

Review article

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Kapchits, G. *Qaamuuska Casriga Ah: ee Maahmaahda Soomaaliyeed. A Modern Dictionary of Somali Proverbs*. Laashin, 2020. Pp. 347. ISBN: 9785020180765.

Georgi Kapchits is clearly the most prolific scholar studying Somali proverbs. His writings about Somali proverbs have covered a variety of topics. (He modestly does not list all of his works in the Bibliography at the end.) The present book combines his scholarly study of Somali proverbs and their structures, together with a collection of *circa* 5,000 proverbs.

I must say at the beginning, this review is written by a proverb scholar for an audience interested in proverbs, not written by a Somali scholar for a Somali audience.

Much of Kapchits' work is based on the pioneering work of Grigorii Permiakov (also spelled as Permyakov), the peerless Russian paremiologist. For those who cannot read Russian but can read English, the most accessible source is a translation of one of his articles in *Proverbium* (Permiakov, Grigorii L'vovich. "On the question of a Russian paremiological minimum." *Proverbium* 6 (1989): 91-102). Scholars such as Kapchits, writing in English about Permiakov's work, use the word "cliché" with a technical meaning, not the definition popularly used by English speakers. "Cliché", in this technical sense, is used for an established saying, a phrase or sentence that is commonly used as a whole. Permiakov's influence is clearly reflected in the first six chapters, a total of 25 pages.

The first chapter is "Sign nature, themes and logico-semantic classification of Somali paremias". It is built on Permiakov's work, but only briefly summarizes some of its distinctives, such as 28 relation types, etc. This system includes sets of opposites, such as "Usualness – Unusualness" and "Friendliness – Hostility."

The book continues with some short studies on Somali proverbs, such as structures and categories. In section 6, he examines

“Variants and variations of Somali paremias.” In a list of 249 common proverbs that he had collected by questionnaires from Somali speakers, he found that variant forms were submitted for each one. He also argues that in some cases, the original form of a proverb is now less used, rather a variant is displacing it (p. 28).

The largest parts of the book involve lists of proverbs. The first list is a list of the 315 most familiar proverbs among the Somalis, ranked by familiarity. Many scholars discuss how and whether to calculate the “paremiological minimum”, the best-known proverbs in a language. But Kapchits has actually done it, and clearly explains his methodology. By necessity, the collection of data for this was done with ethnic Somalis who lived in Europe.

The next list is the general collection of about 5,000 Somali proverbs, alphabetized. These are given in their Somali forms only, with no translation. This is a disappointment to people like me, but his intended audience clearly includes Somalis, not just scholars. This list of proverbs also includes variant forms of proverbs or gives cross-references to those with similar meanings under many of the entries, e.g. *Labaatanjir intuu geed ka booduu talo ka boodaa* is followed by a cross reference to *Nin yari intuu ka boodo ayuu arin ka boodaa* (p. 186). This is very useful for those who speak and read Somali.

This is followed by lists of proverbs under three categories. In the first, he lists 30 proverbs that contain quotations, a category that includes both wellerism proverbs and dialogue proverbs. Grouping these two categories under a broader category recognizes a commonality that is sometimes overlooked.

The second category lists 27 question and answer proverbs, differentiated from dialogue proverbs. Again, I think Kapchits is showing a potentially important distinction by separating these from dialogue proverbs, though they do share an important feature.

This is followed by a third list, enumerating/listing proverbs, such as: “Do not make friends with three [kinds of] men: he who does not allow anyone to be ahead of him, he who does not leave food for anyone, and he who does not talk to anyone.” Many of these are built with three items that were chosen not only for their thematic logic but also because they share some poetic feature. For example, the one just translated lists the three qualities, each with *ma-* and a root-initial *h-* and then three syllable words: *Saddex lama raaco: ma-horreeye, ma-hambeye iyo ma-haasaawshe* (pp. 15, 320).

Of these 294 enumerating proverbs, 223 (>75%) are based on lists of three things. There are 43 proverbs based on the number two. From four through seven, the number of examples drops greatly (four 15, five 6, six 3, seven 3), then only one example with a list of ten.

Kapchits has recognized the richness of these enumerating proverbs, discussing them early in the book (pp.12-18). He has also given a paper on this subset of proverbs at the annual Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs at Tavira, Portugal in 2018. This distinctive type of enumerating proverb is also documented in Gujarati of western India, e.g. “There exist three things which must be controlled: lust, mind, and anger” (Doctor 1993:58). “Three” is the most common number of items in both Kapchits’ Somali and Doctor’s Gujarati data. Is this because a comparison of three items is psycholinguistically more powerful? Or, since Somalia and India face each other across the Arabian Sea, is the use of lists of three items the result of contact? Or is it a combination of the two factors? Collections of data such as this will enable scholars to study this issue.

Somalis are rightfully and proudly known for having and using many proverbs. This book documents this for scholars and also equips Somalis in the diaspora to continue their use of them. I’ve already cited it in a manuscript I am preparing. By compiling this book, Georgi Kapchits has given us a multifaceted gift.

References

- Doctor, Raymond. “Indian Enumerative Proverbs”. *Proverbium*, vol. 10, 1993, pp. 51-64.
- Permiakov, Grigorii. “On the Question of a Russian Paremiological Minimum”, translated by Kevin McKenna. *Proverbium*, vol. 6, 1989, pp. 91-102.

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