

The Culture of Politics: The Somali Experience

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May 05, 2013

Introduction

Following his extensive expedition into the hinterlands of the Somali ecology, Sir Richard Burton, the 19th century acentric British explorer, in his eventual meetings with several Somalis chiefs, in particular Garad Adan Garad Koshin (Geri tribe) and Sultan Sharmarke (Issak), gained an intrinsic understanding of Somali kinship, culture, religion, and their system of governance. In his subsequent book, “First Footsteps in East Africa,” Sir Burton came to the conclusion that Somalis are fiercely *republicans* and a race that values personal freedom. Other observers of the Somali society, the indomitable student of the Somali society, I. M. Lewis, in particular, commented on the prominence of kinship. What is less emphasized is the dual nature of the Somali society that is on the one hand a kinship based society but at the same time a nation conscious of its oneness.²

This essay would assess the dual nature of the Somali society that is both clan and national in its consciousness. How to structure a sustainable system of governance in a society with these two contradictory attributes is of immense interest to students of Somalia. The unitary- based system of governance that reigned between 1960 and 2012, where Mogadishu suffocated and choked off the regions no longer holds any appeal to the majority of the Somali society. The observation that Sir Burton made in 1858 that Somalis are *republicans* is now memorialized in the Transitional Federal Government’s constitution that adopts a federated republic.

The Unity of Clan and Nation

Somali people are keenly aware of their individuality and the private ownership of the herds they each keep. Yet, they observe the rule that land and resources are divided along clan lines, and these resources are accordingly collective endowments. In that regard, one may choose to view Hargaysa, Kismayo, Bossaso, or Mogadishu as cities owned by one or more closely affiliated clans. At the same time, however, these cities and many other locales are Somali geographies. Hence the Somali saying of “geel jire geela waa wada jirtaa wana kala jirta,” or “*a herdsman holds his livestock in private while sharing the common good with the larger community,*” holds true for the essence of the Somali culture and persona, a persona that permeates in his/her political culture.

Hussein Adam known by the nickname of Hussein Tanzania, writes that “*the inherent lineage-based clan nature of “centripetal and centrifugal [tendencies], at once drawing*

the Somalis into a powerful social fabric of kinship affinity and cultural solidarity while setting them against one another speaks to the essence of the Somali culture of politics”³ This cultural thinking permeates politics and business transactions in both rural and urban ecologies of Somali settlements. This is a clear expression of the way that Somali pastoral individualism and [clan] communal belonging patterns are wrapped in one.

Given this unity of contradictions of the Somali cultural construct, the Somali duality if you will, the habitat is mainly that of clan real estate. Bassaso is a Majeerteen country as much as Hargaysa is an Issaq territory, or Baydhabo as Digil & Mirifle stronghold. By the same token, these territories are at the same time Somali territories. A case in point is the following example: a deadly conflict in Daroor, in the Somali regional State of Ethiopia (Kilil 5), pitted two Issaq sub-clans against each other, quickly spreading to several districts, and resulting in the death of about hundred people in a matter of days in 2007.⁴

To the chagrin of many, it was not the Ethiopian government that stopped the bloodshed, but the Somaliland administration, which sent a delegation of prominent politicians and traditional elders from Hargaysa to Daroor. This is a case where kinship territorial unity figures prominently in the political culture of the Somali society, regardless of modern state boundary lines. In the last part of the paper we will assess how the concept of clan ownership of different geographies in the Somali Republic is contributing to the formation of regional governments that are posing political challenges to the unitary-based system of governance.

At another level, under intricate social contractual agreements, Somalis recognize that clan land is open to all Somali speaking individuals in time of war and other calamities. A Somali individual, or groups of individuals, are allowed, especially in time of war or famine, to move in and live anywhere in the Somali geography, despite the prevailing political reality. A case in point is that a Hawiya clansman fleeing the civil war in Mogadishu is welcome in the Darood dominated Eastern provinces of Kenya (NFD). In this instance, Somali identity takes primacy over clan lineage, or kinship system which differentiates individuals and emphasizes the “otherness.”⁵

Somali Pastoral Nationalism

With the advent of a modern Somali state in 1960 came a certain political culture which, in essence, contradicted the widely held traditional belief systems Somalis had about their pastoral ecology, national unity, access to state power and political patronage. As much as Antonio Gramsci attributes the functional aspect of human daily life to class and class contradiction, in the Somali context, the clan factor has the most enduring impact on the country’s political culture.

Somalis are largely pastoralists and sedentary farmers who consciously define their ecology within the context of their land. Somali ecology comprises the large swath of land that extends from the highlands of Harar (Ethiopia) to the valleys of Juba River, from the barren lands of Djibouti, running parallel to the Rift Valley, to the Northern Frontier Districts (NFD) of Kenya. This geography has largely remained unchanged since Ahmed Al-Gazali (Ahmed Gury) launched his war, the Abyssinian Conquest, in the 16th century. Notwithstanding external identities imposed on the Somali nation, especially after the Berlin Conference in 1884, which is often referred to as the “scramble for Africa” and permanently apportioned different Somali clans and geographies to different competing European and Ethiopian colonial powers, Somali ecology and territorial boundaries have not changed.

As a matter of fact, some Somali clans (notably the Geri, Absame, Bartire, Mareehan, “Harti of Maid”, Issa, Issaq, Gadubursi, Gurgure, Hawiya (murursade) still occupy the same geographies and territories that they occupied in the 16th century and before, despite several colonial attempts to upset these groups’ ecological balance.⁶ Despite said unity in ecology, due to foreign powers, notably Europe and Ethiopia, a Somali in today’s context could be a potential citizen of several modern states in the Horn of Africa region, including Ethiopia, Somalia (Somaliland, Puntland, Jubaland and Central regions), Kenya and Djibouti. ⁷

Modern states in neighbouring countries, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, two countries that vehemently seek to undermine the traditional way Somalis understand their national ecology have been determined to limit the movement of Somali pastoralists to internationally demarcated boundaries. Wole Soyinka calls the uninvited imposition of artificial boundaries to divided organic groups like Somalis “an open sore.” Soyinka believes that such inorganic divisions of similar linguistic groups through artificial boundaries fan ethnic conflict and prove to be the primary impediment to establishing democratic and stable societies in Africa.⁸

The Demise of Maandeeq

Unsolicited limitation imposed on the organic movements of Somalis within their ecology notwithstanding, Somalis expected of Mandeeq -- the lactating she-camel, born on the eve of June 26, 1960 who joined its other half on July 1, 1960 – of an insurmountable and burdensome deliverance on the intertwined questions of territorial realignment of Somali ecology, good governance, and a government by the people. Mandeeq came short in delivering all three promises.⁹

First, Mandeeq or the new Somali state depicted by the poet, Kasim, as a lactating she-camel was expected to enable all her Somali children to freely move around and graze

their livestock on all the Somali territories, including the area that lies between the highlands of Harar and the savannah of Haud and Reserved Area in the Ogaden. However, Mandeeq's movement was restricted to limit its ecological movements within the boundaries of the new state, thereby cutting it off from the well-endowed savannah of Haud and Reserved Area in the Somali region under Ethiopian rule. This inorganic reapportioning of Somali ecology disrupted the rational management of pastoral resources.

In order to realign the culture of modern state boundaries in the region with the organic, ecology rational Somali perception of nation building, Somalia in its most recent history, fought two wars against Ethiopia. Although they were defeated in both 1964 and 1978, Somali leaders in each case showcased the unifying power of the clan by mobilizing Somalis all over the Horn of Africa. Hussein Adam adds that "clan and lineage antagonisms do not preclude a will to unite or a feeling of common destiny ..." In other words, when Somali clansmen preserve their own rational decision-making by uniting the herdsmen toward a well-defined objective (*geeli jere geel waa wada jirtaa*), they are powerful against any adversary from without. In those two wars, all Somali clans were united, and consequently showcased their [ethnic] power in the Horn of Africa. In 1978, for example, Somalia defeated Ethiopia and could have realized the dream of Mandeeq had it not been for a highly coordinated military intervention by Russia and the former Warsaw bloc.

At another level, Somalis also expected of Mandeeq, or the new state, to treat all its children with an even and ecumenical hand. But, in its short-lived statehood, Mandeeq was utilized for clan and parochial interests and thereby lost a uniting reach. What was expected to be a state accessible to all its citizens ended up serving individuals and particular clan interests, which ultimately led to the disintegration and failure of the Somali state. Once the state failed to live up to its promise (treating all clans with equality and with a sense of fairness), its guardians resorted to departing their company (*geel jire geela waa kala jirtaa*).¹⁰

A third factor contributing to the dismal failure of the 1960 republic of Somalia lays in the choice of adopting a unitary state structure, a choice which has roots in the 1950s paradigm of modernization development. In modernization development theories, national development is based on a centralized top-down approach, where all power, be it economic, political, social, and cultural, is concentrated in the capital, creating an imbalance of the distribution of resources. Despite the fact that Mogadishu (capital city) was an ancient coastal city that was more advanced than any of the regional centres of the country, Somalia's post-colonial state of the 1960 enhanced the consumption-oriented elites in Mogadishu, and gave them an unfair advantage on services, education, investment and loans to housing. The failure of the Somali state is a clear testimony to

the pitfalls of a strong unitary and undemocratic state in a differentiated society like Somalia, where each region represents a distinct clan's or affiliated clans' interest.

The proposed federalism, as promulgated in the draft Somali constitution, therefore, is not only a recognition of such a failure, but an attempt to memorialize the degree to which clan groupings in Somalia impact the culture of modern politics, while at the same time hoping that militating impacts resulting from politics based on clan would be tamed. It is also an entrenched and unshakable recognition that a unitary state has majestically failed in this clan-based society. //

The current divide between the camps that support federalism versus the Mogadishu-based centralists is an expression of the age-old tension between the centre and the periphery regions. Whereas those who support federalism claim to recognize past negotiations of local rights, they allege that those who still adhere to a centralist unitary system of government are: (a) negating the most recent past history of Somalia; and (b) hanging onto the old paradigm where the centre dominates the people of the regions.

In simple terms, the raging disagreement between Mogadishu and periphery groups is a power-sharing debate between federalists versus centralists. In the background of this contentious debate lies (1) recognizable clan conflicts, (1) the impending impacts of the 1991 clan cleansing which partially depopulated Mogadishu, and (3) economic justice and restructuring of the relationship Mogadishu had with the rest of Somalia's regions.

Conclusion

Since 1960 at the inception of the Republic of Somalia, regional relationships with Mogadishu have been tenuous. At times, atrocities have been meted on the periphery groups; in the 1991 civil war, Mogadishu carried its own version of "clan cleansing" against those who hail from the periphery regions. It is within this backdrop that groups from the periphery regions uphold the spirit and principles of federalism while elites inside Mogadishu oppose it. To Mogadishu elites' oblivious and persistent deafness on the demands of the regions, one may say the Somali adage of "Lax dhukani abaar ma oga," or a "deaf ship never hears about the impending drought" seems to be a fitting adage.

The breakdown in communication between Mogadishu and Puntland in last days of April 2013 is rooted in the wider debate of whether to restructure Somalia in a federalist system or maintain a form of centralised system of government. So far, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has been accused of changing the provincial constitution in favour of centralism to the chagrin of President Dr Farole who played a lion's share in the drafting of said document. Such is an indication of the complexity of solving Somalia's failed

state.

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Notes

1. *I dedicated this article to Dr. Hussein Adan (Hussein Tanzainia) who has eloquently written on the duality of Somali kinship some 30 years ago..The article is based on an earlier essay the author wrote for the Kenyan-based Kenyan based Rift Valley Institute. He was commissioned to write on the Culture of Politics in Somalia. A different version of this essay is also included in an article which appeared in the current volume of the Horn of Africa Journal (Vol. XXX, 2012).*

3. *Hussein M. Adam “Language, National Consciousness and Identity-The Somali Experience, in I.M.Lewis, 1994, ibid, p. op. cite, 33.*

4. *The delegation that left Hargaysa to Daroor was led by Mr. Ahmed Silanyo, current President of Somaliland, who at the time was the leader of the opposition party, Kulmiye.*

5. *Dadab in the Northwestern District of Kenya (NFD) has one of the largest refugee camps in the world. Most of the refugees in the camp have escaped from the gunshots in Mogadishu or from the famine stricken regions of Middle Shebelle of Somalia. Northern Frontier District of Kenya (NFD) is largely populated by Daroods and as such hosts other needy Somalis.*

6. *Fatuh Al Habash: The Conquest of Abyssinia (16th Century), Sahib Ad Dini Ahmed abd al-binuqadir binu Salim bin Utman ArabFaqih, translated by Lester Stenhouse, Tsehai Publishers, 2003.*

7. *The Somali society was divided into Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, French Somaliland (today’s Republic of Djibouti) and Ethiopian Somaliland land, generally known as the Ogaden region. The Ogaden region is mired in armed conflict between the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Ethiopian Federal Government. In 1964 and 1978, the Democratic Republic of Somalia and Ethiopia fought two bloody wars over the Ogaden region. In 1963, at the wake of the Kenyan independence, Britain transferred the Somali region of NFD to the newly independent country of Kenya in exchange for securing property rights to English settlers in Kenya.*

8. *Wole Soyinka, the Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis, W.E.B.Du Bois Institute 19976.*

9. *Kasim is considered to be one of the most patriotic secular poets in Somali culture. Kasim passed away in 2007. His poem about Mandeeq has two readings. One is about the freedom a Somali pastoralist requiring to move his/her herds around the natural habitat. . The other reading is that the Somali state is supposed to nurture all its*

citizens the same way a lactating mother would feeds its offspring. Somalia state came short of both goals.

10. Mandeeq is a mythical lactating she-camel that grazed on the fulfilling grass of the Savannah of the Haud region, and then quenched the hunger of all her offspring and the owner. In the Somali lexicon, Mandeeq became a euphemism for the post-independence Somali state that (1) tried to feed all her Somali children; and (2) brings all the Somali geographies on which Mandeeq grazed under one flag. But other forces denied Mandeeq to graze on its natural habitat, and as a result, Mandeeq herself became discriminatory towards her own children by dividing them along clan lines.

11. Although the root causes of Somalia's disintegration are multilayered, the immediate cause can be located in the aftermath of the defeat following the 1978 Ethio-Somali war. After that defeat, opposition groups, first the Somali Salvation Democratic Front, the Somali National Movement and the United Somali Congress, sought help from Ethiopia, Somalia's traditional enemy and the main detractor of the concept of "Mandeeq."