

## Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?

Contested Somali borders: the power of tradition vs. the tradition of power

Zoppi, Marco

*Published in:*  
Journal of African History, Politics and Society

*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Zoppi, M. (2015). Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream? Contested Somali borders: the power of tradition vs. the tradition of power. *Journal of African History, Politics and Society*, 1(1), 43-64. [http://www.africa-pilsen.com/images/pdf/JAHPS/Zoppi\\_JAHPS\\_Vol-I\\_No-I\\_2015.pdf](http://www.africa-pilsen.com/images/pdf/JAHPS/Zoppi_JAHPS_Vol-I_No-I_2015.pdf)

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [rucforsk@kb.dk](mailto:rucforsk@kb.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream? Contested Somali borders: the power of tradition vs. the tradition of power

*Marco Zoppi\**

### **Abstract**

This paper provides an historical analysis of the concept of Greater Somalia, the nationalist project that advocates the political union of all Somali-speaking people, including those inhabiting areas in current Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. The Somali territorial unification project of “lost territories” was a direct consequence of the arbitrary borders drawn up by the European colonial powers in order to realise their expansionist interests. This paper underlines the instability produced by the European colonial powers in the Horn of Africa, and presents their arbitrary decisions as the root cause of Somali grievances and border disputes, which dogged the region from the end of colonial rule to the outbreak of civil war. The aim of the paper is three-fold: firstly, it seeks to identify the reasons behind the instability of Somalia’s borders; secondly, it attempts to explain why the Greater Somalia project has not been realised. Finally, it discusses the overall issue, in order to achieve a balance in terms of myth and reality.

### **Introduction**

The Horn of Africa provides us with an interesting yet intricate landscape, which enables us to examine the role that the arbitrary borders implanted by European colonial powers have played in relation to the political development of the whole region. Any analysis of the Horn of Africa, particularly from an historical perspective, brings to the surface a number of political questions, as well as a set of transboundary activities which, often in a detrimental way, have connected the countries that make up the region. In many of these phenomena lies the latent legacy of colonialism. In other cases, it was actually the incapacity of African leaders to find a compromise which negatively impacted on attempts to transform the useful proposals explored within Pan-Africanist circles during the 1950s into tangible actions. Within the Horn, Somalia appears to be the country which has suffered the most from, or at least it is the country which has found itself less satisfied with, the border architecture established by the European colonisers. This has resulted in a situation which is characterised by enduring international political activism. In order to assess the validity of these assertions, I will attempt to focus on some of the

\* Marco Zoppi is a Phd fellow in Histories and Dynamics of Globalization at Roskilde University, Denmark. Contact: marzo@ruc.dk

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

principal historical events that occurred prior to 1991. It is the author's contention that many of the key events that require analysis when considering Somali border issues took place roughly between 1940 and 1990, while the outbreak of civil war in Somalia led to a range of political efforts in relation to other matters, which are not the main focus of this paper. Somalia, it should be noted, has not been the only nation from the Horn interested in territorial claims, some of which being as recent as the Sudan's split in 2011. It is one piece of the border negotiations mosaic, confirming that African nations did not fit, and often still do not fit, within the borders that the Europeans drew up.

Somali nationalism's grievances mainly derived from the failed opportunity of creating the much aspired Greater Somalia, a large territory unifying the Somali-speaking populations living in Somalia, Djibouti, as well as in parts of both Ethiopia and Kenya. This project was supported by the United Kingdom in the 1940s but later abandoned for strategic reasons, once the flame of Somali nationalism had been ignited. Even so, Somalia continued to struggle to secure a redrawing of the borders through both diplomatic as well as military means. Nationalism emerged as a powerful expression of African revisionism in relation to the colonial order. Eventually, the unifying mission failed: firstly, because the former colonial powers had other designs on the area, thus with holding any official support for the nationalist cause; and secondly, because even the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), founded in Addis Ababa in 1963, formally recognized the borders as they were established by the colonial powers<sup>1</sup>, notwithstanding the fact that many African leaders had long recognised the danger and the menace that these arbitrarily drawn lines implied for the maintenance of continental stability<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, in the light of the desire for independent action on the part of African countries, the OAU lacked the legal, military and, in part, the ideological instruments to provide a mediation process that could achieve more than a non-binding recommendation. Lastly, it failed due to the very nature of the nationalist movement itself, as I will attempt to show. Independent Somalia's persistent interest in the affairs of adjacent regions represented a permanent threat to its neighbours, which, to an extent, shaped their own foreign policies<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> OAU's Charter, Article III (paragraph three): "Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and for its inalienable right to independent existence". 1964 OAU Cairo Resolution will further confirm OAU's pledge to respect borders.

<sup>2</sup> At the OAU inaugural ceremony, Ghana's President Nkrumah said in an iconic speech: "The masses of the people of Africa are crying for unity. The people of Africa call for a breaking down of boundaries that keep them apart. They demand an end to the border disputes between sister African States – disputes that arise out of the artificial barriers that divided us. It was colonialism's purpose that left us with our border irredentism that rejected our ethnic and cultural fusion".

Accessed October 24, 2013, <http://newafricanmagazine.com/we-must-unite-now-or-perish/>

<sup>3</sup> Because "in the Horn, state (re)formation is never finished: it will produce persistent conflicts on the basis of material, political and other competition" Jon G. Abbink, "Ethiopia-Eritrea: proxy wars and prospects of peace in the Horn". *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. vol. 21, no.3 (2003): 410.

---

---

### Borders and Somali traditions: A problematic encounter

I shall now proceed by underlining why the borders that currently define the Somali nation may not in fact enjoy full legitimacy. I will seek to clarify the fact that although both the Somali constitutions, of 1960 and 2012, officially recognised the existing treaties and borders, the issue here lies in relation to material legitimacy (i.e. a legitimacy which goes beyond the paper on which it has been accorded), whose very absence has led to the proliferation of undercover activities, the arming of guerrilla groups, political interference and proxy-wars; tactics that are largely favoured by the governments and non-state actors active in the area. Consequently, the discourse on the above-mentioned type of legitimacy is conceptually very similar to the distinction that scholars have utilised in relation to borders and borderlands: a border as an “institution of inter-state division according to international law”, and borderlands as “physical space along the border”<sup>4</sup>. While the former refers to the theoretical territorial division as such, the latter focuses on the inclusiveness these areas actually provide in relation to their inhabitants, with all the enormous consequences that this implies. It is possible to argue that there are two reasons for the current lack of material legitimacy. The first one, as mentioned above, is political; the colonial boundaries are an obstacle to the achievement of a Greater Somalia. They have not been determined by Somalis, neither were their opinions elicited as part of the decision-making process which led to the actual boundaries<sup>5</sup>. The recognition and acceptance of current borders as definitive is, therefore, the first step towards finally setting aside the Greater Somalia cause. The second reason directly concerns Somali pre-colonial traditions, especially in relation to what the customary laws prescribe with respect to land and identity issues. The following paragraph deals with the role of tradition as an inhibitor in relation to border acceptance within Somali society, keeping in mind, however, that some elements could also be regarded as true in other African instances.

Somalia is traditionally a clan-based society, in which the clan is the primary unit of community life<sup>6</sup>. Geographic features and limited resources forced the ancestral inhabitants of Somalia to adapt their subsistence activities according to environmental conditions, eventually diversifying themselves into two main clan groups, according to their modes of production. In northern Somalia, active nomadic tribes can be found, (the Darod, the Dir, and the Isaq). Southern Somalia, including the Mogadishu area, is the homeland of semi-pastoral clan types (the Hawiye, the Rahanweyn and, again, the Darod), who are also skilled as farmers.

<sup>4</sup> Dereje Feyissa and Markus V. Hoehne, “Resourcing state borders and borderlands in the Horn of Africa” *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*, Working Papers, no. 107 (2008): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Michael W. Reisman, “The case of Western Somaliland (Ogaden): an international legal perspective”, *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 03, (1978): 3

<sup>6</sup> Somali tradition has been described in the invaluable book by Ioan Myrddin Lewis: *A pastoral democracy*. (Munster: Lit Verlag Munster-Hamburg and James Currey Publishers, 1999).

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

For Somali nomadic tribes, it has been said that “the household was the basic unit of production and livestock ownership, and livestock production was the primary economic enterprise”<sup>7</sup>. Nomadic tribes are mainly distinguished by their inability to produce a food surplus. They rely on livestock holding and commerce, which requires them to constantly move in search of new grazing lands, preferably in restricted and traditional areas since other sites may produce lower yields, thus threatening the entire community with the prospect of famine. One of the most relevant considerations to be taken into account when exploring traditional Somali society is that for Somalis the genealogical distance has been revealed to be of much greater importance than geographical proximity<sup>8</sup>; the influence exercised by clan affiliations (everyone belonging to a specific group in conformity with the male descendent line) actually retains its predominance over other identity sources, such as religion<sup>9</sup>, as well as over any form of ideology. This principle implies one issue that requires consideration: especially in the north, spatial contiguity is not equal to common social belonging. Let us consider, for example, two groups which make use of the same grazing land and which have no common ancestors but maintain peaceful relations. Given that they belong to different clans and that they may not share the same traditional norms or the institutions set up to prevent conflict, the *xeer* (treaty)<sup>10</sup>, these two clans may well descend into war when confronted with resource scarcity and disputes over the access to land. However, if they have agreed on a contract, the above-mentioned *xeer*, the clan’s elders can convene a *shir* (council)<sup>11</sup> to seek a peaceful resolution to potential conflicts or, if harm has already occurred, to determine appropriate compensation levels. However, notwithstanding the existence of such agreements, armed confrontation between the two local groups is possible at any time, since fellow clansmen from other geographical areas may call on them for support. Such is the power of clan affiliation. Therefore, mutual suspicion, at the very least, is the “natural attitude”<sup>12</sup> that characterises the relationships between these pastoral communities. Particularly in response to this reality, the tenets of Somali traditions prescribe that a strip of land, approximately one kilometre wide, should be left between one group, or clan, and the other<sup>13</sup>. As far as Somali pre-

<sup>7</sup> Abdi Ismail Samatar, “Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 30, no.04 (1992): 630.

<sup>8</sup> Joakim Gundel and Ahmed A. Omar Dharaxo, “The predicament of the ‘Oday’”. Danish Refugee Council, Novib-Oxfam (2006): 5

<sup>9</sup> It must be mentioned, however, that Islam, which can be traced back to the seventh century, is an important cultural heritage and has profound roots within Somali society. Sufism, the mystical Islamic practice that entails the cult of saints, is widespread throughout the country. Moreover, Islamic laws regulate questions which pertain to family law, such as inheritance and marriage.

<sup>10</sup> The word also indicates Somali customary laws that govern relations between the clans. When these laws are broken, the payment of *diya* (blood compensation) is required, and the entire clan is responsible for compensating the offended group.

<sup>11</sup> The traditional council of elders in charge of dealing with a large number of matters of community interest.

<sup>12</sup> Ioan Myrddin Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Puntland Development Research Centre (PDRC), *Somali Customary Law and Traditional Economy: Cross*

colonial traditions are concerned, this constitutes the most suitable comparison with the European concept of a border. When Somalis have resorted in the past (and even today) to artificial divisions of land, they have done so in order to regulate the use of land between each clan; the purpose has not been to socially define those who live within that specific territory. This task is accomplished *in toto* through reference to clans and genealogy. These features probably derive from the fact that many Somalis live, at least, semi-pastoral lives, and their use of land remains temporary as well as being strictly subject to seasonal variations. Therefore, Somali traditional customs did not create institutions such as borders, and never established a centralised “state”, as conceived in the West. It seems as if Somali communities did not need such things, since borders are inconsistent with their experience of expansive pastoralism and the traditional usage of land. Clans are not distributed according to geographical criteria and the xeer is called upon to settle disputes whenever they occur. Somalis have founded their social contract on something other than the principles of statehood<sup>14</sup>. If we are seeking to understand the perception of current borders that Somalis have, the major challenge that faces us is how to capture the essence of the tradition and its meaning in daily practice. And this constitutes a primary task, since traditional norms, despite the external imposition of democratic institutions, still prevail within the social organisation. Since independence in 1960, and continuing until the present time, borders have continued to be very porous, both physically/legally and philosophically/ideologically, largely because the tribal system has survived, along with all its practices. For such a system, boundaries are an alien concept, to be eluded, bypassed, and exploited if possible; borders provide “conduits and opportunities”<sup>15</sup>.

If we bring the Somali population into the discourse of border legitimacy, what we are most likely to observe is the fact that, in many cases, borders are ignored in terms of their legal dimension. In fact, a number of activities take place within border regions, from livestock grazing or herding, to illicit ones, while governments have a hard time in preventing them and few opportunities to provide incentives to do so. Why does this occur? One answer could be that there is a factual dichotomy between two conceptualizations of the social order: the “power of tradition” and the “tradition of power”. The former is the form I associate with Somalis; tradition retains its role in providing a qualitative order to daily life, by providing the means to manage basic needs and deal with social relations. The power of tradition is such because it is acknowledged, respected and emphasised by Somalis, who perpetuate its rituals and adhere to its practices; it is exactly in these communitarian rituals and social relations

*Sectional, Pastoral, Frankincense and Marine Norms* (Garowe: PDRC, 2003), 60.

<sup>14</sup> A discussion on the social contract in Somalia, in terms of “bottom-up, organic, disjointed negotiation of indigenous governance solutions” is present in Leonard’ and Samantar’s article titled “What does the Somali Experience teach us about the social contract and the state?” *Development and Change*, vol. 42, issue 2, (2011): 559.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony I. Asiwaju and P. Nugent. “Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries” in: *African Boundaries: barriers, conduits and opportunities*, ed. A.I. Asiwaju and P. Nugent. (London: Pinter, 1996), 1–17.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

that power finds its privileged channel of transmission. The Europeans, who came to colonise the Horn of Africa with their Imperialist objectives and accompanied by the racist “civilising mission” refrain, attempted to impose their traditions of power, which included the state’s attributes indicated by Max Weber<sup>16</sup>. However, scholars have noted that “sovereignty” in Africa has been best exercised over people rather than territory<sup>17</sup>; besides which, clan councils of elders are the expression of multiple sources of authority, rather than only one. Therefore, Weberian notions of the state when applied to Africa were denuded of their monolithic pillars, i.e. land and monopolistic potency, and this was to affect the functioning of the European-influenced state and borders in Somalia, since such institutions were hijacked by self-replicating elites which extended the “clan politics” at the state level. To a large extent, border issues in the Horn of Africa revolve around the conflicting duality of the nation-state and the traditional community. What has been the outcome of this struggle?

Somalis exploit a foreign-imposed instrument to their own advantage, as was the case with the notion of “the state” that was brought by European colonisers at the end of the nineteenth century. If, in the wake of the civil war, that same European concept of state was viewed by Somalis as “an instrument of accumulation and domination, enriching and empowering those who control it and exploiting and oppressing the rest”<sup>18</sup>, I would argue that a similar understanding pertained in relation to boundaries. These artificial lines, which were arbitrarily drawn up by colonial powers, which themselves had little knowledge and interest in creating homogeneity, cut off several groups of Somalis from their clansmen. However, they maintained strict transboundary relations with their kinsmen “on the other side”. In spite of the artificial frontiers, informal cross-border integration between communities took place every day. Pan-Somalism has been the main political outcome of the context presented above. It provided for a synthesis between the two opposing sides. While Somalis do not recognise the institutional architecture that originated in Europe and was then transplanted in Africa, they do believe in the concept of a Somali nation, in the sense that this constitutes a homogeneous population that shares history, religion, language and customs<sup>19</sup>, a population that has been divided, however. This self-perception of being part of a Somali nation is quite unusual in the rest of Africa, where societies are often quite ethnically fragmented and/or partitioned as a consequence of the colonial strategy of *divide et impera*, a strategy often reiterated

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber defined the state with the following words: “a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” in Daniel Warner, *An Ethic of Responsibility in International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 1991), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Two examples: Jack Goody, *Technology, tradition and the state in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 30. Andrea Pase, *Linee sulla terra* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2011), 184.

<sup>18</sup> Ken Menkhaus, “State Collapse in Somalia: Second Thoughts. *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 97(2003): 409.

<sup>19</sup> Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 98. See also Lewis, ‘Understanding’, 27.

by African ruling elites after decolonisation. There are opposing opinions as to whether Somalis actually constitute a homogeneous population<sup>20</sup>. However, if not the real consistency, at least it might be the persistent transmission of this opinion in the debate that is indicative of the strong persuasive power of early Somali nationalism. Moreover, cultural or ethnic diversity were not the factors that helped to prolong the conflict in Somalia during the civil war. It is more likely, as has been noted, that the terrifying experience of the civil war forced Somalis “to find protection in the ghost of pre-colonial kinship tradition, the clan”<sup>21</sup>. Perceived cultural homogeneity has safeguarded the integrity of the clan system, even during the prolonged civil war, which itself was largely caused by political reasons and the uncontrolled actions of power-crazy elites which were partly able to exploit clan membership for their own political ends. Hence, ancestral traditions in Somalia, which had survived attempts to abolish them during the 1960-69 democratic government, and which were even emphasised under the Barre socialist regime’s superficial attempts<sup>22</sup> to abolish the clan system, also managed to survive the civil war test. If pre-colonial traditions were powerful enough to survive such attacks, there was still hope that the dream of achieving a Greater Somalia could be a reality. And if internal conflicts had not been able to prevent it, there was little that internationally ratified borders could do to suppress such aspirations. In other words, there has been a relentless political belief that a change in circumstances is achievable. This progressive orientation has also encompassed frontiers, which have proved to be anything but fixed. It forces us to expand our analysis of the Horn of Africa to a deeper level than a simple focus on existing borders. For this reason, it is necessary to extend our horizons beyond a mere focus on borders if we are to gain a better understanding of the political dynamics of the Horn, since Greater Somalia – and here lies the fundamental problem- obviously involves other countries in addition to Somalia.

The aim of Pan-Somalism is to unify the Somali populations living in five different regions, as represented by the flag’s five pointed white star. Two of the regions constitute Somalia as we know it today (the former Italian and British colonial segments)<sup>23</sup>. In addition, there are three other regions: Djibouti (the former French Somaliland) the Ogaden (also referred to as Region Five or the Somali Region), in Ethiopia, and the Northern Frontier District (NFD), which is

<sup>20</sup> To some, Somalia is “misrepresented as a country with an ethnically homogeneous population, culture and language” Gundel and Dharbaxo, ‘The predicament’, 4. To others, Somalis suffered from “separations of people—ethnic groupings and their cultures and civilizations, who, in reality, belonged to one nation”, as reported by Daniel Don Nanjira, *African foreign policy and diplomacy: from antiquity to the 21st century* (Santa Barbara: Praeger), 308.

<sup>21</sup> Samatar, ‘Destruction’, 637. Lewis concurs with Samatar: “tendencies of reversion to clan loyalties, with alliance and dissociation of segmentary kin groups according to the local context, characterised the general scene throughout the Somali region in 1992”. In Lewis, ‘Understanding’, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, ‘Understanding’, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Today, this area has been divided up into the self-declared state of Somaliland and the autonomous region of Puntland.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

in Kenya. Perhaps, the Somali President, Schermarke, best explained the core of Pan-Somalism's claims when he wrote in the Preface to the book, "The Somali Peninsula"<sup>24</sup>: "Our misfortune is that our neighbouring countries (...) are not out neighbours. Our neighbours are our Somali kinsmen whose citizenship has been falsified by indiscriminate 'boundary arrangement'. They have to move across artificial borders to their pasture lands. They occupy the same terrain and pursue the same pastoral economy as ourselves. We speak the same language. We share the same creed, the same culture and the same traditions. How *can* [original italics] we regard our brothers as foreigners?"

Among the three disputed areas which are not under Somalia's direct control today, the Ogaden (comprised in the Somali Regional State, one of Ethiopia's administrative divisions) and the Haud<sup>25</sup> represent the most thorny issues to be tackled as a result of British diplomacy, the inability of Ethiopia to gain full control of the area and the presence of pasturelands that are of vital importance to Somali herdsman. Moreover, the Ogaden is a region inhabited by a majority Somali population. A border, established by other countries when Somalia was not even an independent state, created without canvassing the opinions of the Somali population and without establishing its place in Somali culture, cannot alter the ancestral dynamics of generations of nomads in relation to grazing rights, an activity that guarantees the survival of 600,000 people, through recourse to either traditional or Western legal processes.

### **Somalia and the colonial powers**

The origin of the modern<sup>26</sup> Ogaden question goes back to the early colonialism era, at the time of the treaties and agreements that Great Britain signed with Ethiopia's emperor, whose expansionist ambitions were no secret. According to some studies, the agreements concerning the border between the Ethiopian Empire and British Somaliland have no legal validity<sup>27</sup>. In 1908, Italy and Ethiopia signed a convention

<sup>24</sup> Information Service of the Somali Government, *The Somali Peninsula: a new light on imperial motives*. (Mogadishu: Information Service of Somalia Government, 1962). URL: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/116645277/The-Somali-Peninsula> (Accessed October 24, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> The Haud is a borderland area, comprising rich pasture land. "About 300,000 Somali nomads cross the border to the Haud seasonally to stay for a period of five or six months" Eshete Tibebe, "The Root Causes of Political Problems in the Ogaden, 1942—1960", *Northeast African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1991): 20.

<sup>26</sup> I prefer to talk about the "modern" question, because there is a long history of religious warfare between Christian Ethiopians and Muslim Somalis which links back to the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Undoubtedly, these war episodes have contributed to the exacerbation of relationships between Ethiopians and Somalis. However, they are less relevant in relation to the demarcation of the borders agreed between Great Britain and Ethiopia.

<sup>27</sup> Reisman, 'The case', 4. Reisman reports that at the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain concluded a number of Protectorate Agreements with the Somali coastal tribe that included the maintenance of the independence of the tribe. In 1897, London ceded some portions of the Somaliland protectorate to Menelik, in the absence of any authority accorded by the Somalis. Basing his arguments on the opinions expressed by the International Court of Justice, Reisman concludes that the Treaty between the UK and Ethiopia has to be deemed invalid.

which should have included the demarcation of the Ogaden border. However, that document left the legal status of a major section of the border unclear and the Ogaden region remained, therefore, as an ambiguous territory prevalently inhabited by Somalis, yet potentially subject to the expansionist aims of Great Britain, Italy and Ethiopia. Italian leader, Mussolini, did not see it as an issue in need of resolution since he had grander plans, with the ultimate aim of conquering Addis Ababa's empire. In May 1936, Italian troops actually defeated the Ethiopian army, providing the impetus to combine the administration of the Ogaden region with the coastal colony of Italian Somaliland, thus creating a *de facto* greater (colonial) Somalia within the Italian East Africa Empire<sup>28</sup>. In 1941, Italy was in turn defeated by British troops and Haile Selassie was able to return to the throne. Reisman reports the message delivered by Haile Selassie after the Italian defeat in Ethiopia<sup>29</sup>: "I have come to restore the independence of my country including Eritrea and the Benadir [the Ethiopian name for Somalia], whose people will henceforth dwell under the shade of the Ethiopian flag."

From this moment on, the international community began to address the future of the Italian East Africa Empire. The task of resolving the Ogaden question passed into London's hands. In 1942, the British eventually recognized Ethiopian control over metropolitan areas, though they retained the administration of the Ogaden, maintaining the provisional territorial division established by the Italians, but not taking any additional long-term steps to finally resolve the issue. Once the attempt to obtain an international protectorate over the entire region had failed, the British handed over the challenge (and the unresolved problems) to the Italian Trusteeship administration of Somaliland, under the mandate of the United Nations. However, after the British withdrawal, the Ethiopian Empire seized the Ogaden,<sup>30</sup> while the problem of determining the final border was returned back to Italy, as a trusteeship entitled Nation. The actions of the Italians did not indicate a determination to find a solution to the Ogaden issue, even ignoring the repeated pressure to do so, as applied by the United Nations<sup>31</sup>. However, Somali nationalism was already mounting by then since the British government had opened up Pandora's Box when it put forward "the possibility of creating a Greater Somalia administration (under British trusteeship) as a basis for future independence"<sup>32</sup>, just before handing Southern Somalia over to Italian trusteeship. In this situation, the undefined border with Ethiopia became an asset for modern Somali irredentism, originating as it did from this crucial diplomatic passage. The absence of a clear rationale on the part of

<sup>28</sup> Cedric Barnes, "The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea, c.1946-48", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 02 (2007): 278.

<sup>29</sup> Reisman, 'The case', 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> UN Resolution 1213(XII) recommended in December 1957 that Ethiopia and Italy would establish an arbitration tribunal to delimit the frontier. One year later, Resolution 1345(XIII) urged Ethiopia and Italy to "intensify their efforts to implement the terms" of the previous resolution.

<sup>32</sup> Barnes, 'The Somali', 277.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

British diplomacy, as well as the non-application of the self-determination principle at the time of independence in 1960, paved the way for the beginning of the Somali armed struggle, which culminated in Siad Barre's decision to attack the Ogaden in 1977. Evidently, the dream of a unified Greater Somalia had not ceased to radiate its appealing influence even thirty-five years after the British formulation of the Greater Somalia project. With regard to the contested Northern Frontier District, Kenya was also determined not to make concessions to the Somali government and felt able to count on previous treaties signed with British and Italian colonial emissaries. Djibouti was a different case. The tiny state held three national referenda, in 1958, 1967 and 1977. The outcome of the first showed that only 24.7 per cent opted for independence (and a potential merging with Somalia); the second confirmed the proposal to form a loose confederation with France (60.6 per cent), although results may have been compromised as a result of the alleged manoeuvres of the Djiboutian government. In 1977, almost the total population voted in favour of independence from France; however, the possibility of Somalia influencing the outcome or taking action was much weaker by that time.

Mogadishu eventually failed in its attempt to retain the disputed regions, which would have resulted in a total increase of 60 per cent in the size of Somali national territory. After the end of the Ogaden war, the leader's popularity at home crumbled and he had to face mounting resistance from the northern area, which were enraged at Barre's discrimination against their region. Within a matter of months, this would result in the outbreak of civil war. Paradoxically, by the end of the 1980s Somalia had not only failed in its irredentist enterprise in the Ogaden, but was also close to splitting into two states. This would occur in 1991 when Somaliland declared unilateral autonomy. In 1998, Puntland claimed its independence from Mogadishu, representing, perhaps, another sign that the borders in Somalia did not enjoy universal recognition.

### **The Somali youth league, organised nationalism**

After providing historical contextualisation, I now propose to provide a more detailed analysis of the early stages of irredentism in Somalia, which will enable us to understand the way in which the battle for border realignment has been conducted. The first structured and prominent nationalistic organisation to be established in Somalia was the Somali Youth Club (SYC), founded in May 1943 in Mogadishu. The British watched every instance of political activism with enthusiasm, and the SYC gradually became their privileged Somali interlocutor. In addition, during a meeting of Prime Ministers held in London in April 1946, Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, underlined the fact that the best arrangement for the former Italian colonies would include<sup>33</sup>: "Italian Somaliland, together with British Somaliland, the

<sup>33</sup>"Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade". Historical documents, URL: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/historical/volume-09/historical-document-09-218.html> (accessed October 24, 2013).

Ogaden and the Reserved Areas, to be placed under international trusteeship with the United Kingdom as Administering Authority.” When this proposal was opposed by other powers, Mr. Bevin justified his plan in the British House of Commons on June 1946. He said<sup>34</sup>: “(...) the nomads of Italian Somaliland must cross the existing frontiers in search of grass. In all innocence, therefore, we proposed that British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, and the adjacent part of Ethiopia, if Ethiopia agreed, should be lumped together as a trust territory, so that the nomads should lead their frugal existence with the least possible hindrance and there might be a real chance of a decent economic life, as understood in that territory.”

Great Britain maintained a certain degree of interest in the area, expressed in its desire to ensure the creation of an international trusteeship mandate. Most importantly, London envisaged the formation of a Greater Somalia, an idea that certainly the British government representatives in Somalia had the chance to transmit to the SYC leaders, turning it into a concrete option for the country’s future. British diplomatic actions appeared to convey the message that the political situation in the Horn and the borders issue had not yet been settled with any degree of certainty, and further developments might yet take place (with the British acting in a supervisory role). With this premise, Somali nationalism was able to gain in importance and acquire new adherents. Unity became an obsession that prompted the reorganisation of the SYC into the Somali Youth League (SYL)<sup>35</sup> in 1946, the year of the Bevin plan. The growth of the SYL, in the shadow of the British Military Administration (BMA), eventually alarmed Ethiopia, since the organisation’s branches were opening throughout the Somali-speaking territories, the Ogaden included. But the sudden surge in Somali nationalist sentiment would produce a fatal change in the situation. In January 1948, the UN Commission in charge of evaluating the potential for an Italian administration of Somalia visited Mogadishu. In the streets of the capital, two factions organised demonstrations: one was pro-Italy, celebrating the likely eventuality of Italian Trusteeship; the other, which also involved SYL members, was firmly against such a development. In spite of the proclaimed peaceful intentions, the city was set on fire and at the end of the day 54 Italians and 14 Somalis lay dead and the SYL offices had been burnt down. After this event, it was clear to the British government that Somali nationalism was becoming increasingly militant, and London opted for a change of strategy that did not envisage further involvement in Somalia. Thus, the most concrete chapter of the Somali irredentism story was closed. Less than two years afterwards, Italy was granted a United Nations mandate in relation to the trusteeship of Somalia, lasting until 1960.

<sup>34</sup> House of Commons Debate, June 4, 1946, cols. 1840-41.

<sup>35</sup> Chapter I, Article V of the founding constitution clearly stated the SYL’s goal: “To unite all Somalis in general and youth in particular and to reject all old habits such as tribalism, Sufi orders, clanism and the like”. In Ghazi Abuhakema and Tim Carmichael, “The Somali Youth League Constitution: a handwritten Arabic copy (c. 1947?) from the Ethiopian Security Forces Archives in Harär”, *Journal of Eastern Africa Studies* 4, n. 3 (2010), 453.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

### **The borders and an independent Somalia up to the civil war**

During the Italian administration, Somali nationalism remained active, yet with few opportunities to openly raise its claims<sup>36</sup>. In any case, the Ogaden issue was in the spotlight, as demonstrated in the speech delivered by the Negus to the people of the Ogaden (1956)<sup>37</sup>: “We remind you that all of you are by race, colour, blood, and custom, members of the great Ethiopian family. And as to the rumors[sic] of a ‘Greater Somalia,’ we consider that all Somali peoples are economically linked with Ethiopia, and therefore, we do not believe that such a state can be viable standing alone, separated from Ethiopia.”

It was not until independence, granted on 1 July 1960, that the dreams of a unified state for the Somali people gained a renewed place at the centre of Somalia’s political life. At the international level, Somalia’s aspirations for a permanent political reunification managed to ruin its diplomatic relationships with neighbouring countries, providing the basis for Somali isolation in the global arena. Before initiating a course to arms, the Somali government attempted to persuade African countries in the OAU of the necessity of reconsidering the borders. Major diplomatic efforts to obtain recognition for the concept of the Greater Somalia project were concentrated in the 1960s for a number of reasons. Firstly, Somalia obtained independence in 1960. Until that year, as already stated, there were limitations in relation to Somalia’s freedom to operate at an international level. Secondly, in the period 1960-69, Somalia enjoyed multi-party democracy, characterised by high levels of freedom in relation to political participation, even though the last democratic elections held in 1969 saw the participation of 1,002 candidates for 62 parties, mainly representing “thinly disguised clan organisations”<sup>38</sup> rather than actual parties. Thirdly, there was growing internal pressure from veteran organisations, such as the SYL, to re-launch at an international level the earlier British proposal for a Greater Somalia solution. Finally, the establishment of the OAU (in Ethiopia) provided a forum for all independent African countries to meet around the same table. The question of colonial-inherited border arrangements occupied a large percentage of time at the meeting. In his address to the inaugural meeting of the OAU in 1963, President Aden Abdoulla Osman took advantage of the presence of a Pan-African audience to raise the issue of the *peculiar* Somali situation<sup>39</sup>: “unlike any other border problem in Africa, the entire length of the existing boundaries, as imposed by the colonialists, cut [sic] across the traditional pastures of our nomadic population. The problem becomes

<sup>36</sup> For at least the first five years of its ten-year mandate, Italian administrators did not even seek SYL collaboration, as reported in Mohamed Aden Sheikh, *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi* (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 2010), 29.

<sup>37</sup> Ezekiel Rediker, “The Ogaden: a microcosm of global conflict”, *The Concord Review* (2004): 209.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, ‘Understanding’, 37.

<sup>39</sup> “African Union, 1963 speeches”. Address delivered by the Honourable Aden Abdoulla Osman, President of the Somali Republic, URL: <http://summits.au.int/en/21stsummit/speeches/address-delivered-honourable-aden-abdulla-osman-president-somali-republic> (accessed October 24, 2013).

unique when it is realised that no other nation in Africa finds itself totally divided along the whole length of its borders from its own people.”

In his speech, President Osman mentioned all the contested borders that were inflaming Somali nationalism, probably upsetting the concerned countries. This was particularly the case with the OAU host country, Ethiopia. As for the Ogaden, he said<sup>40</sup>: “We shall simply summarize our stand on this matter by saying that Ethiopia has taken possession of a large portion of Somali territory without the consent and against the wishes of the inhabitants.” With regard to Kenya, President Osman affirmed<sup>41</sup>: “The Somali area administered by Britain is known as the Northern Frontier District. Last October when an impartial commission was charged with ascertaining the view of the inhabitants living there, it found that 87% of them were in favour of union with the Somali Republic. (...) the people of that region have demonstrated that they emphatically do not consent to be governed by the authorities in Nairobi.” Finally, the Somali President offered some comments in relation to the not-yet independent Djibouti<sup>42</sup>: “We urge, in particular, that the people of French Somaliland be given an opportunity to determine their own future freely, without pressure or intimidation.” As can be seen, President Osman, rather than mentioning territorial annexations, focused on the principle of self-determination, prompted by the United Nations Charter in 1945, in order to stress that the will of the Somali people had not been respected, an argument which continued to be a vital claim in the Pan-Africanist struggle against the legacy of the European colonisers.

However, after long debates and polarized opinions, the OAU Charter of 1963 eventually sanctioned the maintenance of inherited boundaries, denying any form of territorial concessions in order to avoid a domino effect. At the same time, it charged the Commission of Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration with the task settling disputes through peaceful means, in accordance with the principle of non-interference and in respect of the national sovereignty of State Members. Basically, Pan-Somalis returned from the meeting empty-handed.

After the electoral round in 1967, which saw Abdiraschid Ali Schermark elected to the presidency, the new President worked to restore cordial relations with neighbouring countries. His *détente* agenda towards Ethiopia and Kenya, however, was seen by many as a sign that the nationalist cause had capitulated. This policy created wide discontent among Somalis, and was seen as “thrusting the Pan-Somali issue temporarily into the background”<sup>43</sup>; it might also have been the reason behind the assassination of President in 1969. Politicians were well aware by then that the issue of nationalism dominated popular opinion. Siad Barre, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1969, owed much to nationalism legitimising his hold on power. If, as it appeared, the former president had dismissed the cause, Barre was expected

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, ‘Understanding’, 37.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

to revitalize Pan-Somali sentiments. From this point of view, circumstances were favourable. The Derg's rise to power in Ethiopia was followed by a turbulent period that offered a powerful opportunity to initiate the irredentist enterprise. The Ogaden war was very popular in Somalia, and there were high expectations at home when Barre gave the order to invade the region in 1977. Unfortunately for the Somali leader, Ethiopia was promptly offered help from Soviet, Cuban and South Yemeni troops, forcing the invaders to retreat. The most vital of political issues for Somalia, i.e. of independence, was to become the source of its biggest disappointment. "The terrible defeat" Lewis notes, "(...) led to widespread public demoralisation and to an upsurge of 'tribalism' (i.e. clan loyalties) as different groups sought scapegoats to explain the debacle"<sup>44</sup>. From now on, the military leader had to face growing opposition, while Somalia started its relentless descent into intrastate conflict. The north was perceived as a threat to the regime's survival and increasingly became the target of activities such as torture, extra-judicial detention, summary execution, and, eventually, military bombardment. On 9 April 1978, less than a month since the war's end, a failed coup attempt, led by officers of the Mijertejn (Darod) clan, was launched. Other army officers regrouped and formed the Somali Salvation Democratic Front, which moved its operational headquarters deeper into Ethiopia and began the process of seeking additional support<sup>45</sup>. According to Lewis, the fact that "... the Mijertejn sought support in Ethiopia, Somalia's traditional enemy, is both a sign of their desperation and a measure of the degree of disintegration of Somali national (and clan family, e.g. Darod) solidarity"<sup>46</sup>. In April 1988, Barre signed peace accords with Mengitsu; the dream of a Greater Somalia was fading away and Somalia also was disintegrating into chaos.

### **No boundary is forever? The strategies of the regional players.**

The vigorous political energy and determination which surrounded the Somali unification objective represented a permanent threat in the eyes of neighbouring countries. If Djibouti was out of reach due to French interests, the Ogaden and the NFD seemed achievable targets. Somali claims on lost territories and partitioned identity may be behind Kenya's policy of leaving Somali pastoralists alone in the NFD, with no attempt at creating development plans<sup>47</sup>. It was no surprise, in the early days after independence, that Somalis in Kenya were in favour of a union with Somalia and they initiated a secessionist conflict with Nairobi. The election of Schermarke in 1967 would open up a window of opportunity for a renewed peaceful atmosphere, since it prompted a change in Kenyan policy towards the NFD. At the beginning of

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Luca Ciabbari. *Dopo lo stato. Storia e antropologia della ricomposizione sociale nella Somalia settentrionale*. (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010), 74.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, 'Understanding', 67. Note that Siad Barre belonged to the Marehan clan, a sub-group of the Darod.

<sup>47</sup> Mahasin A.G.H. Al-Safi, "Kenya Somalis: the shift from Greater Somalia to integration with Kenya" *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 34.

the 1970s, a regional policy was launched, with the aim of increasing the standard of living through education, health and agriculture plans<sup>48</sup>. The development plan was successful in the measure that Somalis living in Northern Kenya equalled and then bettered the economic conditions of their counterparts in Somalia. While Barre's regime engaged in clashes with Ethiopia, the NFD provided a safer environment than Somalia. Many pastoralists moved to the expanding urban centres, abandoning their traditional lifestyle. Through the inclusion of Somalis inhabiting the NFD, Kenya was able to secure a decrease in the influence of the Somali unifying ideology within its own territory. The situation in Ogaden was characterised by far more violent and prolonged conflicts. Today, the Ogaden conflict is less based on self-determination disputations than on political issues. If the 1977-78 Ogaden conflict was perceived as a nation-wide issue, a different assessment is needed for what happened later. This is particularly the case since "several opportunities for more peaceful and prosperous development have arisen since the creation of Ethiopia's Somali region in 1991, and different actors bear responsibility for not seizing them"<sup>49</sup>. It seems, therefore, that private gain calculations have been the driving force in recent years. The ultimate prize is no longer the redrawing of borders. So, while the Ethiopian government is eager to solve the question in order to take advantage of the region's potential for oil and gas production, the Ogaden itself is being submerged in a wave of inter-clan fighting, the short-sighted political visions of the Ogaden National Liberation Front and the Ethiopian authorities, as well as Islamic insurgency. Against this backdrop, nationalism has today lost its hold on the Ogaden dispute.

### Greater Somalia: Myth or reality?

In this paper, I have dealt with the complex issue of Greater Somalia in order to shed light on the reasons behind the intermittent political interest in borders within the Horn region. No other African nation has been partitioned as many times as has been the case in Somalia<sup>50</sup>. However, no other partitioned groups in Africa have reacted in the same way as the Somalis have done, i.e. through the development of an active nationalist movement<sup>51</sup>. The dividing lines in Africa are nothing more than colonial constructs; they failed to recognise African social systems and were designed to comply with the immediate interests of the colonisers. However, the realisation of the Greater Somalia project was also impeded by other factors, some of them questioning the very essence of the nationalist aspiration itself. In the light of what I have presented in this paper, I will now try to underline the main reasons behind the failure to establish the Greater Somali nation. First of all, Somalia has failed to

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Tobias Hagmann, *The Political Roots of the Current Crisis in Region 5*, *Social Science Research Council* (2007), URL: <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Hagmann/index1.html> (accessed October 24, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Mohammed Haji Mukhtar, "The Emergence and Role of Political Parties in the Inter-River Region of Somalia from 1947-1960" *Ufahamu: a Journal of African Studies* 17, no. 2 (1989): 75.

<sup>51</sup> Dereje Feyissa and Markus V. Hoehne, 'Resourcing', 4.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

secure continuous support for its cause from an international power. I have explored the preponderant role of the British government in promoting the idea of a Greater Somalia, at a time when London held control over all Somali territories except French Somaliland. However, its interest in the cause ended as soon as London failed to gain protectorate status for the area after the end of the Second World War. The Soviets, who supplied Somalia with financial and military aid between 1964 and 1977, have been advocates of the Somali cause, but always with the final aim of extending their political influence in the Red Sea region. This was the justification for Moscow's changing sides in 1977, when it backed the socialist Derg regime in Ethiopia, Somalia's bitterest enemy at the time. Italy, in its role of former colonial power, acted mainly as intermediary in seeking to peacefully resolve Somali disputes with Ethiopia<sup>52</sup>. Finally, the US was never interested in intervening in order to further the cause of the Greater Somalia project; it restricted itself to monitoring political developments in the Horn of Africa through the development of intense diplomatic relations with both Addis Ababa and Mogadishu. Secondly, we need to take into consideration the historical contingency. Somalia became independent in 1960, the Year of Africa<sup>53</sup>, three years before the establishment of the OAU. While earlier Pan-African meetings had called for the abolition or adjustment of frontiers which cut across ethnic groups and divided people<sup>54</sup>, at the 1960 watershed African countries started to change their positions. Fearing the likely wave of border controversies and general instability that might have followed any cases of border rearrangement on the continent, African leaders adopted a conservative attitude towards colonial boundaries. Any successful rearrangement would have constituted a precedent, allowing many others to demand the same. Within the OAU, this changing attitude was exemplified by the polarisation of African countries around different approaches to the borders question; the one which eventually prevailed opening up the way for the sanctioning of boundaries inherited from the colonial powers<sup>55</sup>. The third point concerns international relations with neighbouring countries. Prior to the achievement of independence, Somalia was confronted with Ethiopian imperialism. Given that Somalia launched its counter-claims against Ethiopia and addressed the issues of the NDF and Djibouti internationally, relations with its neighbours were quickly compromised. This also precluded the possibility of mediation and the possibility of reaching any sort of peaceful bilateral agreements with Kenya, Ethiopia and

<sup>52</sup> According to a 1973 document from the US State Department, "Rome hopes for an amicable solution to the Ethiopian-Somali conflict and seeks good relations with both nations. Italy sometimes acts as an intermediary and moderating influence between the two countries". URL: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve06/d91> (Accessed October 24, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Seventeen nations freed themselves from European colonial rule in that year.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, the Accra Pan-African conference of 1958: "Whereas artificial barriers and frontiers drawn by imperialists to divide African people operate to the detriment of Africans and should be therefore be abolished or adjusted". Reported in Saadia Touval. *The boundary politics of independent Africa* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1972): 56.

<sup>55</sup> The two poles of the debate were represented by the Casablanca Group and the Monrovia Group.

Djibouti<sup>56</sup>. A further consideration was the providential Soviet military intervention in 1977 on Ethiopia's side, which determined the outcome in the confrontation between Addis Ababa and Barre's army. The occupation of the Ogaden would have represented a pivotal change in the history of the Horn, in particular revitalizing the frustrated Somali dreams and fostering new efforts to bring the NDS and Djibouti into the fold. Instead, the failure provoked an explosion of protest from the northern opponents of Barre, while, at the same time, the deteriorating security and economic conditions persuaded Somalis inhabiting the NDF and Djibouti against seeking unification.

What has been described so far concerns the "realms of reality" in relation to the border question. I would argue that there is also a counter-dimension to the portrayal of the quest for a greater Somalia as a myth. I propose to explore this position before moving towards a final set of conclusions. The configuration of the mythical status of a Greater Somalia can be articulated through reference to three elements: the existence of a cultural division between north and south Somalia, which was easily exploited for political ends; the position of Somalis living in the disputed territories and; the role of tradition. I have briefly remarked on the fact that the northern and southern regions of Somalia require us to acknowledge some important distinctions; primarily, their mode of production is different, since northern populations are made up of pastoralists whose economy is based on livestock herding, while their southern counterparts practice mixed farming and pastoralism. This economic distinction goes hand in hand with cultural differences, partly due to different lifestyles, and partly sparked by a certain attitude that the two groups accord to each other<sup>57</sup>. In this case, the power of tradition acts to the disadvantage of the Somalis. The regional dichotomy was even more emphasized as a result of the different provisions associated with British colonial rule in the north and Italian rule in the south. Therefore, when the BMA took over the Italian portion of Somalia, it favoured the employment of SYL members to help with the administration. Many of them belonged to the main northern clan of Darod, and consequently, among the population, the SYL was increasingly perceived as an organisation representing the interests of the northern clans; evidently, the duality between the nation-state and the traditional community had not been overcome. The UN Four Powers Commission, which was sent to investigate the political conditions of the former Italian colonies, stated that the SYL did not permit other parties to engage in publicity, under the threat of reprisals and other measures<sup>58</sup>. If the SYL

<sup>56</sup> I recall here the Treaty of Kayes (1963), between Mali and Mauritania, which represents the first instance of a peacefully agreed border modification. Five years later, South African and Botswana appointed a commission to complete the demarcation of their shared border. Examples reported in Salvatore Bono. *Le frontiere in Africa*. (Milan: Giuffrè, 1972). 216-220.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion on this topic, see Ioan Myrddin Lewis. *A pastoral democracy*. (Munster: Lit Verlag Munster-Hamburg and James Currey Publishers, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Information reported in Mukhtar, 'The emergence', 76.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

was northern-based, we must conclude that Somali nationalism in reality was not a genuine Pan-Somali movement, but rather a powerful claim exploited by some in order to serve their own advantage. As a result of British policies and nationalism, what were initially cultural divisions became transformed into political competition. Under Barre's regime, the situation only got worse, with the progressive clanisation of society and the political arena, coupled with the implementation of repressive measures which further alienated the current Somaliland from Mogadishu. Any strategy aimed at creating a unified and inclusive nation, beyond simple territorial unification, was entirely missing. The second issue, i.e. the nationalist feelings displayed by Somalis inhabiting the lost territories evaporated little by little as they became increasingly socially integrated. As for the NFD, al-Safi has concluded that since the civil war, "the political instability which has prevailed in Somalia (...), has not only made further prospects of the integration of Somalis within Kenya more feasible but also allowed a further influx of Somalis into Kenyan territory"<sup>59</sup>. With the support of the traditional Somali authorities, the same could apply one day to Ethiopia's Somali Region. Finally, we need to ask ourselves what would be the role of tradition within a hypothetical Greater Somalia composed of all the now-disputed areas? In particular, it is impossible to say whether or not the nomads would keep their livestock within the new Somali borders, especially during periods of cyclical drought that unfortunately affect the area. It is impossible to predict the consequences of multiple unauthorised crossings, or the results of the application of the xeer in the new areas. Neither can we predict whether the centralised state would be able to maintain authority over an Ogadeni village which is roughly 600 kilometres north of Mogadishu, where the inhabitants are prevalently nomads moving from one area to another during the course of the year. Should we also consider how the recent Somali experience, with the defection of Somaliland and the claims for increased autonomy by Puntland, would actually jeopardise the chances of success of the territorial unifying project? Such developments raise questions about the very nationhood principles imported from the West. While the federal system promulgated in the 2012 constitution probably guarantees a higher level of internal cohesion, it is politically and ideologically far distant from the ideal of a Greater Somalia.

### **Conclusions: The changing borders in the Horn of Africa**

I have attempted to demonstrate that not all colonial problems (borders) have found post-colonial solutions. The main conclusion we can draw in relation to the focus of this paper is that Somali borders have been, for most of their history, a mere set of lines on a geographical map. At the governmental level, as well as the extra-governmental one, policies, actions and discourse have often assumed something more. Therefore, any understanding of the post-colonial political events in the Horn

<sup>59</sup> Al-Safi, 'Kenya Somalis', 40.

of Africa requires us to address this preliminary and fundamental consideration. The actual practical irrelevance of borders highlights the challenges of human ecology and the legality of their establishment. However, I have also identified the dangers that stem from the politicisation of Somali nationalism, as demonstrated in the case of the close relationship between the British and SYL members. In a similar way, the Italians granted special favours to the Hawiye in 1950-60 in relation to public employment<sup>60</sup>. Under this approach, nationalist claims became simply an instrument for advancing the political interests of a single clan, establishing privileged contacts, and dominating other groups, i.e. a system for dividing rather than uniting people. To some extent, I would argue, the supporters of the irredentist claims used nationalism as a vehicle for extending their influence within and outside Somalia. Siad Barre gained power as a result of his expressed nationalist spirit, and he was ousted under the pretext that he had failed in his mission to return the Ogaden to the fold. In reality, the drive for Somali nationalism has been weaker since 1960, since the merger of the two former Somaliland(s) has doubled the competition for power<sup>61</sup>. If common ancestry and religion has provided the basis for Somali national solidarity, it has not provided any ideological basis for the creation of a Greater Somalia, which has remained a politically-fragmented project. Again, I represent this issue as a struggle between the power of tradition and the tradition of power. Somalis felt united as a result of the clan system and the *xeer*, not because of the establishment of the Western state model, clan kinship, rather than citizenship. However, the failure of states in the Horn to address the border question, as well as the failure of mediation at aregional, continental and international level, have forced both the state and the clan system to face up to all the issues mentioned in this paper.

Due to the impossibility of finding a solution in the present circumstances, borderlands in the Horn of Africa remain areas of ambiguity and are poorly integrated within the central regions. The absence of government development policies, nomad seasonal crossings, smuggling, and refugee flows, along with the arming of groups in rival territories are all practices which confirm the current status<sup>62</sup>. Borders in the

<sup>60</sup> Favours were granted in return for their participation in the former colonial administration. The Hawiye inhabited Somalia's central and lower regions, including Mogadishu. See Antonio Maria Morone. *L'Ultima colonia, come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960*. (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> For more details on the problematic merging in 1960, see Sheikh Mohamed Saeed, "The Rise and Fall of Somali Nationalism", *Refuge* 12, no. 05 (1992): 4-7. Here, an excerpt from page five is provided: "The South was politically prepared for independence and already had a council of ministers and chamber of deputies. These gave the region experience in real politics and power profiteering. The political elite in the South, struggling for power, was divided on tribal lines and was not enthusiastic to unite with the North because they were not ready to share government privileges at any cost".

<sup>62</sup> The situation as presented by UN agencies is of areas which "provide a fertile ground for the twin threats of organized crime and trafficking to flourish" (UNODC, "Organised Crime and Trafficking in Eastern Africa: a Discussion Paper" 2009, 3) and which are highly risky for those who decide to pass them through (UNHCR, "Smuggling and trafficking from the East and Horn of Africa" 2013), UNODC report, URL: [http://www.unodc.org/documents/easternfrica/regional-ministerial-meeting/Organised\\_Crime\\_and\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_Eastern\\_Africa\\_Discussion\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/easternfrica/regional-ministerial-meeting/Organised_Crime_and_Trafficking_in_Eastern_Africa_Discussion_Paper.pdf) (accessed October 24, 2013), UNCHR report, URL: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/51d175314.pdf> (accessed October 24, 2013).

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

Horn of Africa are likely to present a permanent threat to regional security, since the traditional social organisation, which does not attach any substantial political meaning to boundaries, has not been dismantled. The community has remained solidly bound to traditional norms, with every new irredentist claim which emerges being considered for its potential politicisation. The civil war has seen warlords successfully claiming to speak on behalf of sections of the Somali population which they did not actually represent. The same mistake cannot be repeated in relation to future expressions of commitment to the cause of a Greater Somalia. In order for a solution to be found, the issue must be freed from manipulation. Why should we be concerned? Because the perceptions of Somali homogeneity, in a continent of post-colonial ethnic fragmentation, has revealed a potential destabilising element that neighbours fear more than they fear Mogadishu's weapons. The same applies in respect of the tenacious clan system. This may explain why other instances of border realignment have taken place in the Horn of Africa instead, and why other nations have opted for military alliances<sup>63</sup>. It also explains the potential interest in maintaining Somalia as a weak neighbour.

In conclusion, Somali nationalism is one of the most incredible expressions of African revisionism in relation to colonial borders. Examples from history and human ecology suggest that the struggle for self-determination was legitimate and a valid aspiration of the Somali-speaking populations. However, the myth of a Greater Somalia has to contend with the reality that continues to survive as part of traditional clan solidarity. Somali-speaking populations have never experienced a centralized form of administration and have shown a capacity for engaging in extremely violent conflicts in order to achieve political power within the European-style institutional framework. Colonial rule brought two of these regions together, and the result of this has been catastrophic enough, although the endless quest for political power has largely been responsible for this outcome. At its best, the concept of Greater Somalia has provided the first tangible example of the transborder potential of African communities and ideals, posing a significant challenge to the European institutional designs for and understanding of the continent.

<sup>63</sup> In 1964, Kenya and Ethiopia signed a Mutual Defence Treaty to confront Somalia. This pact was renewed in 1980 and again in 1987.

---



---

**Bibliography**

- Abbink, Jon G. "Ethiopia-Eritrea: proxy wars and prospect of peace in the Horn". *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. Vol. 21, no.3 (2003): 407-425.
- Abuhakema, Ghazi and Tim Carmichael. "The Somali Youth League Constitution: a handwritten Arabic copy (c. 1947?) from the Ethiopian Security Forces Archives in Harär", *Journal of Eastern Africa Studies* 4, n. 3 (2010), 450-466.
- Asiwaju, Anthony I. and Paul Nugent. "Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries" in: *African Boundaries: barriers, conduits and opportunities*, ed. A.I. Asiwaju and P. Nugent. (London: Pinter, 1996), 1-17.
- Al-Safi, Mahasin A.G.H. "Kenya Somalis: the shift from Greater Somalia to integration with Kenya" *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995):34-41.
- Barnes, Cedric. "The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea, c.1946-48", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 02 (2007): 277-291.
- Bono, Salvatore. *Le frontiere in Africa*. Milan: Giuffrè, 1972.
- Ciabarri, Luca. *Dopo lo stato. Storia e antropologia della ricomposizione sociale nella Somalia settentrionale*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010.
- Don Nanjira, Daniel. *African foreign policy and diplomacy: from antiquity to the 21st century*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010.
- Feyissa, Dereje and Markus V. Hoehne. "Resourcing state borders and borderlands in the Horn of Africa" *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*, Working Papers, no. 107, 2008.
- Goody, Jack. *Technology, tradition and the state in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Gundel, Joakim and Ahmed A. Omar Dharaxo, "The predicament of the 'Oday'". Danish Refugee Council, Novib-Oxfam, 2006.
- Information Service of the Somali Government. *The Somali Peninsula: a new light on imperial motives*. Mogadishu: Information Service of Somalia Government, 1962.
- Lewis, Ioan Myrddin. *A pastoral democracy*. Munster: Lit Verlag Munster-Hamburg and James Currey Publishers, 1999.
- Lewis, Ioan Myrddin. *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

## *Greater Somalia, the never-ending dream?*

---

---

Leonard, David K. and Samantar, Mohammad S. What Does the Somali Experience Teach Us About the Social Contract and the State? *Development and Change*, vol. 42, issue 2, (2011): 559-584.

Menkhaus, Ken. "State Collapse in Somalia: Second Thoughts". *Review of African Political Economy* no. 97 (2003): 405-422.

Morone, Antonio Maria. *L'Ultima colonia, come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960*. Bari: Gius. Laterza&Figli, 2011.

Mukhtar, Mohammed Haji. "The Emergence and Role of Political Parties in the Inter-River Region of Somalia from 1947-1960" *Ufahamu: a Journal of African Studies* 17, no. 02 (1989): 75-95.

Pase, Andrea. *Linee sulla terra*. Rome: Carocci Editore, 2011.

Puntland Development Research Centre (PDRC), *Somali Customary Law and Traditional Economy: Cross Sectional, Pastoral, Frankincense and Marine Norms*. Garowe: PDRC, 2003.

Rediker, Ezekiel. "The Ogaden: a microcosm of global conflict", *The Concord Review* (2004): 203-222.

Reisman, Michael W. "The case of Western Somaliland (Ogaden): an international legal perspective", *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 03, (1978): 13-22.

Saeed, Sheikh Mohamed. "The Rise and Fall of Somali Nationalism", *Refuge* 12, no. 05 (1992): 4-7.

Samatar, Abdi Ismail. "Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no.04 (1992): 625-641.

Selassie, Bereket Habte. *Conflict and intervention in the Horn of Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980.

Sheikh, Mohamed A. *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi*. Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 2010.

Tibebe, Eshete, "The Root Causes of Political Problems in the Ogaden, 1942—1960", *Northeast African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1991): 9-28.

Touval, Saadia. *The boundary politics of independent Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Warner, Daniel. *An Ethic of Responsibility in International Relations*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 1991.