This thesis investigates the style and modes of performance of Kenyan Somali oral poetry. Several aspects of the oral poetry of this community are discussed, including both verbal and non-verbal elements. In addition, the study identifies the relationship between poetic performance and social life. Some of the activities linked to oral performance which are discussed in the thesis are: pastoral duties, courting, wedding and marriage ceremonies, child care and clan feuding.

The main proposition of the study is that there is a close link between oral poetic composition and performance and a community's way of life. In the Kenyan Somali context, the performance of oral poetry derives directly from the people's way of life, their everyday experiences in the vast arid environment of the North Eastern Province, their nomadic, pastoral activities and their Islamic faith. Conversely, the performance of the poetry and the community's response to it contribute significantly to the sustenance, enhancement and promotion of the community's activities and experiences.

Based on field material collected in the North Eastern Province of Kenya in 1991 and 1992, the study endeavours to interpret the oral poetry from the point of view of the people who perform it and among whom it is performed. Apart from locating the poetry within the geographical and socio-historical context of Kenyan Somali society, attempts are made to identify its main categories, its recurrent topics and themes and the major occasions of its performance.

The study uses a composite stylistic and socio-psychological theoretical framework to analyse the language, structure and techniques of performance of the poetry. It suggests that the community's response to the poetry is closely related to the stylistic and performing devices.