MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

SPECIAL SECTION

Thinking Through Voice with a Somali (Love Doctor) Poet

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Abstract

During research on love songs and political poetry in Somaliland, one of my closest interlocutors has been a poet named Weedhsame who describes his work as arising from a duty to 'give voice to the voiceless'. Collaborating with a musician and singer to 'give voice' to otherwise mute love-sufferers, Weedhsame is revered as a 'love doctor' whose words provide therapeutic relief to his 'patients'. His political *maanso* poems also powerfully give voice—sonically and textually—to the otherwise inaudible concerns of marginalised communities. My conversations with Weedhsame have provided me with a compelling emic perspective on what it means to give voice to others, and the intimately social work of vocal mediation. They have also challenged me to think about my own anthropological voicing practices. In this reflection, I use my conversations with Weedhsame to consider the politics and practices of giving voice in Somaliland, in matters of love and politics, before turning these lessons back on my own practice. I focus especially on what these practices might mean for how anthropologists gather, assemble and sound the stories and 'voices' of others in our work.

Keywords

Voice, Representation, Somaliland, Ethnography, Sound.

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Introduction

‘Do sound waves merely carry energy, or do they generate the energy they transport?’ Weedhsame queried, in measured English. We were sitting across from each other on my living room floor in Hargeysa, about an hour into a conversation about his poetry, and the role(s) he occupies as a Somali poet. At this point we were discussing a love song Weedhsame had penned. I knew from previous interactions that he conceives of his poet duties to include ‘giving voice’ to the love sentiments of otherwise tongue-tied love-sufferers, and thus understands himself to be a ‘doctor’ of sorts, who treats love-sick patients. Yet his question pointed to a feature of songs that exceeded his wordsmithing work, highlighting instead the *singer*’s importance. I found myself momentarily tongue-tied, unsure if this was a rhetorical question. After several seconds of awkward silence, he repeated: ‘Do sound waves merely carry energy, or do they generate the energy they transport?’

‘This is a physics question,’ I finally summoned, deflecting an answer.

‘Yes, it is a physics question,’ Weedhsame affirmed, with an anticipatory energy in his voice, ‘but it is relevant to our discussion.’ He then proceeded to explain that love songs are collaboratively composed by a poet and a musician, who give words and melody to the love-sentiments of an otherwise mute love-suffering patient. But it will not ‘reach our ears’ until a singer ‘embodies’ this message *in her voice*: a voice in which the words and melody of others are given breath, and that, in its material sound, carries its own unique affective force.

This was not the first time I’d heard Weedhsame describe his work as a poet. Over a decade of research on the sociopolitical dynamics of oral poetry and song in Somaliland, I’d had many conversations with Weedhsame—and dozens of other poets, musicians and singers—about what it means to give voice to the feelings and concerns of others, whether about love or politics.[1] But his physics lesson that day resonated on several levels. Not only did he highlight the necessarily collaborative process required to give voice to his love-sick patients, he also drew attention to the significance of *sound*. His comment also *literally* resonated: we were recording our conversation for a podcast episode that, thanks to sound recording technology and the wonders of the internet, was to be carried to unknown future listening ears (Woolner and Weedhsame 2024). This podcast was, furthermore, part of my own effort to ‘give voice’ in a more literal sense to my

[1] These conversations have occurred in both English and Somali. Direct quotations, and translations of direct quotations, appear in quotation marks. Where the quotations are translations, I have indicated the pertinent Somali phrasing in parenthesis or footnote. Significantly, these conversations have spanned two separate research projects: one on love songs and one on political poetry. This piece is my first attempt to think about ‘voice’ across these two genres, and to turn these reflections towards my own anthropological voicing practices.

interlocutors, whose voices are usually stripped of sound and flattened into quoted or paraphrased words on a page.

From a physics perspective, I'm not sure if Weedhsame answered his own question, at least if it requires an either/or response. But his comment, and the context of its utterance, casts into sharp relief how our work intersects, and how both of us are constantly navigating a particular politics of representation—or politics of *voice*—as we go about our respective work compiling, retelling, amplifying, or otherwise conveying others' stories. It was also a good reminder that in Somali, as in English, 'voice' (*cod*) is a multivalent term with both sonic and political-representational dimensions: *cod* can mean 'voice', 'sound', 'musical note' or 'vote'.[2] The doubly resonant nature of his comment, especially considered alongside the focus of this special issue, furthermore left me convinced that anthropologists might have something to gain by more fully considering our interlocutors' voicing practices (cf. Stoller 1994). And while my research does not primarily focus on health or medicine and I don't typically define myself as a medical anthropologist, the informal conversations I've had with the editors and other contributors to this volume about 'voice', both metaphorical and material, have reaffirmed that a reflection on this theme might be a productive contribution—not least because Somali poets often conceive of their voicing work in medical terms. What follows, then, are some thoughts on what I have learned about Somali politics and practices of giving voice to the concerns of others, and some tentative observations and suggestions about what these practices might teach us about the intimate and political work of vocal mediation.

Giving voice to love(-suffering)

I will start where my own research started—with love songs—and the poet's role in giving voice to experiences of love(-suffering). The first thing to note is that (romantic) love in Somaliland is conceived as an all-consuming force that literally grabs hold of people and invariably causes *suffering*. In Somali a lovestruck person does not say 'I have fallen in love'. Rather, they say '*jacayl baa i hayaa*': 'love has me'. Importantly, love(-suffering) frequently manifests as physical pain that ravages the body and causes mental disturbances.[3] Love-pain is, in one sense, an inevitable result of the overwhelming force of love, but it is also shaped by social conventions regarding marriage *and* the taboo nature of discussing love. Indeed, expectations of stoicism in men and modesty in women make conveying love or showing vulnerability incredibly difficult, in both public and private, and an inability to express desire is itself often cited as a primary cause of love-suffering. This is

[2] This is also the case for the verbal form *codee* (with various modifiers). Importantly, 'c' is the Somali rendering of the Arabic letter 'ayn'. *Cod* is a word that begins with a sound produced deep in the throat, rather than a word that sounds like a type of fish.

[3] A full account of Somali conceptions of love(-suffering) is beyond my current scope but see Chapter 1 ('Anatomy of a Love Song') in Woolner 2023a.

where poets come in. While this has not always been the case, since the 1940/50s songs have become an acceptable—or even expected—forum for the airing of intimate aspirations and frustrations. Love songs quite literally 'sing what cannot be spoken' (Agawu 2001, 4).

In this context, poets function as doctors in several ways. In a general sense, people experiencing love challenges frequently turn to love songs to make sense of their problems, for counsel, or to feel less alone in their love challenges (Woolner 2022, 2023a). By composing songs that help people make sense of their own love experiences, poets treat untold numbers of love-suffering listeners. Weedhsame himself offers commentary on this general treatment method in a poem called *'*Cusbitaalka boholyowga*'* ('The hospital of longing'), in which he imagines a hospital where sleepless patients 'thin as toothbrush sticks' (due to love-induced lack of appetite) subsist on a diet of love songs (*qaraami*) and IV-administered sounds of the oud.[4] But poets may also play an even more immediate doctor role. Individual love-sufferers may also specifically seek out a poet, who in their role is known to be a 'boon' of experience able to offer counsel *and,* when required, put words to difficult-to-express sentiments of otherwise mute love-sufferers. Poets like Weedhsame have thus described their work to me as quite literally 'giving voice to the voiceless.'

As suggested above, the process of giving voice is a distributed and collaborative one.[5] Love songs nearly always start in some type of real-world love experience. Sometimes a poet or a singer's experiences inspire a song, but more often it is the experience of another person entirely, brought to a poet by a third party or by a love-suffering patient directly. Being mindful to respect doctor-patient confidentiality, the poet works to put experience into words, adhering to the alliterative and scansion rules that govern Somali verse. Next, the poem is given to a *laxamiste* (melody-writer), who selects an appropriate *waddo* (literally 'road,' or scale) and then sets the text to a melody that conveys the lyrics' emotion. The song is then set to music before being given to a singer, who animates the words and melody in her voice. Singers are selected based on their perceived 'fit' for a song, by considering their vocal range, age/gender, and ability to convey a song's emotion.

At a mechanical level, this composition process requires a poet, musician and singer who are technically skilled in their respective crafts. But for songs to successfully convey the *'run'* (truth) of an experience, this must also be a *feeling*-driven process. If a love experience does not 'touch' the poet, it is hard to compose.

[4] This is a paraphrase of these lines: '*Cusbitaalka boholyowga/ Bukaan jiifku waa caato/ Duul caday ka dhuudhuuban/ Saamaleelku waa caadi/ Sayloonku waa cuudka/ Cuntaduna qaraam weeye*.' A recording of Weedhsame reciting this poem, alongside the poem's text and English translation, is in Chapter 2 of Woolner 2023b.
[5] For a fuller account of this process, see Chapter 2 of Woolner 2023a.

But if an experience resonates, they may embark on a process that combines what Weedhsame termed ‘empathy’ and ‘imagination’ to translate feeling into words. As love songs nearly always speak from a first-person perspective, a poet must ‘stand in [another’s] shoes’ to ‘imagine’ how a song’s protagonist might speak. Given that love songs are almost exclusively composed by men, this often requires the poet to imagine themselves in the shoes of a woman. This empathic-imaginative process is then repeated by the *laxamiste,* who must feel and then translate a song’s lyrics and underlying emotion into patterned *sound* (melody). Finally, a singer must work to ‘get inside’ the emotional experience of a song. The singer Ubax Fahmo, for example, described to me a process of ‘becoming one’ with a song’s protagonist (‘*waxad la mid la noqoonaysa qofka wax kuula yimi’)* in order to effectively (and affectively) voice her feelings. Returning to a medical idiom, I’ve been struck by how closely this process requires something like the ‘clinical empathy’ that Jodi Halpern (2001) advocates for, and that anthropologists Hollan and Throop (2011) have developed: empathy not based on ‘detached inference’ but rather a form of knowing that combines ‘affective attunement’ with an intentional form of perspective-taking.

Importantly, not all artists successfully manage this process, and without proper feeling (*dareen*) a song may be said to ‘sound fake’. But when artists succeed, songs allow listeners to ‘taste’ *(dhadhami*) the emotion of the original love experience. Significantly, the most obvious voice that listeners hear belongs to the vocalist, and songs are thus primarily associated with singers (indeed, singers are often referred to as ‘*codka*’, i.e. ‘the voice’). The most revered singers are those that ‘make you feel what they feel’, as one listener put it to me, via a voice that seems to spring unmediated from ‘deep, deep within the soul’—even when singing about another’s experience. This voice, however, is thoroughly multivocal. Behind a singer’s voice are what Weedhsame termed the ‘hidden’ voices of the poet, *laxamiste*, and the otherwise inaudible love-suffering patient. What we have is thus a voicing process that is both distributed and collaborative but that nevertheless results in a voice that is heard as the sincere and truthful representation of an individual’s love(-suffering) experience.

A voice ‘for the people’

While the lyrics of love songs often represent a significant portion of a poet’s repertoire, the more ‘prestigious’ work of Somali poets past and present is the composition of a class of poetry known as *maanso*. Maanso poems may be on any theme, including love, but are often about political or social issues. Historically, poets were expected to be clan spokesmen, but alongside broader postcolonial transformations in Somali governance, poets are increasingly expected to

represent ‘the people’, often against the reigning powers that be.[6] As for love songs, many poets I’ve spoken with describe this work as arising from a duty to be ‘a voice for the voiceless’. Put another way, poet Siciid Gahayr told me that poets are ‘guardians’ who should ‘speak for the poor and marginalised and those who cannot [speak for themselves].’ Like love songs, maanso are usually inspired by real world events or conditions that a poet observes. Sometimes poems even begin at the request of individuals who ask poets to comment on certain issues. And like love songs, they are often precipitated by situations that *move* or *compel* poets to compose. Poets thus consistently highlight that *emotion* is at the heart of *all* poetry. Indeed, reflecting on this issue in our podcast conversation, Weedhsame deployed a valued Somali speech practice, which serves both to demonstrate a speaker’s literary knowledge and make an impression on listeners: he recited an excerpt of a famous poem (this one by Yusuf Xaaji Aadan Qabille):

> *Haddaan gabayga uurkoo bukiyo arami kaa keenin,*
> *Ama olol xanuun iyo jacayl kugu ijbaaraynin*
> *Afkuun baad ka leedee tixuhu arar ma yeeshaan*
>
> If a broken heart or wound doesn’t bring poetry from you
> Or the sound of pain and love doesn’t force you to recite it
> You only speak plain words and the lines begin no poem[7]

The specific process by which feelings and experience of a sociopolitical nature are given voice, however, differs from love songs in several regards. To begin, maanso poems are composed to be orally recited rather than sung, usually by the poet themselves. Since poems are composed and performed by a single person, the ‘voice’ of maanso is heard to be that of the poet. Indeed, Orwin (2021) argues that a defining feature of maanso is that its ‘lyric voice’ always belongs to the poet. Maanso are almost always composed in the first person, but from the perspective of the poet rather than an otherwise voiceless protagonist. Such poems thus do not require the same intentional perspective-taking as love songs, at least not with the goal of speaking from another’s perspective.

If the ‘voice’ of maanso is more straightforwardly the material and lyrical voice of the poet, why do poets speak of their poetry as providing ‘a voice for the voiceless’? In my more recent research about Miimley, a 2017 poetry debate about government corruption, I’ve found that poets think of their work as accomplishing this task on several levels.[8] The first is by using their verse to document injustice and thus raise awareness about the challenges faced by marginalised

[6] What exactly this looks like, especially in Somaliland, is contested—indeed, a through current of Miimley is a debate about how poetry ought to be used. See Woolner 2024.
[7] This is also cited in Weedhsame (2018, 200.) The translation is by Martin Orwin.
[8] For more specifics and examples of the poems, see Woolner 2024 and Woolner (forthcoming). Over the course of this research I interviewed fourteen poets who contributed to Miimley.

communities. More specifically, poets do this by naming categories of vulnerable people and populating their poems with characters whose experiences are presented as evidence of injustice. Sometimes these characters are generically evoked (e.g., orphans, widows), while other times they are presented as specific individuals who are inspired by real people or imagined from situations a poet observes.

On the most literal level, some characters are given voice by means of direct, first-person speech. For instance, the second poem of Miimley (‘Marag’ [Witness] by Cabdullahi Xasan Ganey) takes the form of an overheard court case, in which an oppressed person, serving as a witness, speaks of the challenges they’ve faced and levels accusations via quoted speech. The defendant responds, also in quoted speech. Many maanso poems are thus multivocal in their integration of several speakers’ perspectives into a single poetic account (cf. Hill 1995; Englund 2015, 2018). Additionally, in the poem ‘Hooyo maagtay’ (Discouraged mother) the poet Layla Sagal herself takes on the first-person voice of an otherwise voiceless mother for much of the poem. Several male poets told me that this made the poem especially ‘touching’ and representative of the ‘more emotional’ quality of women’s verse. Layla herself explained her poem as arising from a desire to make others ‘feel the mother’s challenges’ (‘*inn hooyada dhibta haysata la dareemo*’). It is worth noting that women are broadly classed as a marginalised group and Layla was seen to be speaking on women’s behalf, even as she took on the voice of a woman whose experiences differed from hers. Unlike in love songs, a male poet could not have accomplished this.

Related to this last point, I have increasingly been asking poets in very direct terms by what authority they speak for others. In cases where someone directly approaches a poet and asks them to say something, there is a clear line of authorisation. Some poets pointed to this. But the answer more frequently given to me has been an even more succinct one: listeners. In this vein, Weedhsame explained that if ‘the people’ feel that you ‘are loyal to their needs’, and that you compose poetry out of a ‘duty’ to others rather than for your own fame or fortune, then they will allow you to represent them. In the case of love songs and political verse, it is ultimately listeners who make a poet: without a receptive audience, poems have little effect. But if, by speaking about issues of shared concern in a manner that resonates (metaphorically and physically) with listeners, then, in Weedhsame’s words, ‘they will make you their king.’

Some implication for anthropological voicing practices

The two distinct but related process of giving voice I have just described reveal a multi-layered politics of representation that shapes who, how, and to what effect the perspectives of otherwise voiceless individuals or groups are made audible in

Somaliland. This politics is made meaningful by specific voicing practices that are very much rooted in a specific context—and, indeed, my work to date has focused on how these politics and practices reveal and help to shape intimate and political subjectivities and relations in Somaliland. What, then, might these practices have to teach anthropologists, medical or otherwise? One simple yet profound lesson is that different situations demand different voices, and different voices in turn produce different effects/affects. There is surely also much to be said about the political and ethical dynamics of representing others—issues that have rightly prompted extended reflection throughout anthropology's history, and with growing force since the *Writing Culture* debate. But rather than retreading well-trodden ground, I will focus on two modest observations and related suggestions.

The first observation is one poignantly highlighted by Weedhsame at the outset of this piece and captured in the very multivalent meanings of *cod* in Somali: *sound matters.* Put another way, the voice's power lies in part in its very materiality, which exceeds the linguistic content it conveys. This is straightforwardly the case in love songs, where the shape of a melody and texture of a singer's voice are critical to songs' affective force. But it also applies to maanso. What sets maanso poems apart from prose and everyday speech, after all, are their alliterative, rhythmic and sounded qualities that, for the most part, continue to enter the world via poets' material voices (see Orwin 2020, 2022).

What might this mean, in more practical terms, for how we compile and convey the stories and voices of others in our work? As I hinted at the outset of this piece, one of my own responses has been to experiment with *sounded* forms of research dissemination that make audible my interlocutors' material voices.[9] But given that the mainstay of our discipline remains *written* text, I wonder how we might also *write* in ways that honour the political-affective affordances of sound and the unique materiality of our interlocutors' voices—or, as Kavedžija highlights (this volume), their silences. Such writing must somehow pair a recognition of the uniquely non-discursive and affective qualities of sound and the importance of listening (Kapchan 2017b, 2) with intentional and creative efforts to evoke sound (and silence) on the page. Alongside carefully listening to our interlocutors' voicing practices, might engaging sounded-writing from fields like ethnopoetics and sound studies help medical anthropologists *sound* more forcefully?[10]

[9] This has included making several podcasts (Woolner 2016; Woolner and Weedhsame 2024), collaborating on an album of Somali music (Various Artists 2017), and compiling a website as an audio-visual supplement to my book (Woolner 2023b).
[10] Here I have in mind several scholars whose work models possible ways of evoking sound on the page, including: Dell Hymes formative work on ethnopoetics and the 'ethnography of speaking' (see Kroskrity and Webster 2015); Steven Feld's work on 'acoustemology' (2015); Deborah Kapchan's writing on 'sound knowledge' and listening (2017a, 2017b), and several other contributions to Kapchan's 2017 edited volume (e.g. Jackson 2017). Kate Herrity's (2023) recent (criminology) book on sound in prison life is also exemplary for its sound-evoking prose.

The second observation relates to the dialectic relationship inherent in poets' work. As poets described it to me, 'giving voice to the voiceless' arises from a sense of duty and is extended as an act of care, whether to soothe the wounds of love-sufferers or call attention to injustice.[11] But to be *received* as an act of care, listeners must hear *themselves* in/through the voices of others *and* want to receive a poet's work, whether as 'treatment' for love-sickness or as a form of social-political intervention on their behalf (see Woolner 2022). 'Giving voice' is thus also about *receiving voice* and/or *giving over voice* to the care of others; it is always a dialectic process that involves poets, specific 'patients' and unspecified future listeners. Both love songs and maanso are, after all, thoroughly *multivocal:* they both integrate the voices of multiple others, whether literally or in a more metaphorical sense.

Now I certainly will not suggest that we conflate the ethnographer-interlocutor and poet/doctor-patient relationship. And as a foreigner working in a postcolonial context whose interlocutors are adept at using their own voices, I resolutely do not conceive of my own work as 'giving voice to the voiceless'. But I do wonder, firstly, if (the sound of) our writing might change if we more intentionally considered if and how our interlocutors—or even unspecified future readers—might hear themselves in our work (and perhaps, in so doing, even find some recognition or relief). I also think we have something to gain by more fully embracing ethnography as itself fundamentally a practice of vocal mediation. Might we be freed of some of the solipsistic anxieties prompted by the *Writing Culture* debate if we thought of ethnography as an intertextual nexus (Nevins 2010)—or *intervocal*[12] assemblage—where inherently dialogical voicing, listening and writing practices converge?

Authorship statement

This article was written solely by the author.

[11] Poets, of course, may be motivated by all manner of non-altruistic reasons (including fame and fortune), and accusations to this effect feature strongly in Miimley. Such accusations ultimately uphold the ideal that poets should be a 'voice for the people', unmotivated by their own interests.

[12] I borrow the term 'intervocal' from Feld (1998, 471), who uses it for its relationship to both 'intertextuality' and 'intersubjectivity.'

Ethics statement

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