted the advice to the women of her time. Furra, like the legendary Somali queen Araweelo, is remembered for her hostility towards wise men. Both figures are said to have systematically eliminated the knowledgeable men in their communities, with Furra targeting old, bald, and short men, believing them to possess greater wisdom.

In both Somali and Sidamo traditions, an old man—a symbol of hidden wisdom—manages to survive by being concealed by others. When these queens eventually challenge their communities, it is this concealed wisdom that seals their fate.

Furra is defeated on the advice of a bald old man, while Arrawelo is overthrown following counsel given by an old man to her grandson. Both figures are memorialized in their respective cultures, with local tombs said to exist for Furra and Arrawelo. Given the shared Cushitic heritage of the Somali and Sidamo peoples, this parallel may reflect either a common historical origin or the transmission of stories between the two groups.

The 170 folktales collected by Georgi Kapchits in this book can be seen as a cultural treasure trove, rich with social history and life lessons, often conveyed in allegorical form. These traditional stories hold profound significance for humanity. At their best, they inspire virtuous behaviour and caution against wrongdoing. Even in their simplest forms, they illuminate facets of the past, offering glimpses into the lived experiences of earlier generations. They serve as powerful tools for connecting individuals with the past, offering insights into the norms, values, and achievements of those who shaped the world before us. They also foster an appreciation for cultural diversity, helping individuals study and understand traditions beyond their own. Moreover, storytelling enhances cognitive and linguistic abilities, nurturing powerful reading and comprehension skills.

A prime example is the tale of the goat and the fox at the well. When the goat asks the fox what she is doing in the well, the fox cunningly responds, *"The water here is colder than what you drink above; come and see for yourself."* The unsuspecting goat leaps into the well without considering how she will escape. After quenching her thirst, the goat grows concerned. The fox suggests a plan: the goat must stand firm so the fox can climb out and fetch a rope. Once free, the fox mocks the goat, saying, *"Think before you leap,"* and abandons her.

This tale transcends mere entertainment; it is a moral lesson emphasizing the importance of foresight and critical thinking. Such stories warn children to evaluate situations carefully and anticipate the consequences of their actions. Folktales like this one illustrate the enduring power of storytelling to shape ethical behaviour, encourage reflection, and nurture wisdom. Aliqeyr (2024, p. 340) ^[2] asserts that preserving language through traditional folktales is essential for safeguarding cultural knowledge, strengthening identity, and guiding societal progress.

As G. Kapchits notes in his book, *"Stories written in Somali are for young Somalis, especially those in the diaspora who are cut off from the traditional literature inherited from previous generations"* (p. 11). The bilingual nature of the book not only bridges this cultural gap for Somali youth but also showcases to the world the richness of Somali heritage. One might argue that engaging with traditional tales fosters greater tolerance and understanding of others, as these narratives create emotional connections that transcend cultural divides. Literary exchange, therefore, is a vital tool for uniting diverse communities. While G. Kapchits emphasizes *"youth,"* the timeless wisdom embedded in these tales resonates universally, offering lessons for all generations.

Interestingly, storytelling extends beyond entertainment for adults and children. Psychologists suggest that even fetuses benefit from hearing stories. Though some may dismiss speaking to an unborn child as irrational, research indicates that clear, caring, and nurturing communication helps foster emotional and cognitive development in children. Nancy

Mellon asserts, *"When we speak with clarity and warm caring generosity, the minds and hearts of children tend to flourish, and those same attitudes tend to emerge from them"* (p. 90). Similarly, from a religious perspective, storytelling holds a spiritual significance. Those who create or share beneficial stories that positively impact lives are believed to reap their rewards in the afterlife. Kindness, whether expressed through stories or actions, transcends time and space, demonstrating the boundless nature of compassion.

As G. Kapchits acknowledges, *"The Somalis are widely known as a nation of poets"* (Kapchits, p. 167). Yet, this poetic tradition now resembles a setting sun, dimmed by neglect and external pressures. Two forces, in particular, threaten the Somali language. The first is the government, which fails to prioritize its preservation. The second is the influence of globalization, which, through media and modernity, erodes the use of Somali in daily life. However, the efforts of those who diligently document the language and its history serve as beacons of hope. As Aw Abdiqani poignantly states, *"Language is the identity and symbol by which society distinguishes itself. It is the heritage of our ancestors, and it is unfair to anyone to be deprived of it"* (p. 123).

Africa, often heralded as "the world's food basket" and lauded for its abundant natural resources, is central to the vision of a sustainable global future. The phrase *"The future is Africa"* is a rallying cry for the continent's potential. Yet, what would such a future hold if it lacked the preservation of its linguistic and cultural heritage? Language and humanity are inseparable, and safeguarding linguistic identity is essential to honouring the past and laying a strong foundation for generations to come.

Conclusion

This article has examined the vital role of storytelling in shaping Somali social life and its lasting effectiveness as a cultural and educational tool. However, the fragility of oral traditions and the ongoing decline of the Somali language remain significant concerns. In this context, the contributions of Georgi Kapchits—who celebrated his 85th birthday last year—are monumental. His lifelong dedication to collecting, researching, and publishing Somali folktales and proverbs has produced an invaluable body of work that deserves both recognition and deep gratitude. To preserve this fading treasure of oral tradition and the Somali language, collaboration is essential. National institutions, grassroots writers, and Somali organizations working in this field must unite in this effort. Now more than ever, action is needed, as the Somali proverb reminds us: *Hadal badani haan ma buuxsho*—words alone will not fill the pot; we need action that matches the urgency of these concerns.

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