

PREFACE

As a social anthropologist (and amateur historian), I have had the unusual experience of studying an African people whose traditional cultural nationalism has fathered more than one contemporary 'nation-state'. In the turbulent context of north-east Africa, however, since formal independence from European rule in 1960, Somali political fortunes have experienced many vicissitudes. The passionate nationalism which brought Somaliland and Somalia together in 1960, and fuelled ambitions to extend the resulting Somali Republic to include the entire nation, unexpectedly burned itself out in the 1980s and 1990s. Then, with a reversal of external and internal pressures, the segmentary divisions within the nation reasserted themselves with an explosive vengeance.

This impressive demonstration of the continuing power of more immediate clan and kinship loyalties revealed the enduring tension, in a traditionally politically uncentralized culture, between these lower-level identities and cultural nationalism. The many attempts at different levels in society and at different times to devalue and even extirpate these internal divisions, which always threatened national solidarity, assumed many forms, ranging from denial to political suppression. The most colourful, perhaps, were the public burials (and other measures) instituted by the dictator General Siyad at the height of his powers and in his 'Scientific Socialist' phase. Earlier politicians

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had resorted to the linguistic sophistry of pretending that they had surpassed clan and tribe by substituting in spoken Somali the English (or Italian) term 'ex' (understood as meaning 'ex-clan') when identifying people. Since Siyad had banned all reference to clans, this even included this circumlocutory usage of 'ex'. On visits to Mogadishu in this period, I thus could not resist wickedly asking my apparatchik Somali friends if one could now safely enquire about a person's 'ex-ex'. They were not amused.

So all embracing and insistent were these disclaimers of persisting clan realities, that even foreign academics, who should have known better (although they were usually handicapped by an inadequate understanding of Somali language), were taken in. Consequently, their writings helped to sustain this illusion, which played a significant role in mystifying Somali political realities, and encouraged their misrepresentation in the eurocentric jargon of 'class' and 'class conflict'. Behind this, of course, lay the ethnocentric (Marxist) assumption that clan organization was an early, 'primitive' political form of organization, incompatible with modernity.

Some of these writers even arrogantly asserted (without any evidence, of course) that Somalia's European colonizers had imported the clan system as a means of divide and rule! As our oldest sources show, the reality, on the contrary, is that the Somalis invented their own clan system long before, and entirely independently of colonial intervention. Many things can be blamed on those who colonized Somali territory, but not that. Of course, the foreign administrations were forced to take note of these indigenous divisions and even exploit them: this is what the different Somali groups demanded. Each partisan division sought to bend colonial administrators to its particular cause, and the Somalis as a whole proved extremely adept at thus capturing support. Moreover, as the Somalis have so abundantly demonstrated, and as I try to record faithfully in this book, apart from the problematic area of centralized political organization, the clan system is remarkably flexible and compatible with most aspects of modern life and thus in no sense an atavistic force. Those who would impose their distorting eurocentric ideological view of the world on Somali social phenomena, thus depriving them of originality and vitality, are, in my view, engaged in an endeavour akin to racism.

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Of course, clan ties remain profoundly divisive, and combined with a bellicose uncentralized political culture, create formidable obstacles to the formation of stable, hierarchically organized political units. This, I am afraid, is the price of the democratic individualism and freedom that Somalis cherish. As the turbulent politics of the 1990s and 2000s so painfully illustrates, these aspects of Somali political culture pose bitterly intractable problems for those seeking to fashion a viable future state (or states). Somali cultural nationalism, contrary to the earlier idealistic hopes of many Somalis as well as my own, does not alone suffice. If Somali history has any lessons to teach, this is one of them. Today (2002) Somalis sometimes speak about their diminished nationalism, as though Somalia had not collapsed, in a way that recalls patients whose limbs have been amputated but still 'feel' intact. Their phantom-limb view of their dismembered body politic, may I think, result in part from confusion between Somali 'state' and 'nation', since while the former is highly problematic, in terms of shared culture and language the latter remains very real.

My connection with this culture and some of its representatives, spans the period from the birth of modern political parties in the early 1950s until the present. I first met members of the Somali nationalist organizations campaigning for independence, before embarking on my doctoral field research in the 1950s and, during fieldwork in Somaliland and Somalia (1955–7) had the privilege of getting to know many of the future political élite. My use of both written and oral material is largely conditioned by that social anthropological field research, amplified by further field trips in 1962, 1964, 1974, and for briefer periods in intervening years up to 1992, when health problems made further visits impossible. My initial research was financed by the Colonial Social Science Research Council, then by the Carnegie Trust, the British Academy and the British Council. The U.N.H.C.R., F.A.O. and various other agencies were responsible for my shorter visits, thus also providing me with an opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the arcane world of aid and development. I am grateful to all these bodies and to a succession of Somali governments who generally welcomed and facilitated my work. Although the published results have not always been

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equally favourably received by those concerned, I have, in the main, been tolerated by most governments since independence in 1960 – and even for a considerable time, and to a surprising degree, by the regime of General Siyad. The general attitude here seems to have been that put to me once by Prime Minister ‘Abdarazaq Haji Husseyn (widely regarded as Somalia’s most effective premier) who introduced me to his cabinet as ‘that chap who writes about us. We don’t always like what he says, but the important thing is he writes about us !’*

During the military regime in Somalia, as a guest of the National Academy and the Ministry of Higher Education, I was surprised and delighted to come across a group of teachers, engaged in the preparation of textbooks in the new Somali script. They were translating passages from an earlier edition of this book. This new edition is a direct response to a request from the book retailer Mr Ismail Ahmed for copies for teaching needs in Somaliland and Somalia, as well as for Somali students in Europe. I am delighted to try to meet this flattering demand which amounts, after all, to a returning of historical material to its roots – the Somali world. I hope, however, that by the time a further edition of this book is called for, the need will have been met by a Somali historian. Many Somali friends have advised and helped me in my attempts to understand their culture and politics down the years. In the preparation of this new edition which, with the limited time allotted to me, has indeed been a ‘crash programme’, I would like particularly to thank Dr Omar Duhod, Dr Ahmad Yusuf Farah, Mr ‘Osman Ahmad Hassan, Mr ‘Abdirashid Sed, Mr ‘Abdisalan ‘Isse Salwe, Jan Haakonsen and Dr Patrick Gilkes. I have not forgotten the early encouragement and enduring support I received from Muse Galal, Muhammad Abshir Muse, Professor Said Samatar, and the remarkable self-trained Somali historian Sheikh Jama’ Omar ‘Ise. My thoughts also turn to departed friends like Anthony Mariano, B. W. Andrzejewski, and Bernhard Helander with whom I have longed to debate the arguments of my new final

* For further information on the circumstances of my field research, see I. M. Lewis, ‘An anthropologist at large in the ‘Cinderella of Empire’ in *Blood and Bone, the Call of Kinship in Somali Society*, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 1–18; and ‘Afterword’ in *A Pastoral Democracy*, new edition, Oxford, 1999, pp. i–xxvi.

** See E. H. Carr, *What is History?* London, 1964.

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chapter. My wife has loyally read my final chapter and helped to lick it into shape. Working with this recent historical material, readily available from a superabundance of sources, I now more fully understand how E. H. Carr's view of history is shaped by his predicament as a modern historian facing a surfeit of information and the problem of selection.**

Having had three previous publishers, this book has had a somewhat nomadic history. In welcoming it to what I hope may be its final home, my tyrannical new publisher, James Currey, has been amazingly enthusiastic and helpful. I am especially pleased that we can now again include illustrations, both those published and acknowledged in the original 1965 edition and new material. In selecting and supplying additional pictures to document recent events I am grateful to Ismail Ahmed, Michael Brophy, 'Abdullahi Dool, Felicity Thomas and the brilliant photographer of the Somali world, Hamish Wilson.

Finally, I should warn the reader that I have limited chapter notes to a minimum, seeking only to document or dilate upon a few important points and to call attention to some of the more fruitful and interesting sources. If I have left some sources out this does not necessarily reflect my opinion of them! These end notes are nevertheless fairly extensive, and I have therefore felt that a separate bibliography would not be justified. I have transcribed Somali names generally in their usual anglicized format rather than in the orthography of the Somali script. Somalis will have no difficulty in making the necessary vowel length and other adjustments, and non-Somalis will be able to recognize and pronounce proper names in the format adopted here more easily than would have been the case if I had followed the Somali script strictly.

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