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A CRITIQUE OF SAID S. SAMATAR'S  
"SOMALIA: A NATION IN TURMOIL"

Ahmed Q. Ali

Dr. Said S. Samatar, professor of African History at Rutgers University, and eminent Somali scholar, published a report in August 1991 entitled "Somalia: A Nation in Turmoil" for the Minority Rights Group in the United Kingdom. The report is the only published work by a Somali scholar which attempts to analyze and elucidate the current Somali tragedy and dares to propose solutions and remedies.

Though the effort expended by the author in attempting to analyze such an entangled situation is considerable, we nevertheless do not concur with the conclusions drawn from his analysis. In the following discussion we shall attempt to retrace the inconsistencies in his assumptions which led to such erroneous conclusions.

Over the last twenty years the urban areas in Somalia have been subject to a tremendous change due to the influx of people, mostly young, from the rural areas making all figures of population distribution per sector and area obsolete. A census was undertaken by the Ministry of National Planning in 1986, but unfortunately, violence broke out in Somalia before the publication of the census results. In the 1960s thousands of young nomads and peasants steadily escaped the harsh and often unendurable conditions in rural areas to seek better luck in the towns. This situation was aggravated in the 1970s and 1980s when man-made disasters were added to natural ones. Since 1978, when an opposition movement first appeared, the military regime carried out reprisal operations against the nomadic population, killing innocent, unarmed people and destroying the basis of their subsistence—livestock and water points. Beside the continuous raids of the army and other special units (such as the red berets), arming some lineages against others was a common practice of the regime. The migration to the towns thus reached unprecedented levels, increasing the populations twofold, threefold, and, sometimes, even more in a very short period. For instance, Mogadishu's population jumped from 600,000 in 1975 to 1.6 million according to the census of 1986.

There is no doubt that Somalia is basically a pastoral society in which the livestock constitutes a major economic sector. According to figures released by the Ministry of National Planning, 65% of the population was nomadic in 1975 and produced 40% of the GDP. However, the role and the weight of this category as a social class in national affairs and its relationship with central authority is not a dominant one. The nomadic population lives in the most remote and inaccessible areas of the country. Its major problem is the unequal distribution of pasture and water which exposes it to harsh

environmental conditions and makes it vulnerable to the recurrent droughts. None of the past Somali governments (civilian or military) gave due consideration to the provision of water to the nomadic areas. Somalia, unfortunately, is one of the few places in the world where humans die of thirst.

Yet under Siad's regime, the nomads, like the peasants, were always subject to taxes, the so-called development levies, and self-help forced contributions. Pastoralists practice subsistence economy but dairy and meat products meet only half of their needs; for the rest they sell animals on the hoof. Thus, the pastoralists were and are one of the most oppressed and disadvantaged social strata in Somali society, due, also, to their lack of awareness of their right to share in the national resources. In the 1980s the nomadic population paid dearly with human lives, livestock, and water points for Siad's desperate attempt to overcome the armed opposition movements in the northern region, Bari, Central regions, and the riverine areas. Politically, Siad recruited a new class of nomadic chiefs, mainly from his corrupt entourage, to replace the traditional ones who were unwilling to accept his plans. Detentions and even assassinations of traditional rural leaders caused the breakdown of traditional political institutions.

Before we begin the review of the report, we summarize in the following paragraphs its main assumptions.

Smatar defines Somalia as a homogeneous nation with highly segmented lineages mainly practicing camel husbandry in nomadic conditions in the harsh and inhospitable environment of the Horn of Africa. The Somali clan families lived for centuries in a world of egalitarian anarchy [social order] without centralized authority, but were eager to share power and settle disputes under the acacia tree in normal times, and to war with one another at others. British social anthropologists called this system "pastoral democracy" which is typical of classical segmented societies. Before independence, this peculiarity of the Somalis was thought to be a favorable condition for a stable democracy. For a short period, the democratic civilian regime became a model of democracy in Africa: free elections, free speech, and free press. Smatar recalls Aden Abdulle Osman as one of the rare presidents in Africa to quit the post after he lost the elections against Abdirashid Ali Shermarke. After almost a decade of this idyllic "pastoral democracy," Somalia suddenly fell in the grips of a repressive military dictatorship.

The Somalis are approximately six to seven million, of which four million live in the Republic, and the rest in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. Two-thirds of the four million practice pastoralism as a principal mode of production.<sup>1</sup> The author asserts that except for a minority in the coastal towns, the majority of the present urban

population emigrated from nomadic zones in the 1940s and 1950s, and that it constitutes an important social category, referred to by the author as "urbanized nomads." These former nomads managed to take over the State during the decolonization period, and they are the dominant force in the country. A strong thread of culture, lineage, and an unstable temperament ties them not only to the nomadic population but also with the heritage of the historical pastoral Somalia. This is the main cause of the present tragic civil wars raging in Somalia. As in pastoral society, in modern Somalia power and politics are exercised through temporary and ephemeral alliances of lineages. This situation is highly favorable to opportunistic manipulation by ill-intentioned leaders or politicians. In fact, Siad Barre has exploited, to his advantage, the historic rivalries between Issaqs and Darods, in the first place, and internal conflicts among the Darods themselves in the second. So asserts Samatar.

In this report, as in his previous works, the author also defines segmentation as an endless process which goes down to the household level. It is a curse which presents further detrimental features such as "the lack of individual culpability," which is relaxed by collective liability in blood crimes.

Until the 1920s the British in the north were concerned with overcoming the fierce resistance waged since the turn of the century by Mohammed Abdulle Hassan, and did not plan to develop their protectorate which served mainly as a meat reservoir for their garrisons in Aden. The Italians, on the other hand, developed their colony and transformed it chiefly with agricultural infrastructure.

Professor Samatar analyzes Somali society with the tools provided the British social anthropologists such as I. M. Lewis and Evans-Pritchard, whose works he thinks are of inestimable value for every scholar. Beside the two plagues of endless segmentation and lack of individual culpability, he identifies another two predicaments: the central authority established by the Europeans before and after independence undermined the more appropriate traditional authority in dealing with conflicts and problems; as a result of this a disjunction between "moral authority" and central authority occurred. The central authority is not appropriate because it is not appointed by the clan elders, and thus cannot reflect the optimum clan balance.

Unit in the segmented Somali society is always temporary and holds only as long as an external enemy exists because the law of segmentation is that even twin lineages are in constant competition unless they are united against another lineage. Somalis, argues Samatar, did not struggle for their independence; rather, it was granted to them. During the deconlonization period Somalis rode on the crest of the independence movement in Africa without planning self-government.

During the civilian regime the troubles of Somalia were external, revolving around the national question which led the country into conflicts and wars with the neighboring countries. The civilian regime thus forgot about the economic development of the country. This facilitated the coup d'etat of 1969. Likewise, the military regime embarked on a war with Ethiopia in 1977 for the same reason, but the terrible defeat had grave consequences for the regime.

The failure of the 1978 coup led to the foundation of SSDF. As soon as the SSDF started military activities, Siad sent his crack units to Bari and Mudugh and started his reprisal against the Majeerteens. After the establishment of SNM in 1981, a greater repression took place in the north, destroying the second capital and resulting in a half million refugees. The southern clan-families (Hawiye) remained indifferent up to the end, but suddenly, in 1989, founded USC and launched an armed struggle. The author fails to understand the reason for this, but he learned from a certain M. Siyaad Togane that they waged the war in order "to defend their country from the mighty mouth." For this they paid dearly when Siad ordered his reprisal against them in Moogadishu and the central regions.

USC, after two weeks of fierce fighting, seized the capital, compelling Siad Barre to flee after taking what was left of the national treasure. Two days later Ali Mahdi, a rich hotelier, was sworn in as president. Ali Mahdi appointed Omar Arteh Ghalib as Prime Minister and called for a national conference which no other opposition movement attended. This multitude of movements also happens to be part of the curse.

Finally, Samatar proposes the re-establishment of the clan system as the only viable remedy for the Somali system. He proposes a two-level legislative body, one composed of representatives of clans, and more powerful one composed of the clan elders. In the meantime, he appeals to the international community for humanitarian aid.

We agree with Samatar when he proudly emphasizes that Somalia perfectly fits the definition of a nation-state, and when he characterizes Somali society as one with highly segmented lineages possessing the negative features he indicated. But before examining the implications of this and the changes which occurred in the society after the achievement of national independence, we would like to see how Somalia achieved its national independence.

Samatar asserts that independence was granted by the colonial powers as in the other African countries. He writes: "Independence came to Africa, certainly to the Somalis, like an accident," adding that the Somali people "just rode in the 1950s on the crest of the wave of independence without any idea of the challenges and responsibilities involved in the process of self-government. . . ."

We need to separate the two aspects: the resistance and the struggle for self-determination and the process of self-government. The Somali people as a whole opposed the colonial domination from the onset of its penetration, and this resistance was not confined to M. Abdulle Hassan's movement, as Samatar asserts. The Benadir resistance (*Biyama*) is only one other example of this resistance. That the British took control of the north only in the early 1920s and the Italians that of the south in the mid-1920s testifies to the Somali resistance. A new consciousness of self-determination grew during World War II, following the breakdown of the Italian empire. The Somali national movement established in the early 1940s, headed by the Somali Youth League (SYL), incarnated this new consciousness.

The major differences between the early resistance and the new one were in their political programs and approaches toward the masses and the means by which to achieve unity. In the early resistance, the appeal was made to elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders to achieve unity or an alliance of lineages, and was subscribed to by the leaders without the presence or knowledge of the members. The major shortcoming was that, in case of disagreement or betrayal of the leaders, the whole lineage was held responsible and possibly was punished with tragic consequences. Only in the imaginative brain of Samatar were elders so democratic that they would call for a general assembly to discuss their betrayal. This is the cause of the failure of the early resistance, which also partly explains the unpopularity of figures such as M. Abdulle Hassan among many Somalis.

The SYL and other nationalist groups, on the other hand, appealed directly to the conscience of Somali citizens, calling them to participate in the struggle for self-determination, national unity, and for the improvement of material conditions (rights, jobs, education, etc.). The nationalist movement banned all sorts of discrimination or segregation among citizens (*kani waa ugaas kani waa addoon . . .*). It is interesting to note that SYL introduced the abolition of reference to lineage affiliation to its members and supporters. On the other hand, in the same period (as always), colonialist authorities, with the advice of their social anthropologists, were practicing, as a compulsory routine, the identification of the citizen by *reer*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite their limitations, these movements represented the true and genuine aspirations of the Somali people. The SYL, in particular, organized the masses around its political program on a national level and led demonstrations and protests, and sent representatives to the UN to present the cause of the Somali people. The determination of the Somali people compelled the four powers and the United Nations to concede independence. When the UN, following a compromise of the four powers with Italy, proposed the return of the latter, the SYL organized



sonnets into Somali show the author's distance from Somali reality. Somalis are proud of their poets, and poetry still constitutes an important means for the Somali people to express their feelings. But poetry is undergoing a change while prose is developing in urban Somalia. Between 200 and 300 short novels and short stories (very poor at this stage) and more than twenty papers are published in Mogadishu in one year.

One macroscopic and important issue which passes unnoticed by Professor Samatar is the responsibility of colonialism, whose domination of Somalia lasted more than 60 years: its violation of all human rights, the division of the people, the arrests, killings, burning of villages. This violence is not comparable to what the Somalis are doing to themselves. Even Siad's crimes are dwarfed in comparison to the crimes of the colonialists. No matter how colonialists practiced their different doctrines at home, in the dominion they all acted in the same fashion, especially as far as the continuation of their rule is concerned. The first and the second commandments of colonialism go together, and they are repression and emergency rule, on the one hand and division and corruption on the other. The latter commandment means fighting anything or anyone working for the unity of the people. For this purpose, they employed all sorts of "mercenaries": explorers, travellers, secret agents, and, last but not least, social anthropologists, so dear to our author, especially if they are British. As we soon will see, this latter category, often flattered and constantly quoted by Samatar, was essential to the colonial rule. What Samatar calls the classic work on the Nuer is a study that Evans-Pritchard undertook in 1940 for the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan authority. Can anybody imagine a Sudanese Nuer consulting this pseudoscientific work? These obsolete and un-African materials were mainly conceived for D. C.s and colonial governors. Samatar has included Evans-Pritchard and another half-dozen of the like in his "selected bibliography." At this point we cannot refrain from quoting Chinua Achebe with regard to this category:

... in the heyday of colonialism any serious incident of native unrest was an occasion not only for pacification by the soldiers but also (afterwards) for a royal commission of inquiry—a grand name for another perfunctory study of native psychology and institutions.<sup>4</sup>

That is the function of Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer, I. M. Lewis among the Somalis, Fortes among the Ashanti, etc. If there is any doubt as to the function of mercenaries of the pen, let us listen to what Radcliffe-Brown, emeritus in the field, wrote in 1948 in the introduction



of a gigantic work on half of Africa, in which Evans-Pritchard participated with his study on the Nuer:

The process of change is inevitable. To a very limited extent it can be controlled by the colonial administration, and it is obvious that the effectiveness of any action taken by an administration is dependent on the knowledge they have at their disposal about the native society, its structure and institutions and what is happening to it at the present times. A wise anthropologist will not try to tell the administrator what he ought to do; it is his special task to provide the scientifically collected and analysed knowledge that the Administrator can use if he likes.<sup>5</sup>

Samatar repeatedly quotes Richard Burton, who refers to as Lieutenant and "Sir." The "Sir" in question was a "Secret agent who made the Pilgrimage to Mecca, discovered Kama Sutra and brought the Arabian Nights to the West."<sup>6</sup> Of this secret agent Rice tells us that he "was one of the agents who helped put the Indian provinces of Sind, Balukistan, and Western Punjab firmly under British control."<sup>7</sup> Samatar tells us that Burton was impressed with the Somalis and that he wrote the country was teeming with poets and a "fierce and turbulent race of republicans," but he did not tell us what he wrote about the dignity of the Somalis and their wives. Rice reports that Burton reported the following in the same book that Samatar refers to: "There are no harlots in Somaliland, but there are wives who, because of the inactivity of their husbands, prostitute their bodies without scruple. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

As far as the unpreparedness of the nationalis movement is concerned, we ask who is to be blamed? Colonized peoples were deprived of the freedom to exercise their rights. After all, that is what colonialism is all about! In the south the Itlains, the UN, and its Consultative Council of four nations who were supposed to supervise the performance of the Italians in preparing the country for self-government are to blame. In the north the British forbade the people to have their political representatives and the participation of the political parties in this process. The legislative council conceded by the British in 1957 consisted of six representatives of the clan families selected by the governor; elections along party lines were forbidden against the will of the people and their parties (Somali National League, United Somali Party, etc.). The first real elections in the north were granted four months before independence.

The responsibility of the colonizaers will never be clear if the sources referred to are apologists of colonialism. This is the case of R. L. Hess and his book on Itlaian colonoialism in Somalia. The Italian

historian Leone Iraci who reviewed the book in an extensive paper asks himself whether Hess ever read anything on Italian history. Iraci informs us that research on the work was carried out between 1956 and 1958 (though published in 1966) with the generous assistance of the Fulbright Program, and that the author went to Somalia in 1957 to collect the material on Somalia from the "Casa d'Italia" and "Croce del Sud" hotel. "Apparently Hess has accepted acritically the point of view of the Italians which he contacted and toward them nurtured fear and veneration."<sup>9</sup> We wonder what the professor of African history would say about the case of Kenya? Would he blame the Mau-Mau or the KANU or Jomo Kenyatta who stayed in prison instead of carrying out his exercise in self-government, or are the British and their colonial rule and their state of emergency imposed on the Kenyan people from 1952 to blame?

Of course, it would be easy to put all the blame on the shoulders of the colonialists and absolve ourselves. The ruling class of the civilian democracy as well as the military regime have continued what colonialism started and increasingly they have learned to take advantage of the lineage segmentation of society and to manipulate clan-families in order to maintain their rule. The features and the laws of segmentation are well-explained in the report and in previous works of the author. Thus, in modern Somalia, it is a minority of opportunists from the power and privilege-seeking class who manipulate, and it is not the "curse of pastoral egalitarian anarchy looming on the horizon." If there was not lineage segmentation, the colonialists and the ruling classes would have invented it or used any other issue which could divide the people. Therefore, what Samatar thinks is the cause, the root which is proud to have identified, is nothing but an effect.

It would be immodest to teach history to an eminent scholar in history for it would be "*dhallaankii hooyadii dhalmada baray*" but wrong assumptions lead to wrong conclusions.<sup>10</sup> Nothing is more agreeable than Samatar's statement that Somali nationalism was anti-colonialist (refusal to be dominated by a foreign entity) and anti-Western (colonizing powers who dismembered the nation). How, then, can the author not see this attitude as "pro-independence"? But Samatar argues: "if by independence we mean a national vision that articulates a blue print for ordering a self-governing society in a centralized state." This is nothing but sophism. We are rather surprised that a professor of African history and a Somali scholar does not seem to be familiar with the point of view of the Somali national organizations.

The statement, "Therefore, the instability, anarchy and murderous shiftings witnessed today in the Somali scene are inherently endemic, deeply embedded as they are in the very warp and woof of the Somali world, both as individuals and as corporate sociopolitical units"

is wrong and dangerous. It borders on racial prejudice. It is a matter that is more appropriate for psychoanalytic interpretation. However, in no way can this be taken as proof that the alleged fragmentation of the opposition movements is a reflection of the so-called "schismatic nature of the Somali society."

The report fails to objectively discuss the issue of the opposition movements. First of all, let us point out that the "mighty" army of over 160,000 men of Siad Barre's regime would not have been defeated without these movements, especially SNM and USC. But Samatar, obsessed with segmentation, does not see that in the first place the military regime was overthrown with an armed struggle and this was possible because the overwhelming majority of the Somali people identified the regime as the principal enemy of the Nation and, therefore, opposed it and resisted it. Here, it is worth mentioning the impact that "Mogadishu Manifesto" had on the masses, especially in the capital, in accelerating the defeat of the regime.

SSDF was the first movement to teach the Somali people that it could raise arms against the might army of the military regime. However, the leadership of SSDF failed to prove its independence and could not avoid becoming clan-based, and, later on, could not resist the interference of Sidad who lured some of the leaders with money and government posts. This caused a great setback to the movement in general, for the masses lost their faith in the birth of a genuine movement.

Nevertheless, SSDF did survive politically and cooperated with the other movements, especially in 1989 and 1990. It should not be underestimated that the internal leaders of SSDF have succeeded in preventing Bari and Mudugh from becoming reservoirs of men for Sian-Morgan in their intent to curb USC. Similarly, Ahmed Omar Jess (SPM) aided and relieved SNM when he decided to fight Siad Barre and his regime.

Despite his promise to elucidate the current Somali situation, Samatar has not accomplished this objective, for the report falls short of being exhaustive in explaining what happened and is still happening in Somalia. The author did not investigate thoroughly, as the subject would deserve, the political opposition movements, probably because he saw them from the beginning as clan-based organizations. This firm belief perhaps encouraged him to wind up his analysis and conclusions.

This is more apparent in the case of USC and the "Mogadishu Manifesto." USC is far too important to be dismissed in this manner. In the case of SDM, Samatar could not even identify it by its correct name. SDM also is an important movement which cannot be ignored, for it is the only political movement in the whole inter-riverine region.

These opposition movements have succeeded in defeating the regime militarily but have failed in giving the country a stable

transitional administration to lead it until the establishment, through free elections, of a third republic in Somalia based on democracy and social justice. A new order based on equal rights, social justice, and effective democracy are the genuine aspirations of the Somali people for which enormous sacrifices in lives and property have been made. These opposition movements are responsible for failing to realize these just aspirations of the entire Somali people.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>The figures of the report are very contradictory. For instance, assuming a population of 4 million, the inhabitants of only a half-dozen towns would exceed 50% of the total population.

<sup>2</sup>Ironically, the father of M. S. Togane, from whom Samatar learned that USC was established to protect Hawiyeland from Afweyne, is the famous member of SYL who said, "*Caawa Jawa Abgaal*" after the colonial police beat him for refusing to tell his *reer*. He identified his *reer* only after the Central Committee ordered him to do so to save his life for the cause.

<sup>3</sup>Joan Mason, *Gabayaagii Halgankii Goabannimada, Cali Xuseen* (JUS Mogadishu, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup>A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (Oxford, 1967), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>9</sup>Iraci Leone, "*Per una demistificazione del colonialism: il caso della Somalia*," in *Terzo Mondo*, Milano, Marzo-Giugno, 1971, pp. 38, 45.

<sup>10</sup>The infant who teaches his mother how to deliver a baby.