

# **An appraisal of the ‘Dervish state’ in northern Somalia (1899-1920)**

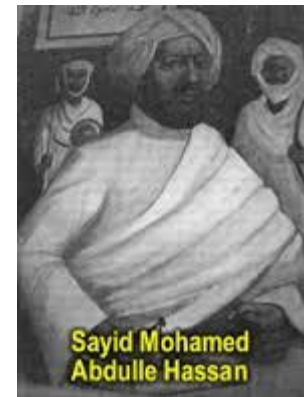
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The Somali Dervish ‘state’ was related to the Dervish uprising, that shook the British Protectorate and other parts of northern and also partly southern Somalia between 1899 and 1920. A ‘state’ implies a minimum of centralised and institutionalised power (i.e., a government), a territory and a population. The Somali Dervish state indeed featured a clear centralised governance structure, with Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan on top. The Sayid (which is an honorary title; the British called him ‘Mad Mullah’) was surrounded by a group of trusted commanders and advisors who were members of the Dervish council (in Somali called *khusuusi*). Together, the Sayid and the council controlled the military units. Islamic judges had the task of upholding law and order among the Dervishes and their kin. But clearly, Mohamed Abdille Hassan had the power to take the final decision in all matters he deemed important. The Somali Dervish state never had a clearly demarcated territory. The Dervishes operated between different temporary local centres (e.g., Aynabo, Buuhoodle, Eyl, Taleeh) in northern Somalia and, for a shorter period, had also stations in central Somalia such as Beledweyn. When confronted with superior colonial forces, their usual strategy was to retreat to the sparsely inhabited and arid hinterland. Also the population of the Somali Dervish state fluctuated. It consisted largely of the close patrilineal relatives and wives of the followers of Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan. Only temporarily did the Dervishes establish more permanent centres of power and ruled over larger areas. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak of the Somali Dervish movement/state.



and a Dhulbahante/Ali Geri mother in the countryside near the village of Buuhoodle, in 1856 or in 1864 (Aw Jaamac 1976; Martin 2003 [1976]: 180), Mohamed grew up in a pastoral-nomadic environment (Aw Jaamac 1976: 3-5; Samatar 1982: 100). He then learned the Koran and became an itinerant sheikh (Somali: *wadaad*). In the 1890s Mohamed visited Mecca and Medina several times. He came into contact with Sheikh Mohamed ibn Salih in Mecca and joined his order, the Salihya. Mohamed became a khalifa (initiator recruiting followers) for the order (Arabic: *tariqa*) in Somalia (Martin 2003 [1976]: 180; Aw Jaamac 1976: 6-7). The Salihya belonged to the Islamic reform movements in the nineteenth century. Its teachings were inspired by the earlier ideas of ibn Taymiya (1262-1328) and Mohamed ibn Abdul-Wahab (1703-1792).

When Mohamed returned from Mecca around 1895, he settled briefly in Berbera, the central port and the administrative centre of the recently established British Protectorate of Somaliland, to win over new followers for his *tariqa*. He preached against new fashions and cooperation with the Christian colonisers. He caused considerable unease among the local religious and business elite and raised the concern of the British administrators. Finally he retreated to the south-east of the protectorate. There his teaching fell on fertile ground. On the one hand the local Dhulbahante and Ogadeen clans at the southern margins of the British sphere and at the eastern frontier of the Ethiopian Empire were experiencing the violence of Menelik II's army on a daily basis. On the other, the pastoral-nomadic clans in the interior had not been much exposed to religious teaching in general (Martin 2003 [1976]: 180-81; Samatar 1982: 99-108).

Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan established his first headquarter near the Aynabo wells in the borderlands between the Dhulbahante and Isaaq territories. He taught religion, recruited followers for the Salihya and mediated disputes among the local groups. His influence grew rapidly and after two years he had brought many Dhulbahante, but also Isaaq/Habar Je'lo and Habar Yonis under his sway. He adopted the name Dervishes (Somali: *Darawiishta*) for his followers. Their marker of distinction was a white turban and a *tusbax*

(‘string of prayer beads’) (Samatar 1982: 108; Aw Jaamac 1976: 13-14). Many Dervishes rode on horseback (most northern Somalis were not horsemen).

It is unclear if Mohamed Abdille Hassan had in mind the foundation of an armed resistance movement from the very beginning. Nevertheless, soon the Dervishes presented themselves as militant organisation. The majority of them came from the Dhulbahante clan. Members of this clan were camel herders and renown warriors (Cruttenden 1849). The British had not concluded a ‘treaty of protection’ with them, as they had done with the inhabitants of the coast, who belonged to various Isaaq or Dir clans. In 1899, the first concerted action of Dervishes targeted the settlement of another *tariqa* (called Ahmediya) near the town of Sheekh in the centre of the British Protectorate. Afterwards Mohamed Abdille Hassan set out to expand his sphere of influence toward Berbera in the north, but also further east. Who of the local clan leaders stood in his way was assassinated (Samatar 1982: 118).

Most of the time the Dervish forces avoided battles in the open, since every direct encounter resulted in huge losses for them. A particularly disastrous event was the fighting at a place called Jidbaley in the British Protectorate in 1904. Here, the British troops and their Somali hands, some of whom actually belonged to the Dhulbahante clan, massacred more than 600 Dervishes in one day, out of a force totalling approximately 6000–8000 men. The flight of the remaining Dervishes ended almost in annihilation of the movement. Boqor Usman Mahamuud, the leader of the Majeerteen clan, who since 1899 was officially under Italian suzerainty, was forced by the Italians to attack the fleeing Dervishes. Simultaneously, British and Italian soldiers stormed Illig (Eyl), a last coastal Dervish stronghold on the Indian Ocean. Thereupon many Ogadeen deserted the Dervish forces. Sayid Mohamed immortalised the horror and desperation he and his followers went through after Jidbaley in a poem called ‘Jiinley’. It dwelled on the deception of Boqor Usman and the desertion of the Ogadeen warriors, embedded in references to religious and miraculous phenomena (Samatar 1979: 72). The measurable result of the skilful poetic outrage was that many Ogadeen who had deserted the Sayid earlier returned or at least sent livestock and arms in his support. The Majeerteen *boqor* reversed his course and established some (clandestine) relation with the Dervishes (Sheikh Abdi 1993: 142-151).

On the brink of defeat, the Dervishes entered into an agreement with the Italians. This had to do with the particularities of Italian colonial politics. On the one hand, the Italians had to consider the fine balance of power among the Majeerteen (Boqor Usman contended for power with his paternal cousin Suldaan Yusuf Ali Keenadiid of Hobiyoo). On the other hand, the Italians had seen how costly it had been for the British to pursue a military solution to the Dervish problem. Moreover, they wished to make a difference. In October 1904 Mohamed Abdille Hassan met with Giulio Pestalozza, the Italian consul for Somalia. In exchange for a promise of peace he received a territory that started at the small port of Illig/Eyl on the Indian Ocean, traversed a corridor between the northern and the southern Majeerteen territories, and reached into the Nugaal valley in the west (Hess 1966: 133-34). The Dervishes built a small castle in Eyl, which served as their headquarters (Somali: *xaruun*) between approximately 1905 and 1909.

This little ‘Dervish state’ however, was not what Sayid Mohamed had wanted. The Dervish leader used the break after the treaty of Illig to recover and reinforce his army. He conferred also with other Somali clans, including the strong Bimaal groups in the south of the peninsula (Cassanelli 1982: 247-50). The Dervish movement was certainly not without its internal divisions and weaknesses. The autocratic style of rule of Mohamed Abdille Hassan shocked many of his close followers and repeatedly caused men and whole lineages to desert him. In 1909 the Sayid took up his struggle again by marching into the British Protectorate and briefly threatening (again) to attack Berbera. The British were baffled. The Dervish uprising cost them dearly and the crown had not calculated such huge capacities and expenses for the relatively unimportant Protectorate of Somaliland. Initially, the British just wished to be present on the other side of Aden in order to secure the meat supply for the garrison there through Somali livestock. They had not set out to control and govern the interior (Samatar 1982: 126-33).

Additionally, Britain got caught up in the First World War. London decided to end the pursuit of the Dervishes and to retreat. The activities of the Protectorate's administration were confined to the coast. Upon retreat, the British armed some loyal (mostly Isaaq) clans in the interior. This led to the escalation of massive retaliatory fighting between various northern Somali clans and to a state of civil war (Gesheker 1985: 17; Kakwenzire 1986: 667; Sheikh-Abdi 1993: 95-97, 145-159). For a while the Dervishes were the dominant power in the Protectorate. They built several stone fortresses throughout the northern peninsula, particularly in today's Sanaag region (e.g., in Midhisho, Shimbir Bariis and Badhan). The largest fortress, however, was built in Taleh in the Nugaal Valley (today's Sool region), between 1913 and 1915. In this period, the Dervishes also gained their most prestigious victory in the battle of Jiidali (near today's town of Bur'o).



commander of the new Camel Constabulary, Richard Corfield, was killed by Dervishes on 9 August 1913. The death of the leading 'infidel' was celebrated by the Sayid in a poem called *Kofil* in Somali, famous for its gruesome content.

Once the Dervishes had established their fortresses, the enemy could just come and engage them in fighting at will. From attackers they became the attacked. Previously they had made good use of mobility and crossing colonial state borders. Repeatedly they had escaped the British, their most formidable enemy, by fleeing into the Ethiopian or the Italian sphere. The final blow was given to the *Somali* Dervish movement/state after the end of the First World War. In 1919 Britain mobilised the now free resources and capacities to deal effectively with the uprising. It sent infantry and warplanes to Taleh, the 'capital' of the Dervish state. It air bombed the fortress in early 1920. The use of airplanes proved to be a shock for the Sayid and his followers. They abandoned their centre and fled towards the Ogadeen territory. There, close to the birthplace of his patrilineal forefathers, Said Mohamed Abdille Hassan died of natural causes within a year (Aw Jaamac 1976: 272-75; Kakwenzire 1986: 668).

In postcolonial times Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan was celebrated as a Somali hero and proto-nationalist. Hersi (1977: 256-57, fn. 28) observed that ‘it is because the Sayyid’s fight against clan fissures and his nearly successful campaigns to rally pan-Somali resistance to colonialism that present-day Somalis and some writers consider him as the inspirer and symbol of modern Somali nationalism’. School children learned his poems and his statute was erected in Mogadishu (it was demolished in 1991, when the recent Somali civil war broke out).

Up until today, the narrative of the heroic Dervish uprising is alive – or better: it was revived again. It underpins – as ‘ideology’, so to say – the establishment of the ‘autonomous’ regional administration in the area between Buuhoodle and Taleh called Khaatumo State of Somalia (founded in 2012, succeeding the SSC administration between 2009 and 2011). Its supporters, who mainly belong to the Dhulbahante clan, consciously refer back to the Dervish uprising to create a political tradition of anti-colonial resistance and Somali nationalism, and to justify their unionist stance against Somaliland’s separatism and Puntland’s indifference about Somaliland’s rule over the town of Lasanod, which is the most important urban centre in Dhulbahante-land.

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