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Somali names and individual identity¹

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Introduction

After nearly half a century since the adoption of a writing system, the personal names of Somali people have not yet been standardized and modernized compared to common international use. For this reason, this paper aims at analyzing the problems that this goal faces and at suggesting some solutions which are consistent with Somali traditions.

1 Spelling inconsistency

Somali personal names today, from an orthographic point of view, are still not standardized and there are various ways to write them. For example, a name of a Somali person, both in and out of his native country, can be written in four different spellings.

In Somalia, one and the same person is used to write his name into two different ways:

1. in a Somali spelling (e.g. *Nuur Xuseen Cabdirashiid*) on his identity card, school report cards, publications in Somali language, etc.;
2. in an English spelling (e.g. *Noor Hussen Abdirashid*) in his passport, university diplomas, publications, etc.

Outside of Somalia, one can possibly write his own name in accordance to the spelling of the ex-colonial host country:

3. *Nour Houssein Abdirachid* (French speaking countries)

¹ I am very grateful to Prof. Marco Svolacchia who gave me hand in preparing this document.prof..

4. Nur Hussen Abdirascid (Italy)

This variability of writing of the same name is a huge problem that affects almost all Somalis, hampering the acknowledgment of their documents (identity cards, passports, diplomas, etc.) bearing names written in different ways. For example, if a Somali citizen goes abroad, for studying or something, he loses a lot of time correcting his name, running between the Somali embassy/consulate (when active) and a public office, that requires that all documents be consistent as far as personal data are concerned.

Besides, it is not easy to trace Somali author' publications, through a catalog or via the Internet, since their name can be written in different spellings, as we have already seen.

Now, let us look at some systems of writing. As is well known, Latin script is the most widespread in the world, being in use in most western countries and in many other countries in Asia and Africa. Nonetheless, the writing systems which are based on Latin script differ considerably in terms of the phonetic rendering of some letters or combinations of letters.

To illustrate this situation, let us look at a single example, the digraph <ch>, with its phonemic correspondence in some European languages, as the following table shows:

	LANGUAGES	IPA	EXAMPLES
ch	Polish; Czech; German, Dutch	[x]	Roch; Palach; Bach; Achthoven
	Italian; Rumanian	[k]	Michele; Chivu
	English, Spanish	[ʃ]	Charles; Sánchez
	French; Portuguese	[ʃ]	Charles; Chainho

As is shown, the reading for <ch> varies widely even among European languages. This situation is by no means exceptional as far as letters and combination of letters are concerned, all the more so if other Latin-based orthographic systems are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, in each of these countries personal names are ever and only written consistently in their own orthography, both at home and abroad. So, why don't Somalis do the same, since they use the same Latin alphabet and have an or-

thographic system that only has two letters (<c, x>) with a peculiar pronunciation²?

The problem is that foreign languages have gained a lot of prestige among Somalis, both inside and outside the country; for this reason, the prestige of the mother tongue is declining. This proves that many Somalis are losing what is called 'language loyalty' (Abdalla 2016).

Now, to standardize the spelling of Somali names it is necessary that the Somali people realize that their language is their identity, and to protect this they must get used to write their names, always and wherever they are, in a Somali spelling. First of all, though, the initiative and the commitment of Somali authorities is required to implement this kind of reform. We believe that, from that moment on, our system of writing names will be respected by foreigners, as we have always respected theirs.

2 *Anthroponyms*

The Somali naming system is based on the genealogical system, consisting of three names:

1. a personal name;
2. a father's name;
3. a grandfather's name.

Since a system of name (s)-surname does not exist, the Somali names often resemble to each other; so, it can happen that many people have the same three names. The name *Maxamed Cali Axmed*, for example, might be the name of hundreds or even thousands of Somalis. Nor is there a unified system of spelling Somali names.

Let's analyse these problems in some detail.

² Digraphs <dh> and <kh> are not included here, because they have readings which do not depart substantially from common use. <q> has a slightly more complicated status, since neither /q/ is present in the inventories of European languages, nor is <q> present in isolation, being always followed by <u> (except for Albanian and Maltese). Nonetheless, <q> is commonly read as [k], which is an acceptable approximation to the real sound, not to mention the fact that <q> exists in IPA with the same value and is the standard transcription for /q/ in non-Latin alphabetical languages such as Arabic and other Semitic languages.

a) Varying among different Somali territories, some procedures are employed to avoid homonymity. For instance, in some administrations – such as the judicial one, the registry office and the passport office – the mother’s name is added to the usual names (e.g. *Noor Xuseen Cabdirashid*, adding his mother’s name, *Faduma Cali*). In public education, especially when passing the final exams of middle and high schools, students must declare *four* names, adding the great-grandfather’s name (e.g. *Nuur Xuseen Cabdirashiid Faarax*).

b) When a Somali citizen goes abroad, especially to western countries, in order to have a residence permit or other types of documents, the host country forces him to declare a surname, in accordance with the rules in that country. For the sake of clarity, let us see how Somali names vary according to different countries. Take, for example, a common Somali name, *Maxamed Cali Cabdullaahi*. To limit ourselves just to a few examples, it will be typically interpreted as follows:

- in UK and USA, *Mohamed Abdullahi* (the 3rd name, *Cabdullaahi*, will be taken as a surname, while the 2nd name, *Cali*, will be ignored altogether);
- in Italy, *Mohamed Ali Abdullaahi* (both the 2nd and 3rd names will be taken as a surname);
- in Sweden, *Mohamed Ali* (the 2nd name will be considered as the surname).

These practices do nothing less than complicating the problem of Somali onomastics. As an example, if a father’s first and last name is *Mohamed Abdullahi*, as we saw above, his son will be called *Ahmed Abdullahi*. The problem is that, according to Somali tradition, when they go back to their home country with these names, they will be taken to be brothers, both sons of an ‘Abdullahi’, instead of father and son.

It is even worse if the “surname” is placed before a person’s given name (e.g. *Abdullahi Mohamed*), as it happens in many parts of Asia and, in specific occasions, in some parts of Europe and Africa: in this case the grandfather’s name (*Abdullahi*), is taken in Somalia to be the son’s name, since it is at the beginning.

To reconcile the two systems of names, the one used by the Somalis at home and the one used by Somalis living abroad, one can devise some ways of creating surnames, modernizing the Somali name system without crushing against Somali traditions.

Before this, let's have a look at the history of the surnames used by most of the world's population, Muslims and non-Muslims. The use of the surnames, also known as 'family names', is an ancient system that kings, and noble families used. In the 11th century, Europe began to adopt a surname for ordinary people, to register the population after the great demographic growth that took place in the cities, where it was becoming increasingly more difficult to distinguish individuals only on the basis of their personal name.

Among countries that began using surnames in recent times are the Netherlands (1811), Japan (1870), Thailand (1920), Turkey (1934) and Afghanistan (2014) (Goldstein, J. 2014). They are countries of different areas of the world, with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Roughly speaking, we can classify the most common surnames used in the world into four categories, according to their origin. TOPONYMICAL: *Bush* (English, 'bush'), *Yamamoto* (Japan, 'mountain base'), *Bukhari* (Arabic, 'of the city of Bukhara'), *Jiang* (China, 'river'), *Moskva* ('of Moscow').

1. PROFESSIONAL: *Smith, Fabbro* (Italian, 'smith') *Al-Najaar* (Arabic, 'carpenter').
2. DESCRIPTIVE (nicknames): *Brown, Tolstoy* (Russian, 'fatman'), *Rossi* (Italian, 'red-haired, pl.'), *Al-axmar* (Arabic, 'red'), *Doğan* (Turkish, 'falcon'), *Gao* (China, 'high').
3. PATRONYMICAL: the oldest system, that comes into two different types:
 - a) CLANIC: *Aala Nahyaan* (an arab clan's name), *O'Brien* (an Irish clan's name), *Wang* (China), *Kim* (Korea).
 - b) FATHER OR ANCESTOR: The Arabs use 'bin/ibn' meaning 'son of': *Ibnu Tajmijjah*, *Bin Laden*, and their cousins, some Jews, use *ben/bar*: *Ben Gorjan*. In the western world different suffixes or prefixes mean 'son of', such as *Powell* > *Ap* Hywel (Welsh: 'son of Hywel'), *MacNeill* (Gaelic: 'son of Neil'), *Wilson* (English: 'son of William'), *Ivanov* (Russian: 'son of

Ivan'), *Fitzgerald* (Gaelic: 'son of Gerald'), *Daud Oğlu* (Turkish: 'son of Daud')

Some surnames are the result of the abbreviation of one's genealogy, as the following examples show:

- *Ibnu Taymiyah* (Arabic): < Ahmad bin Abdulhalim bin Abdisalam bin Abdalla bin Abilkasim bin Muhammad ibnu Taymiyah;
- *Llywelyn Gruffydds* (Welsh): < Llywelyn ap Gruffydd < Llewelyn ap Dafydd ap Ieuan ap Griffith ap Meredith;
- *François Hollande* (French) < François Gérard Georges Nicolas Hollande;
- *George Bush* (English) < George Herbert Walker Bush.

Among the four most important types of surnames mentioned above, three are related to profession, place of origin or personal attributes.

Somalis have many nicknames. There is a Somali saying which goes like "He who has no nickname is like a goat without horns". Many of them refer to physical or moral defects of people, e.g. *laangare* ('lame'), *iley* ('one-eyed'), *gacamay* (maimed), *afqallooc* ('wry mouth'), *madaxay* ('big head'), *jinnoole* ('mad').

There are also positive nicknames, e.g. *Hadraawi* ('talkative, orator'), *Gaarriye* ('clever'), *Bile* ('promoter'), *Maandeeq* ('gratifying').

Among Somalis, nicknames are generally stronger than the real name, because they immediately identify a person. For example, the following names are without nicknames and it is not easy to immediately recognize the people to whom they refer, because many people can share them:

- a) *Cabdillaahi Maxamed Maxamuud Xirsi; Cabdiqaadir Xirsi Siyaad; Maxamuud Cabdullaahi Ciise; Maxamed Sh. Cismaan Aden; Sh. Xasan Sh. Nuur Sheekh Axmed.*

But if a nickname is added, or even if only the nickname is mentioned, Somalis immediately recognize the person to whom it refers:

- c) *Cabdillaahi Qarshe; Cabdiqaadir Xirsi Yamyam;*

Maxamuud Cabdullaahi Sangub; Maxamed Sh. Cismaan Jawaari; Sh. Xasa Barsane.

Extensive use of nicknames is a clear sign of a need for surnames, as happened, sooner or later, in virtually all the countries of the world, whatever their traditions could have been.

Consequently, it is in order to create surnames according to the following guidelines, which are consistent with Somali tradition, which largely employs patronymics and nicknames:

- a) Use of a family name: the name of the sub-clan or of an ancestor, or a positive nickname, or a name of a place.
- b) In order for a son and his father not to be confused as brothers, it is sufficient to take three names: (1) the personal name, (2) the father's name, and (3) the family name.
- c) It is preferable that honorifics (e.g. *macallin*, *shiikh*, *xaaji*) be not added to documents (identity cards, passports, birth certificates, certificates of education, etc.), to prevent for them to be taken as paper names abroad.
- d) In compound names – e.g. *Maxamed Deeq*, *Caasha Kiin*, etc. – it is either preferable to omit the second name (as it is only an attribute to the first name), or have a dash between the two names (i.e. *Maxamed-Deeq*, *Caasha-Kiin* in the above examples), to prevent confusion between the compound's second name and the father's name.

As an example, let us consider the names of some famous Somali persons, who have nicknames by which they are well known. Since nicknames are the source of some surnames in the world, they can be good examples of future Somali surnames.

- 1) *patronymic surnames*:
 - a. ancestor's names:
 - Yaasiin Cismaan Keenadiid³ (his grandfather Yuusuf's nickname)
 - b. clanic names:
 - (Sh.) Cabdulaahi Yuusuf Qudubi ('Qudubi clan')
 - (Sh.) Cabdiraxmaan Cumar Celi ('Celi clan')

³ His full name is *Yaasiin Cismaan Yuusuf "Keenadiid"*, but in his publications he employed his grandfather's nickname (*Keenadiid*) but not his father's name (i.e. *Yuusuf*): this is a good example of one of my proposals mentioned above.

- (Dr.) Saalax Caydaruus Alcamuudi ('Al-Camuudi clan')
- 2) *toponymics*:
- Maxamed Cusmaan Jawaari (Jawaarey, name of a town)
 - Faarax Maxamed Gololey (Gololey, place name)
- 3) *nicknames*:
- Cabdullaahi Suldaan Timacadde (white hair)
 - Maxamed Ibraahin Hadraawi⁴ ('talkative, orator')
- 4) *professional names*:
- Axmed Cali Askar ('soldier')
 - Maxamed Cali Kaariye ('fare-collector')

If this system, or something like it, will be adopted it would be like killing four birds with one stone, solving or reducing many problems:

1. the resemblance of many names will be largely reduced;
2. the incompatibility between Somali and common international onomastics will be resolved, with special reference to the splitting between names and surnames.

In addition, a couple of attractive results related to religion will be achieved:

3. The (sub) clan's name will become common practice in onomastics, in conformity to the demands in the Holy Qur'an (49:13):

وجعلناكم شعوبا وقبائل لتعارفوا ('And we have made you nations and tribes to know each other')

That the reason why most Arab surnames are the name of their tribe, such as: *Aal-Saudi, Al-Amuudi, Aal-Nahyan, Attamiimi*, etc.

4. So perhaps the negative nicknames – against which the Islamic faith advises, as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an (49:11) – will be eliminated or diminished: ولا تتبايزوا بالألقاب بنس الاسم الفسوق بعد الإيمان ('...nor call one another with bad nicknames. Bad is the name of sinfulness after embracing Faith.').

⁴ The name *Hadraawi* (orator) can be a further example of nicknames as a source of surnames.

3 Date and place of birth

As is well known, Somalis do not have the tradition of registering the date of birth; especially the day and the month of birth are not important, so they are not written on the Somali documents (passports, ID cards, etc.). After the Somali diaspora, in order for Somali citizens to get an identity card, most of them declared they were born on 1st January, so that the only difference between their birth date is in the year. Even the date of the year is often not precise, but imaginary, diminished or increased depending on convenience.

In actual fact, in contemporary world it is important that every person has a birth's date (day, month, and year), considering that the most registry systems do not accept the lack of even one of these pieces of information. Moreover, for many Somalis the place of birth is not so important: sometimes they claim they have been born in a place where they were really not born, often to be welcomed as refugees. To overcome this problem, I would like to advise what follows:

1. anyone who does not have a precise date of birth should try and recollect a more plausible date as an alternative to the by now notorious 'first of January'.
2. to commit oneself to register the birth date of future generations.
3. to stick to a strict norm in all Somali territories: every hospital where children are born must immediately release the birth certificate to their mother, and parents must go to the registry office to register the date and place of birth, as is done in the rest of the world.

4 Conclusions

As the features of a face allow us to single out a person from another, so Somali citizens could be singled out if they were associated to the following three data:

1. *a full name*, written correctly in a single form of writing, the standard Somali orthography;
2. *a surname* consistent with Somali culture;
3. *date* (day, month and year) and *place of birth*.

It goes without saying that in order to achieve long-term results it is crucial that Somali authorities thoroughly commit themselves to this reform,

which would solve the following problems that traditional Somali onomastics faces:

1. names inconsistently written;
2. huge homonymity;
3. incompatibility with international onomastics (based on name(s)-surname splitting) resulting in arbitrary and ambiguous assignment of the role of surname in Somali names abroad.

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