

Mohammed Nur: Somali poet, language assistant at Hamburg University



Mohammed Nur, Somali, a traditional Muslim teacher in Berbera, later a language teacher in Hamburg, became one of the first important sources on the Somali language due to a series of historical coincidences. He shaped the linguistic exploration of Somali (Berbera and Jabarti dialects), as well as the documentation of traditional Somali poetry in Europe. His life is on the one hand characterised by the British colonisation of his home country (Somaliland), through which he was drawn into the conflicts of Europe, and on the other hand by his very traditional Somali upbringing. His experience with Europeans and with the poetic language culture of his family turned him into an ideal source for the field of African Studies, which was flourishing in his times. As a young Somali teacher, he had become the leader of a religious-diplomatic Somali delegation sent by the shaykh of Mecca to the rebellious leader Abdallah Hasan, for negotiations, which gave him a rich experience in Somali political

culture, and later lived in Germany with different contracts, first as a teacher in an “ethnographic exposition”. During World War I he was regarded an “enemy subject”, as he came from a British territory, and was interned in a camp. When the institute for so-called “colonial languages” was being set up in Hamburg in the early 20th century, he was freed, hired directly from the camp by Professor Meinhof. Even though Germany lost all of her colonies at the end of World War I, the institute was being expanded further and became an aspiring research centre. Within a short period of time, the University of Hamburg developed from the merger between the institute and other academic institutions. The Somali internee Mohammed Nur played an historical role in this, which has thus far been widely overlooked in the history of the university, but which has become decisive for the establishment of a tradition of Northeast African Studies at the University of Hamburg. Mohammed gained a contract as a language teacher and experienced the beginnings of the newly founded university. Both his knowledge of the vocal tradition of the Somalis of his native region and his own poetic talent helped support the documentation of the oral literary heritage. The texts he wrote and documented are part of the early examples of Somali oral literature. In the early 1920s he returned to Somaliland. Today his portrait is displayed in the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg, after it had been missing and lost within the university for almost a decade. The rediscovery of this Somali poet is part of a new appreciation of the early non-German academic members of staff, who stood back behind the academic officials, and who have mostly been failed to acknowledge in academic history.

Text: Wolbert Smidt

