

From Clan to Clannism in Somaliland: A Rejoinder

Written by Markus Virgil Hoehne

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MARKUS VIRGIL HOEHNE, DEC 20 2024

In an article entitled “Is Somaliland Defying the Odds, or Are the Odds Based on a Flawed Premise?” Jamal Abdi attempts a new interpretation of Somaliland’s gestation. On the one hand, he distances himself from colonial anthropology, represented by the work of Ioan M. Lewis, which suggests that the main explanatory factor for Somali politics is clan (as a shorthand for all kinds of forms of collective belonging defined by patrilineal descent). On the other hand, Jamal Abdi tries to save a bit of the classic account of Somali society by Lewis, who provided his initial account of Somali kinship, the role of elders and customary law based on ethnographic research in the north (today’s Somaliland) by stating that indeed, some cultural traits of Somalis have been preserved in the region, which lay the foundation for peace building there in the early 1990s. Moreover, Jamal Abdi suggests that there is some kind of perennial democratic tradition among northerners which explains the contemporary democratic success in Somaliland.

To develop these points, Jamal Abdi first lashes out on Lewis (as is common among a younger generation of Somali studies scholars), and writes:

Since the publication of his 1961 ethnographic study *A Pastoral democracy*, British anthropologist I.M. Lewis has profoundly shaped the outside world’s understanding of Somali society, culture, and history. Throughout his long career, Lewis maintained that Somali society is best understood through the lens of the segmentary clan system, in which corporate groups conflict, leading to endemic violence. This interpretation construes Somalis as a fundamentally warlike people, with loyalty to their clan taking precedence over all else. According to the Lewisian interpretation, this ultimately explains the root causes of the civil war and the subsequent disintegration of the central state in 1991. Although anthropologists have long argued that cultures, customs, and traditions constantly evolve and change, Lewis stubbornly denied the possibility that colonialism negatively impacted Somali culture and society.

It is correct that the old Lewis stubbornly stuck to the logics of the anthropological model of “segmentary lineage society” and indeed explained the Somali civil war simplistically through the lens of clan. Yet, the young Lewis was more nuanced, as already Lidwien Kapteijns (2010) found in her seminal critique of Lewis’ clan-paradigm. If one reads the early works of IM Lewis, especially his “*A Pastoral Democracy*” (1961), carefully, one can see that he conceptualizes Somali society as more complex, and “clan” is only *one* aspect of kinship, besides uterine and affinal ties. Moreover, clan is inherently dynamic and relative. Here are a few quotes from “*A pastoral democracy*” underlining this point. Lewis observed that “[r]eal or putative uterine alliances are thus as much a feature of the Somali lineage system as is agnatic segmentation” (Lewis 1961: 156). Lewis (1961: 159) argues: “In principle, within the clan diya-paying groups oppose diya-paying groups, and within the clan-family clans oppose clans. But the simple model of agnatic segmentation with equipoised units at every level is distorted by the recognition of irregular growth and by the importance given to the uneven distribution of man-power and fighting potential.” Lewis also stresses that “the system of units which we have distinguished as clan-families, clans, primary lineage-groups and diya-paying groups suggests a more stable hierarchy of segmentation than actually exists” (Lewis 1961: 133). He continues: “What is most characteristic of the Somali system is its relativity and its flexibility” (ibid.).

So: relativity and flexibility characterize the Somali segmentary lineage society, according to the young Lewis (and those terms – “relativity” and “flexibility” – can still be productively used in analyses of Somali politics today). But Jamal Abdi, and before him, critiques of (the later) Lewis like Catherine Besteman, Abdi Ismail Samatar, Lidwien

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Kapteijns and others are correct in the sense that Lewis did not really consider colonialism and structural changes in Somali society introduced through it. This is a blind spot, and it was replicated in later accounts of his. Additionally, his later accounts indeed reduced Somali society often to clan, which remains unconvincing.

Jamal Abdi continues by stating:

Even a cursory examination reveals that the existence of Somaliland, a centralized democratic state, is at odds with the principal assumptions of the Lewisian interpretation. According to the latter, an inclusive and democratic Somali state should not be possible as it would inevitably be corrupted by the pervasive and enduring clan system. Despite the recent local conflict in Somaliland's eastern Sool region, it is widely recognized that Somaliland's peace and state making process involved the voluntary participation of all communities. Self-led peace and state formation, achieved through voluntary cooperation between groups that had fought on opposing sides of a bloody civil war, is fundamentally irreconcilable with Lewis and his followers' interpretations and characterizations of Somali society and culture.

This statement must be separated in two parts. Let us start with the second part: "...that Somaliland's peace and state making process involved the voluntary participation of all communities. Self-led peace and state formation, achieved through voluntary cooperation between groups that had fought on opposing sides of a bloody civil war, is fundamentally irreconcilable with Lewis and his followers' interpretations and characterizations of Somali society and culture." Indeed, peacebuilding in Somaliland in the 1990s was highly successful. Who were the main actors involved? Mostly: Traditional leaders, military officers of the Somali National Movement (SNM) and other militias, some former politicians, businessmen and diaspora activists. Yet, what kind of structure connected all these diverse actors? It was belonging to particular patrilineal descent groups (e.g., as members of certain clans or lineages). The whole peace-building process in Somaliland was built on clan-belonging. Elder, officers, businessmen, diaspora activists etc. all acted on behalf of their respective patrilineal descent group first, and only second and third in other capacities (e.g., as former schoolmates, as members of certain religious congregations within Sunni Islam etc.). The peace-building was only effective because clan elders who also had some sway over clan militias and ordinary people supporting militias with food and shelter agreed, in the name of their groups, to end hostilities. This was done through customary legal agreements (Somali: *xeer*) entered into by traditional leaders on behalf of their patrilineal descent groups.

Traditional leaders became the most important political actors in nascent Somaliland, especially during the early 1990s. Through their work, inter-clan consensus was forged which provided the basis for the further political developments in Somaliland. All this is well documented in the established literature on that period in recent Somaliland history, starting with publications by the Academy for Peace and Development (APD) in Hargeysa founded in the late 1990s, which did tremendous work led by Somali scholars manifesting itself for instance in the volume (edited by Wartorn Societies Project) entitled "Rebuilding Somaliland: Issues and Possibilities" (Lawrenceville NJ and Asmara: 2005)" and a number of later publications edited by interpeace including one detailed report (2008) taking stock of "Peace in Somaliland". Of course also Mark Bradbury, Marleen Renders, Michael Walls, Iqbal Jhazbhay and others who wrote on Somaliland's gestation in the 1990s have extensively referred to the role of clan elders and customary law administered by them, which means: they centered "clan" regarding peace-making in the region.

Thus, in contrast to Abdi's opinion that "self-led peace and state formation, achieved through voluntary cooperation between groups that had fought on opposing sides of a bloody civil war, is fundamentally irreconcilable with Lewis [...] interpretations and characterizations of Somali society and culture". Actually all accounts I would know of in one form or the other recur to the importance of patrilineal descent (Somali: *tol*) and elders and customary law in this process, which is what Lewis highlighted already (besides uterine and affinal ties) in "A pastoral democracy" (1961). One could even say: the bottom-up reconciliation in the north in the 1990s really illustrated the pertinent validity to some of Lewis' early insights.

I remember the first time I was in Hargeysa, in July 2002, and my host, a very educated urbanite, was involved in a conflict with a man from another lineage. During my stay in his house, his lineage elders and elders from the other

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side met several times discussing the case. The pattern of small-scale conflict-settlement between those parties in Hargeysa in 2002 followed exactly the structural logic of conflict settlement outlined by Lewis four decades ago. The same can be said about the large-scale settlements in Somaliland in the 1990s. The fact that military and diaspora actors, educated elites and others were involved, and that US dollars instead of livestock were sometimes used for compensation, did not make a difference from a structural point of view.

Let us now look at the first part of the Jamal Abdi's statement above, that "even a cursory examination reveals that the existence of Somaliland, a centralized democratic state, is at odds with the principal assumptions of the Lewisian interpretation. According to the latter, an inclusive and democratic Somali state should not be possible as it would inevitably be corrupted by the pervasive and enduring clan system." Is Somaliland a centralized democratic state not based on clan-belonging/on patrilineal descent as principle of political organization? First, Somaliland was the contrary of a centralized state for the first third of its modern existence. Between 1991 and 1995, Somaliland was fragmented and war-torn and its government hardly controlled the center. Until the early 2000s, what was called Somaliland only existed between Hargeysa, Berbera and Buro, with (from the mid-1990s onward) some representation in Boroma. This means: for the first decades, Somaliland was more an idea of a state than an empirically grounded reality; this idea was prevalent mainly in the territory inhabited by the members of the Isaaq clan-family.

Second, in the early 2000s, with the introduction of a new constitution providing for a multi-party system, a new dynamic unfolded. Political parties were supposed to have a representation in all regions of Somaliland. This provision was supposed to guarantee that not one clan/patrilineal descent group would establish its own party. Initially, indeed, all national parties (the constitution limits their number to three!) were to some degree cross-clan. However, given that Isaaq are the demographic majority in Somaliland, and given that voters mainly support their patrilineal relatives since there are anyway no real ideological differences between the parties, Isaaq candidates always won, regardless of which party they belonged to. This marginalized non-Isaaq and facilitated what I would call the "Isaaqification" of Somaliland politics under the guise of multi-party politics.

Third, Somaliland's stability was undermined by the long-standing conflict between those full-heartedly supporting the unilateral secession from Somalia in 1991 and those rejecting it. This conflict escalated most visibly in the east, in the lands inhabited by members of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans between Buuhoodle, Lasanod and Badhan, covering roughly one third of what is claimed by the government in Hargeysa as Somaliland state-territory. With the "Isaaqification" of the politics in the center, those who early on rejected the secession (but initially agreed to it for the sake of peace) became increasingly frustrated and eventually mounted armed opposition against Somaliland. This started in 2009 with the formation of the Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (SSC) movement and culminated in the war over Lasanod in 2023 in which local militias eventually drove the Somaliland army out of all Dhulbahante lands on 25 August 2023. Warsangeli earlier had dropped out of Somaliland national politics by not participating in the parliamentary elections in 2021.

The key factor running through all these events, from multi-party politics to the conflict in the eastern regions (only cursory mentioned by Jamal Abdi, but fundamental to the stability of Somaliland) is: patrilineal belonging and political tensions often expressed through narratives shared among agnatic relatives. Indeed, one can argue that the whole story of Somaliland today prevalent in Hargeysa, the political center, and spread through multiple channels including social media worldwide, is largely an "Isaaq story". The way how colonial and post-colonial history is interpreted by supporters of Somaliland is in most cases intrinsically related to experiences of Isaaq as a group. These experiences are not shared by most non-Isaaq in the region. Thus, Somaliland is a clan-state based on an Isaaq narrative and based on – by now – a multi-party system that facilitates sharing of power between different Isaaq clans. To state, as Jamal Abdi does, that Somaliland is a "a centralized democratic state" and that its politics are "at odds with the principal assumptions of the Lewisian interpretation" is an expression of the author's lack of analytical distance from the object of study.

Finally, Jamal Abdi mentions that:

In a forthcoming article, I suggest a third interpretation which pragmatically bridges the competing perspectives in

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Somali studies. In doing so, the article rejects the idea that Somaliland remained impervious to nearly eight decades of indirect British rule, while it also harbors reservations to the contention that colonization led to a complete breakdown of the ethos of pre-colonial culture, given the well-documented utility of culture-specific practices in Somaliland's peacebuilding trajectory. Following this line of reasoning, peacebuilders in Somaliland benefitted from the remnants of the culture-specific factors that have historically induced pro-sociality.

I would suggest that Jamal Abdi takes existing literature on Somali colonial and post-colonial history more seriously. There have been several critical accounts trying to capture the multifaceted dynamics between the late 19th and early 21st century, including those by Abdi Ismail Samatar on economic transformations and Lidwien Kapteijns on gender relations and urbanization. An account of breaches and continuities concerning northern Somali history (from colonial to post-colonial time) can be found in my PhD defended in 2011. There I wrote several pages on the question of the colonial heritage on Somali society and politics, coming to the following conclusion:

Colonialism had lasting effects on the Somalis in the Horn of Africa. First, it introduced statehood in what was then a stateless setting. Second, it partitioned Somalis into five different colonial territories which, particularly in the north, caused problems for the pastoral nomads. Somalis became aware of the negative sides of partition slowly, but once they had experienced unity under the British Military Administration in the 1940s, their feeling of belonging together was awoken. Colonialism turned Somali cultural nationalism in political nationalism. Third, the interferences of the colonial powers into the traditional relations of authority and conflict behaviour changed and partly undermined important political institutions within Somali society. Finally, the inability of the British to come to terms with the Dervish uprising wreaked havoc on both people and the environment in the north. Due to lack of funds and experience on the side of the British the revolt of Maxamed Cabdille Xasan escalated into a full-blown civil war. Its effects could be felt for decades. This contradicts Lewis's (1977: 229) finding that the Protectorate of Somaliland 'was ruled with a light hand and a sympathetic touch befitting its situation as a territory with no European population' (cited in Geshekte 1985: 18). The touch of direct administrative measures in the protectorate may have been comparatively 'light', but the consequences of British (and other) colonial politics on the whole with regard to Somalis in the Horn constituted a heavy burden for the future of independent Somalia (Hoehne 2011: 138).

In sum, Jamal Abdi's article strikes me as a contradictory attempt to establish Somaliland's exceptionalism while at the same time shunning a colonial anthropological tradition that, however, underpins much of what we understand of the northern Somali society until today. Worse even, Jamal Abdi tries to hide his own clannish lens behind a terminological façade referring to "centralized state", "democracy" and Lewis-bashing, but lacking empirical substance and analytical sharpness. In this way Jamal Abdi ostensibly offers new insights by claiming a post-colonial stance while arguably perpetuating hidden colonial lenses based not only on clan (Somali: *qabiil*) but on clannism (Somali: *qabiyalaad*).

About the author:

Markus Virgil Hoehne wrote his MA-thesis on strategies of peaceful conflict settlement in Somalia (published in German 2002) and subsequently did his PhD research in northern Somalia (Somaliland and Puntland). Since 2011 he has been conducting research on Somali issues as senior researcher for universities and international organizations. He is the author of *Between Somaliland and Puntland: Marginalization, Militarization and Conflicting Political Visions* (Rift Valley Institute 2015) and co-editor of several edited volumes including *Borders and borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa* (Boydell and Brewer 2010) and *The State and the Paradox of Customary Law in Africa* (Routledge 2018).