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# New “Religious Men” in Somaliland

MARLEEN RENDERS

Northwestern Somalia, although it is part and parcel of the larger context of the Somali civil war which affects all Somali populations in the Horn, stands out as a particular political context. The region declared secession as an independent state as early as 1991 under the name of “Somaliland.” It is generally peaceful and has known a reasonably stable measure of government since 1997. Democratic (externally monitored) elections were held in 2002, 2003, and 2005. The fledgling state-apparatus however, is tiny and severely under-funded. Political stability has been maintained via a peculiar mix of institutions and actors, state as well as non-state ones, with a pivotal role for the elders and the political strongholders of the various Somaliland clans and subclans. Clan politics is a real and important factor in Somaliland’s making and functioning today. In the absence of a protecting and providing state, clan allegiance is a determining factor as far as individual physical and economic security are concerned. Apart from clan, Islam is felt very strongly about. The persistent situation of insecurity and uncertainty over the past fifteen years seems to have only exacerbated this.

## Islam in a stateless society

The clan-system and Islam have co-existed for centuries as institutions suited to the needs of an egalitarian Somali pastoralist society. In Somali mythical history, the clan system is as old as Islam itself. It is traced back to the advent of Muslim traders on the Somali coast. Arab traders, who were to various degrees related to the Prophet himself, married Somali women, thus starting the lineages which make up

the clan-system today. Somali clans take pride in never having known “paganism.” The Somali polity was a so-called “stateless society.” In a context without formal political hierarchy social order and peace were guaranteed via customary law<sup>2</sup> (*heer*), a system of contracts between roaming pastoralist (patrilinear) descent groups belonging to the larger groups called “clans” and “clan families.” Heer varies from place to place, depending on situations, circumstances, and groups involved. In matters concerning family-related issues such as marriage, divorce, or inheritance, heer is considered heavily influenced by the Sharia. Yet, rather than being based on individual responsibility, heer is characterized by collective responsibility, which is in fact at variance with Islamic orthodoxy. When blood compensation (*diya*) is paid in case of death or injury, it is paid collectively by the descent group of the perpetrator to the descent group of the victim. In decisions concerning a particular descent group or in case of conflict between two descent groups, the group’s elders are collectively in charge. The elders see to it that the interests of the group are protected either by

negotiation or by having the able men of the group take up arms. In the daily dealings of the descent group, the role of these elders, the so-called “spear bearers” (*waranleh*) is complemented with the role of another type of elders: the “men of religion” (*wadaad*). In principle, these men are excluded from full participation in secular politics: they

**A reformist brand of Islam emerged and consolidated during the decades of the Somali civil war, which began in the early 1980s—leading up to outright state collapse in 1991. Initially, its socio-political position was rather marginal. Proponents of the new brand denounced the dominant local Sufi Islam as well as the Somali clan system, to which it was traditionally closely associated. Soon however, lack of political and military success seems to have forced the Islamists back into the organically grown interaction between Somali Islam and the ubiquitous clan system, its politics, and institutions. At least for the time being.<sup>1</sup>**

are by definition non-combatants in conflicts between descent groups and they do not participate in political deliberations pertaining to their group’s interest. They are supposed to play a mediating role in case of conflict. Except, that is, when the war is a jihad. One famous “wadaad” of the Darood clan however, Sayyid Mohamed Abdule Hassan, nicknamed by the British protectorate forces “the Mad Mullah” became a political leader. He waged a long and bloody jihad against Christian occupation (British as well as Ethiopian) of Somali lands from 1901 to 1920. He thereby predominantly attacked fight-

ing forces of other Somali clans he considered as traitors because they had aligned themselves with the British “infidels.”

A wadaad can be anything from a member of a nomadic group who knows some Arabic and has more than average devotion and knowledge of religion to a truly learned man, a shaykh with intimate knowledge of Quran and Islamic jurisprudence. The religious men attend to the religious affairs of their lineage: they solemnize marriages, give their blessings, settle divorce and inheritance matters, direct Friday prayers, and so on. Their services are rewarded with gifts—some of the wadaads rely entirely on charity for their livelihood, as any gift to a wadaad brings a reward from God. In the fifteenth century, the introduction of the Qadiriyya brotherhood in Somalia gave rise to the foundation of brotherhood “settlements.” In these religious communities, pious Somali from different clan backgrounds lived together as brothers, devoting themselves to cultivation, animal husbandry, religious study, and worship. In addition, they protected the sick, the old, and the disabled and provided religious education to future *wadaado*.

## Independent Somalia

The 1960 independence signalled the advent of modern state structures to Somalia. In 1969, the civil regime was overthrown by a military coup. The coup leader, General Siyyad Barre, immediately outlawed the Somali clan system. Sharia remained formally part of the legal system, but in practice it played a marginal role. The regime displaced any potentially competing structure—aiming for total legal and political control. Protests against the promulgation of the new family law of 1975, which in accordance with the proclaimed socialist ideals of Barre (but in contravention of the Sharia) granted equal inheritance rights to men and women, were immediately crushed by executing ten religious men who had stood up against the law. Barre added the extra-legal National Security Courts to the judiciary system, bringing arbitrariness and terror to the Somali. Traditional clan elders were made into state agents as so-called peacekeepers between the “ex-clans.” At the same time, clan was instrumentalized politically. In the government’s discourse, Islam, as well, was “Siyyadized” to serve the ideological purposes of the military regime.

The regime’s “socialist” ideology with its secular, materialist outlook and its dictatorial style of government was a thorn in the side of an increasing number of Somali political and social actors, including a (relatively small and very loosely connected) group of Islamist activists. These Islamists stated that they wanted to establish an Islamic public order—eventually culminating in the establishment of an Islamic state based on the Sharia. One aspect of their ideology stood out as similar to Barre’s proclaimed ideals for the Somali state: the Islamists wanted to do away with the clan system. They resented clanism as a political instrument that served Barre to keep Somali Muslims divided and under

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control. Yet, while Islamist armed militancy slowly started to develop, it was overtaken in speed by clan based military movements. In January 1991 Hawiye clan militia (General Aideed's "United Somali Congress") overran Mogadishu, ousted Barre and ended the twenty-one years of military dictatorship. Somalia fell apart, dismembered in ever more disintegrating clan-fiefdoms.

Upon the disintegration of the regime and the country a new dynamic ensued in the Islamist sphere. Part of the Islamist militants and sympathizers decided to stay out of the war between the clan-based militia and went back to their own clan areas where they promoted an Islamic public order from below, getting involved in various social activities, particularly education and health/sanitation related ones. Another part of the Islamist militants resorted to violent means, forming the then only trans-clan militia of the war, referred to as Al Itihaad ("Islamic Union"). The Islamist Al Itihaad behaved and operated like any other militia, trying to secure territory and strategic assets to make money out of them. Without long-term success, however. The Islamist militia was beaten by clan militia wherever they tried to set up shop in Somalia, be it Kismayo, Bossaaso, Las Qoray (Somaliland), or elsewhere. Unless they teamed up with one of the clan factions, they remained politically and militarily unable to establish themselves as a sustainable administration. Towards the mid-1990s, the Somali Al Itihaad militia disbanded: the rank and file just went home to their clan areas (including the new Somaliland state) while the leadership went on to pursue other avenues to further the Islamist project—within, rather than against the clan system.<sup>3</sup>

## Islamists in peace-time Somaliland: the "wadaad" revisited?

Despite their ideological disapproval of the Somali clan system, Islamists had to re-insert themselves into that system in order to safeguard their physical safety (and ultimately their political project). Explicit Islamist political activism was virtually impossible in Somaliland's clan-based polity of the late 1990s. Proponents of an Islamic public order became very prominent in business and charity: living, working, and preaching among their clansmen.

Their teachings still propagated a "new" Islam, stressing values such as a strict moral code, modesty in dress, and hard work as well as denouncing typical Sufi practices such as *dikhr* or religious chanting. They also strongly disapproved of the chewing of *qaat*, a herbal stimulant and favourite past-time of the overwhelming majority of the male population. From a religious attribute for Sufi shaykhs who used it for meditation, *qaat* had developed into a social vice, taking up huge parts of household budgets, workers' time, and causing health problems such as mental disorders. Although their religious teachings (especially concerning *qaat*) by no means went uncontested, the "new" religious men were respected in their communities for their virtuous behaviour and their religious knowledge.

Like the "old" wadaad, these "new" religious men were part and parcel of their clans, yet, without a central role to play in actual clan politics. A few of them appear to have been involved in talks following political conflicts between clans or between the Somaliland government and self-appointed representatives communicating "clan grievances," thus allegedly fulfilling the traditional tasks of religious wise men trying to temper conflict. More importantly however, they have been devoting considerable energy—as did the "old" wadaad—to charity and education.

A pet project for Islamic charity is, for example, the construction and maintenance of orphanages. Quite a few were set up in Somaliland, either with the help of locally generated funds or with proceedings from zakat collected and sent over by Muslims abroad. To be sure, orphans

Image not available online

are much preferred beneficiaries of zakat: the Prophet himself was an orphan. As for the educational activities organized by the "new" religious men, these were a far cry from the traditional religious education provided by the wadaad in roaming Quranic schools (known as *dugsi* in Somali). The educational institutions they set up were similar to the so-called *écoles franco-arabes* in Western Africa (Senegal, Mali, etc.) with a broad curriculum but with a strong religious orientation. As such, these private Islamic schools have (together with other private initiatives) filled part of the gap left by the defunct Somali state educational system. They teach Arabic (which is the language of instruction at these schools) and Islamic sciences, but also marketable skills such as math, English, or computer sciences. The schools sometimes even belong to a formalized international network which gives the school's graduates direct access to further education at Arab or Islamic universities worldwide.

Skills such as math, Arabic, and English are highly practical tools when doing business. Indeed, business seems to be the preferred occupation of the "new" religious men. Many of them became well-to-do businessmen, involved in contracting or trade. They are valued business counterparts (sometimes operating as subcontractors for international agencies) as they have a reputation as honest, diligent, and efficient workers who finish their work within the agreed deadlines. Some sources claim that the better part of businesses in Somaliland is in fact controlled by these Muslim-believer type entrepreneurs. As such, once more, they are respected members of their communities, generating welfare as well as actual wealth.

The economic activities of the "new" religious men, however, highlight the most crucial difference with the traditional wadaad. Whereas the old wadaad was for his survival dependent on handouts from his clansmen—in cash or kind—the "new" religious man is economically independent, cultivating all kinds of business connections, independently from his lineage. Despite their apparent re-integration as a new kind of "wadaad" in the age-old interaction between Somali Islam and the clan system, their economic independence and power constitute a crucial change and may make for a fundamentally altered political dynamic in the future.

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Markus Höhne and Tobias Hagmann for their comments on an earlier version of this article.
2. In "Xeer," the "X" is pronounced like the "H" in the Arabic name "Hassan."
3. This is also true today in the case of the much later developing Mogadishu-based "Islamic Courts" movement, which briefly administered parts of Mogadishu from mid-2006 to the military intervention of external forces (USA and Ethiopia) in the winter of 2006–7. The Courts did actively rely on clan institutions and political strongholds to establish control.

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Commerce  
in Hargeisa,  
Somaliland

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