Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention

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'Son, the tribalism business is the work of the urban people. They cook it there and then serve it to us.'
– Issa, a peasant in Jowhar, Spring 1990.

One of the casualties of the gruesome nightmare that is gripping Somalia has been the capacity to think historically and systematically about the nature of the malady, and to find practical ways of controlling the present in order to build a more sustainable future. As explained by Ahmed Samatar: ‘the fullness of understanding a given situation is [not] coterminous with the immediate and experiential. Rather, any visible elements of a particular reality are usually signals that other more discrete factors could be at work’.¹ For far too long, those opposed to Siyad Barre’s régime refused to go beyond the General and his constellation of clients to identify ‘the enemy’. Their unwillingness to engage in any hard-headed analysis and their hostility to critical scholarship has undoubtedly helped to condemn the very people they ‘wanted’ to liberate.

At no time in the recorded history of Somalia has nearly one-third to one-half of the population died or been in danger of perishing due to famine caused by civil war.² This calamity surpasses all previous ones and can be appropriately called ‘Dad Cunkii’, the era of cannibalism. The ghastly tragedy which has befallen the Somali people, particularly those in the southern region, is the consequence of the collapse of national institutions and the state. Although moving reports by journalists are, of course, important in bringing the dire plight of the inhabitants to the attention of the international community, they do

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not provide an explanation of the origins and the nature of this catastrophe.

The ferocity of the civil war and the magnitude of its destruction urgently calls for an analysis of what went wrong, and why such a seemingly homogeneous society has descended into abyss. This short article challenges the recent use of ethnicity, particularly in the popular media, to explain intra-communal struggles in many parts of the world, and provides both a summary of, and a commentary on, the woefully inadequate scholarly literature about the origin and nature of the tragic collapse of the state and the complete breakdown of civil order in Somalia.

The centrality of kinship in understanding contemporary Somali politics and its tendency towards fragmentation and anarchy has long been stressed by a number of scholars. Others, however, while ready to acknowledge the importance of culture in appreciating the contours of recent developments, maintain that the significance of traditional relations has been changed almost out of recognition by the evolving interactions that have taken place between human beings. Hence the need to unravel the dynamics of political and economic processes which condition the structure of social relations in a given community at a particular historical juncture.

**THE TRADITIONALIST THESIS**

Medieval Arab writers distinguished the Cushites by the appellation of Berber or Berberi. 'And the Berbers who live in the place [Somali port of Berbera]', wrote a 1st Century Alexandrine Greek merchant in his commercial log book, ... 'are very unruly,' a description of Somalis as true today as 2000 years ago when the hapless captain's starving crew was roughed up by wild Somali camelmen. the Somali people have no traditional commitment to state government: they are 'traditionally' uncentralized and equalitarian and historically their encounters with state organization have tended to be fleeting and predatory.4

The intellectual lineage of the traditionalist explanations of Somali politics in general, and the present catastrophe in particular, go back to colonial explorers such as Richard Burton, and to many of the administrators who followed him.5 But the real foundations of this thesis were laid by the anthropologist I. M. Lewis in *A Pastoral*

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Democracy: a study of pastoralism and politics among the northern Somalis of the Horn of Africa (London, 1962), and The Modern History of Somaliland: from nation to state (New York, 1965). The first book, based on field-work conducted during 1955–7, had two rather simple but strong messages for readers: (i) the Somalis have a highly equalitarian society with pastoralism as a base, although livestock, the most vital economic asset, is not evenly distributed; and (ii) the fundamental organising principle of their way of life is segmentary clanism. In the absence of institutionalised state structures and any nation-wide governmental authority, civil associations along clan-lines and loyalty to one’s lineage are the defining characteristics of Somali politics and social life. Over three decades later this point was emphasised again by Lewis in his revised, updated (from 1980), and expanded edition of A Modern History of Somalia: nation and state in the Horn of Africa (Boulder and London, 1988):

With the increasing spread of western education, the growth of modern towns, and the gradual but quite unmistakable formation of new social classes, clan loyalties now fell into place as one component in a complex of diverse political attachments. Yet within this cluster of allegiances, for the majority of the population those bonds based on clanship... remained the most pervasive, the most commanding, and above all the most insidious (p. 166).

Although A Pastoral Democracy was researched at the tail-end of British rule in northern Somalia and published after decolonisation, Lewis’s description of the pastoralism and associated democratic culture could well have been written a century earlier. The imposition of colonial rule on stateless societies, the new dynamics of social relations, and the transformation of the pastoral economy are all deemed to be mere quantitative alterations in Somali society rather than fundamental modifications of pre-colonial tradition. By evading the qualitative nature of the changes experienced, the traditionalists are able to avoid systematic analysis of any mutations of the social structures and the governing ethos that might have taken place in the last century. Thus, contemporary Somalis are said to be pastoral democrats who are equalitarian, albeit without marshalling any evidence to verify such a proclamation. What is amazing is that those who postulate the traditionalist thesis and subscribe to its assumptions have not seen the need to update A Pastoral Democracy, given the phenomenal growth of livestock and urbanisation, and the development of non-traditional nodes of power.

Such static reading of social history makes the analysis of social change mechanical, linear, and simplistic. Consequently, people and the communities in which they live have little ability to innovate, to learn from others, to engage in self-improvement or self-destruction, and to undergo social transformation. But the reality is often very different, because the inhabitants of any country are not dupes who carry the burden of history without having any capacity to alter the future course of human affairs. It is only by making such assumptions about the mesmerising power of Somali tradition that David Laitin and Said Samatar can write:

Genealogy therefore constitutes the heart of the Somali social system and is the basis of the Somali collective predilection to internal fissions and internecine sectionary conflicts as well as of the unity of thought and action among Somalis—a unity that borders on xenophobia.

Such a portrayal of social processes ignores the critical debates during the 1970s and 1980s on the significance of structure and agency.

The naive interpretation of Somali social history brings scholars very close to constructing an equation with a single variable. Thus Lewis notes the fundamentality of tribalism in social life when discussing the anti-tribal efforts of the Government in the early 1970s:

The intention was, as President Siyad put it, ‘to give everybody the opportunity to learn reading and writing...to give our people modern revolutionary education...to restructure their social existence...to eradicate social balkanization and fragmentation into tribes and sects...to bring about an absolute unity.’

While these measures directed at eliminating clan divisions and establishing enduring bonds of national solidarity were vigorously promoted at all levels within the state, the Head of State himself was covertly relying on old time-honoured ties of loyalty. He had, in fact, constructed his inner power circle of members from three related clans.

Said Samatar adds that it should be obvious how vulnerable the system is to an external manipulation by, say, an unethical head of state, such as General Siyad Barre, who used the

7 Such an approach recalls the literature on ‘modernisation’ which associated industrialisation and capitalist development with the West and, particularly, the Protestant ethic. East Asia could not have been foreseen by the proponents of that discourse. Cf. Robert Wade, Governing the Market: economic theory and the role of government in East Asian industrialization (Princeton, 1991).
8 Laitin and Samatar, op. cit. p. 29.
9 See, for example, E. P. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (New York, 1978); Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory: action, structure and contradictions in social analysis (London, 1979); and Paul Cloke, Chris Philo, and David Sadler, Approaching Human Geography: an introduction to contemporary debates (New York, 1991), particularly ch. 4.
scarce resources of the state to reward and punish entire clans collectively. This has, in fact, been the fate of the Isaaq and Majeerteen clans who suffered fearful persecutions under Barre’s regime.11

Accordingly, the culprits in the current catastrophe are the lethal combinations of the divisive and innately bellicose culture, to paraphrase Lewis, and an evil individual like Siyat. This thesis reiterates in scholarly language what is otherwise commonsensical street wisdom.

The logic of the traditionalist discourse leads to the conclusion that the trouble with Somalia is the nature of its culture, grounded in the clan system, with cruel individuals proving divisive for projects of modern nation-building. However, this approach offers no answer to the following question: Since the lineage system has been part of Somali social organisation for centuries, why has this society not engaged in nihilistic fratricide before? Surely there must have been power-seeking individuals in the past?

The traditionalist thesis has five major failings: (1) it conflates kinship and current clanism; (2) it accepts the ideology of clanism as reality, and as a sufficient explanation of the on-going tragedy, without unearthing the social and the material basis of its constitution; (3) it gives excessive weight to the causal power of clanism; (4) it treats kinship as a static phenomenon; and (5) it leaves unexamined the key pillar of Somali social structure, the family.

In order to avoid these shortcomings and the constricted interpretation of Somali culture, we need to ask: What in the old system constrained dreadful men from plunging society into hell?

THE TRANSFORMATIONIST THESIS

One of the principal weaknesses of the traditionalist approach is a lack of historical specificity in the use of its key concepts, notably pastoralism and culture. Moreover, terms such as clanism, kinship, and tribalism are loosely defined, and sometimes used interchangeably without much regard to their social meaning and content. In contrast, specificity and historicity are critical to the transformationist literature. The traditionalist approach to kinship and its reinterpretation by a transformationist provide an example of the differences between the

11 Said Samatar, op. cit. p. 13. We need to note that the destruction of livestock and water wells, and the subjugation of the people of the northeast, was overseen by none other than General Morgan, a ‘son’ of that same soil.
two theses. Ahmed Samatar has recently noted the full meaning of kinship in the pre-colonial Somali social order:

The ideology of kinship had two central elements: blood-ties and *Xeer*. The first was essentially a product of genealogical connections buttressed by a patrilineal system harking back to a real or invented common origin/ancestor; the latter was the embodiment of common wisdom and the locus of inter/intra generational and, in its most general depiction, a pan-Somali code of conduct. The combined meaning of these elements constituted the milieu in which both the private and the public were defined. This, then, was the basis of kinship – an ideology commensurate with reciprocal production relations.\(^{12}\)

Thus, kinship is not mere blood-ties and genealogy. In pre-colonial Somali tradition a set of rules and norms, known as the *Xeer*, was socially constructed to safeguard security and social justice within and among Somali communities, with other values being added as the people of the region ‘embraced Islam in the eighth century’. Thus, any evaluation of ‘a Somali tradition’ needs to consider the full constitution of communal relations; namely, the complex of *Xeer*, Islam, and blood-ties. The latter have been artificially separated from the rest of the social structure by the traditionalists, who have assumed that the basis of lineage organisation in Somalia has not changed, and that it can therefore be analysed independently of other human relations. Consequently, there was/is a clanist Somali tradition.

Social theorists argue that blood-ties in the old tradition were part and parcel of communitarian social relations whose primary purpose was to ensure the production of necessities in the pastoral range.\(^ {13}\) There were two key features of this political and economic system; the household was the basic unit of production and livestock ownership, and livestock production was the primary economic enterprise. Despite differences in the ownership of livestock among the households, social stratification in the form of propertied and property-less classes did not exist in pre-colonial communitarian Somalia.

In the absence of institutionalised state structures, and given the wide distribution of the means of livelihood, no household or lineage group could muster enough resources (material and organisational) to dominate and exploit others. It is in this sense that pre-colonial Somalia was an equalitarian society. The *Xeer* was a social contract democratically constructed (all adult males took part in this) to check


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the occasional conflicts between individuals and among communities. What gave the Xeer staying power in the absence of centralised coercive machinery was the voluntarism associated with the absolute necessity of relying and living on one’s labour/livestock rather than exploiting others. Such an ethic – in conjunction with Islam – prevented and restrained centrifugal tendencies in the lineage system, thereby inhibiting terrible men from plunging the community into a nightmare. This means, in the language of realist social science, that lineage in/of itself does not have any inherent causal power, and that its effects on community relations are contingent rather than necessary.14

The search for the causal forces in the destruction of Somalia must begin by tracing the nature of the changes that had taken place in the social rather than the genealogical order of this society. There are two major historical benchmarks in the evolution of contemporary Somalia: (i) the commercialisation of the subsistence economy, and particularly livestock, the material backbone of the traditional way of life; and (ii) the imposition of a colonial state on a decentralised social structure, and the creation of post-pastoral democratic nodes of power. It is in the articulation of state forms and economic transformations that the current situation can be best understood.

1. Household Economy

The first order of business is to redefine ‘pastoralism’, the historically and analytically imprecise term used by many writers to characterise individuals and communities who make a living by raising livestock in semi-arid regions of the Third World.15

It needs to be emphasised that the nature of a social system is not defined by the instruments or methods used by producers, but rather by the relations into which various groups have entered to produce and reproduce the existing social order. Consequently, pastoralism is a method of livestock production that can exist under a variety of historical conditions. For example, ‘communitarian pastoralism’ is a social system in which the production of use-values predominates, while ‘peripheral capitalist pastoralism’ involves the creation of exchange-values as well. In the latter case, pastoral activities become central to the reproduction of a larger social constellation of which the producers are a part.

Pre-colonial Somali society was stateless in character, lacking any institutionalised hierarchy. All the adult members were engaged in the principal mode of production, ‘communitarian pastoralism’, which lacked the forms of oppression associated with class societies, although gender-based exploitation was a characteristic feature, as confirmed by a recent study.\(^{16}\)

As the Somali economy became an integral part of the global capitalist system, the transition from one social order to another has entailed the transformation of previous class and property relations. What is emerging bears the imprint of the new age, albeit retaining aspects of the old régime. The contemporary Somali social structure is still in transition, clearly heralding the passing of pre-capitalist communalism, with the new social order, peripheral capitalism, being qualitatively different from its pre-colonial predecessor. Contemporary pastoralism supports not only the producers but two additional and dominant social groups: the merchants and the state elite.

Although pre-colonial pastoralism was not isolated from the mercantile world,\(^ {17}\) the latter had marginal influences over the reproduction of everyday life. But over the last century the new relationships between pastoralists, merchants, and the state have entailed the emergence of different social relations and the demise of communitarianism. During the last 15 years there has been an ongoing conflict between those who controlled that state and those members of the business class who claimed to be the legitimate appropriators of the ‘surplus’ generated by pastoral producers. Dispersed all over the country, and in the Ogaden, the latter may have been uniformly subject to surplus extraction irrespective of their lineage affiliation. In other words, if pastoral producers were the basis of Somali ‘tradition’, then the conflict over the appropriation of their surplus did not originate in the countryside.

The commoditisation of livestock and the subsequent emergence of non-producer ‘claimants’ has generated a new social order pregnant with a different kind of discord, in spite of the articulation of that conflict in the language of kinship. The communitarian social order based on the production of livestock, and governed by the tenets of the Xeer, as well as by the requirements of the household in a marginal environment, was no more. It was superseded by an economy in which the competition for access to commodities, the consumption of objects

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beyond one's productive capabilities, and the accumulation of wealth in the urban centres were paramount. The ethos and the reproductive requirements of this commercial order began to erode the effectiveness of the rules of kinship.

2. *Pastoral Politics*

The imposition of a state on the old Somali order has also eroded pastoral democratic practices with far-reaching and lethal repercussions. One of the legacies of colonial administrations was the neglect and commercialisation of pastoralism and peasant agriculture, and the absence of any vibrant new productive enterprises. In the context of an impoverished economy, small but rapidly growing social groups involved in trading, as well as state employees, came to demand independence in the 1950s, and the Somali Republic emerged from the union of Italian and British Somalilands on 1 July 1960. The leadership in both the public and private sectors was dominated by a group of Somalis who had little experience of, let alone much attachment to, either livestock and/or peasant agriculture. Moreover, they were overwhelmingly ill-equipped to devise and implement a successful strategy for development.

The new régime inherited an anaemic economy, a deepening budgetary deficit, a multi-party political system, a growing urban population largely unhinged from productive labour, and intensifying competition among the dominant social groups for resources. The deficit was solved in the short run by a combination of budget cuts and subsidies from former colonial powers. What was much more difficult to deal with was the nearly stagnant economy, and the lack of more sustainable avenues for the generation of employment. Since the country did not produce a surplus which could be reinvested to expand its productive base, resources had to be obtained from elsewhere. Again, these came from overseas in the form of loans and grants, which were tied to particular programmes which hardly benefited the pastoralism and peasant agriculture on which most Somalis depended, and did not initiate new productive enterprises.

The failure of this development strategy to improve traditional sectors, and to create new domestic forms of accumulation, made the state the most lucrative source of funds. It was the competition among the élite for these resources that ultimately led to the degeneration of the major political parties and the demise of parliamentary governance. The two organisations that dominated the political scene at the time of independence, the Somali Youth League (S.Y.L.) and the Somali
National League (S.N.L.), shared the same ideological and philosophical view of the state and economic development. In the elections of 1964, 24 political parties fielded 793 candidates for the 123 parliamentary seats, but five years later the number of parties had multiplied to 62, with 1,002 candidates in the 1969 contest.18

This increasing fragmentation of national politics was seen by Lewis as the resurgence of traditional particularism: ‘It is thus “clanship” in the technical sense, rather than tribalism, which commands allegiance and frustrates the achievement of much that is in the national interest’.19 But the pre-colonial Somali tradition of kinship should not be confused with unfettered blood-ties: the leadership in the old tradition had no public resources that they could compete for and loot, and as such the nature of the allocations made under that régime was qualitatively at variance with the modern order. The moral force of the Xeer, and the materially constraining conditions of the household economy, were not operative in the new dispensation, and therefore had little to do with tradition.

The competitive and the Xeer-less nature of the post-colonial social system made state revenues, including foreign assistance, the bone of contention in a stagnant economy. In other words, those first on the scene could reward themselves and their clients. The competition for profitable state offices unleashed a deadly race within the petit-bourgeois élite, which became fragmented into the smallest units possible, namely individuals, thereby corroding the common project of this emerging class – the creation of a stable political environment and growing economy – and entangling themselves and the Somali people in fruitless strife. The state, which mediates conflict between competing social groups in advanced capitalist societies, was here both the object and the price of the struggle.

The main way to get access to state funds was to become an elected political representative or, even better, a minister, and this goes a long way to explain the increase in both the number of parties and candidates in the 1964 and 1969 elections. Attempts by the Prime Minister to prevent further fragmentation of the political process did not bear fruit, mainly because of the popular understanding that the up-coming contests were all about the ‘privatisation’ of state largesse – indeed, many senior civil servants resigned in order to participate in the electoral gamble. The proliferation of political parties was a

18 This section heavily draws from ch. 4 of my book, The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia.

product of this process, and in the absence of any philosophical differences among the élite, they collectively used clanship as a means of distinguishing one candidate from another.

The effectiveness of blood-ties to mobilise voters had its limits, given the fact that the competition was intense even within such groups. For instance, since many people realised that these exercises in élite pluralism had nothing to offer the country, it became part of the norm that most personal costs incurred, including even the time spent in going to the polling stations, had to be paid for by the candidates seeking election. In most, if not all cases, the appeal for blood-ties had to be supplemented by the distribution of cash to influential individuals, especially during the final days of the campaign.

The Somali Youth League emerged victorious from the 1969 elections, with 73 of the 123 seats. However, immediately after the results had been declared, virtually all of the supposed differences between the political parties disappeared, and a feverish competition ensued among those members of National Assembly who wished to recoup their expenses and a lot more. The best way to do so was to gain access to the central chambers of state power, and this helps to explain the rapidity with which all those in the ‘opposition’, except the former Premier, Abdirazak Hadji Hussein, ‘crossed the floor’ to join the ruling party.

In a nutshell, this endless search and competition for resources swiftly transformed what seemed to many political commentators of the time to be a promising democratic society into one of Africa’s single-party states. Given the expensiveness of campaigning for a parliamentary seat, the ruling clique was quite conscious of its increasing leverage over future candidates for high public office. Even so, because the state revenues that could be used to induce political support were very limited, there was always the possibility that enough disgruntled members could bring the Government down, as happened in 1964 and 1967. Therefore, it was imperative that important changes in the political process be brought about to save the system from consuming itself. In essence this meant shedding the ‘democratic’, if not the electoral, paraphernalia, and imposing a petit-bourgeois dictatorship on the Somali society that required the support of the army.

Shortly after the elections, the Prime Minister made well-publicised inspection trips to the military headquarters in Mogadishu, and reportedly planned to send some senior officers to be trained in the Soviet Union and/or to force them into retirement so that they could be replaced by his own men. This scheme was aborted by the assassination of the President, Abdirashid 'Ali Shirmarke, in October.
1969, and by the ensuing squabble among members of the party and the National Assembly that allowed the army to step in and to end the confusion. What seemed immediately attractive to the public was the termination of the proliferating political parties by the Supreme Revolutionary Council (S.R.C.), followed by the associated privatisation of public resources. What very few people knew at the time was that General Muhammed Siyad Barre had partaken in the old spoils, and that his Soviet-style socialist programmes had little to do with the Xeer-bound traditions of the past.

Although the S.R.C. soon began to lose popularity, there was no apparent challenge to Siyad Barre and his junta, apart from an alleged ‘palace coup’ in July 1972. But the reputation of the military régime was shattered by the defeat of Somali troops in the Ogaden during 1977–8, and this re-opened the political competition among the élite, most of whom were senior members of the administration. The ensuing struggle for power became deadlier this time, as both the Government and the opposition were inclined to use bullets to retain or gain access to the resources of the state, rather than the ballot box and bribes. The departure of the Soviets discredited the rhetoric of scientific socialism, and by the end of the decade the régime had come around to singing the tunes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, thus pre-empting any possible use of such ideology by the opposition.

By this time those in and out of power had, ironically, similar ‘economic programmes’, and the resources of the state were being increasingly misappropriated on a grand scale. Knowing that his régime had no chance of winning in any democratic and competitive election, the President openly turned to the brutal repression and prosecution of any possible opposition. Having purged the military and appointed loyalists and immediate family members to all key positions, he then used civil service posts and public funds to reward and punish other opportunistic members of the élite. Having desecrated Somali nationalism and abandoned the need for popular legitimacy, Siyad Barre and his clients set about manufacturing a base of support through blood-ties and political oppression.

The destruction of the state as the instrument for ensuring the safety of common citizens, and the collective punishment of communities deemed disloyal, left an institutional vacuum in the country. Rather than safeguarding the public, the state became an arbitrary and unpredictable predator to be feared. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, the opposition failed to fill the void, and did not offer the Somali people an alternative vision of a better and achievable future.
They followed ‘Siyad, the teacher’, as many Somalis contemptuously referred to the dictator, and also relied on blood-ties as their principal organisational safeguard. The fragmentation of the opposition along these lines kept the régime in power for almost another decade. The terror of the military, the collapse of public law and order, and the fragmentation of the opposition, meant that ordinary people were forced to find protection in the ghost of pre-colonial kinship tradition, the clan.

The colonisation of the state by the loyalists, whose only purpose was to stay in power in order to ransack public property, led to the emergence of localised nodes of coercive power, the precipitous decline of central authority, and ultimately the incapacitation of the last source of power, the military. The complete ‘success’ of the régime’s strategy of divide-and-rule through blood-ties in the end consumed its own strength, thereby leading to the total collapse of governmental authority.

The anticipated ‘second coming’ of independence after the downfall of the military régime did not materialise. The shortsighted opportunism of leading members of the opposition led them to become engulfed in a struggle over whatever was left of the carcass of the state.\(^\text{20}\) The chaos which surrounded the last days of the Government as the United Somali Congress (U.S.C.), one of the opposition factions in the southern region, made its final push into the presidential palace, foreshadowed the eventual descent into a savage civil war. The purpose of the U.S.C. seems to have been, in hindsight, to oust Siyad Barre without any carefully thought-out plans to repair the institutional capacity of the state and immediately restore civil peace. Having carelessly and widely distributed arms to undisciplined and untrained supporters, and without a contingency programme for restoration and reconstruction, Siyad Barre was temporarily defeated, the U.S.C. declared itself the victor in January 1991, and Ali Mahdi was capriciously appointed as the new President.

The young vigilantes who had been armed by the U.S.C. began to ransack both public and private property, and within two months of Siyad Barre’s departure they destroyed more people and property than the military régime had done in 20 years. The central figures of the U.S.C. were powerless to control the very people they had supplied with weapons. The looters told many home-owners whose property

\(^{20}\) Cf. the prophetic verses, narrated in 1972, by the poet and social critic, Mohamed Warsame Hadrwii, ‘Hal Laqaley Raajeeda Lagu So Qamamoo’. This song depicts the nation as a slaughtered she-camel, with the vultures each grabbing a piece of the carcass in the confusion.
they occupied, 'Ana Xoreestey', which literally means, 'I liberated it for myself'.

With the destruction of the national co-ordinating centre of administration, all the opposition movements claimed sovereignty over their supposed 'native areas', thus completing the dismemberment of the Somali state. Each warlord dreamed of replacing Siyad Barre, and since there can only be one central seat of power in a unitary country, intra-faction conflicts ensued, reminiscent but more deadly than those witnessed in the highly competitive elections held in 1969. This process left the country fractured, and instigated hatred based on blood-ties not previously recorded in the annals of Somali history.

As each potentate tries to overtake and weaken his competitors, the social fabric is destroyed, as well as the basic life-sustaining physical infrastructure. The inability of the faction leaders to provide for their undisciplined militias has turned the 'troops' into roaming gangs whose only ethic is loot, rape, maim, and destroy. Consequently, one-third to one-half of the Somali population are in grave danger of dying by starvation caused by this completely avoidable havoc. While the people perish, the warlords keep the United Nations and other relief organisations at bay for fear that their enemies may win support and recognition.

In addition to the unforgivable and unforgettable cruelty of the warlords in the south, the Somali National Movement (S.N.M.) in the north has spent over $60,000 in the United States in commissioning a firm of consultants to try and convince the international community that the original inhabitants of the former British Somaliland were all members of the Isaaq clan, and that 'their territory' has legitimate historical claim to sovereignty and hence statehood.21

THE CULPRIT IS NOT KINSHIP

Traditionalist scholars and journalists tend to confuse blood-ties and their politicised forms with pre-colonial kinship. According to David Laitin and Said Samatar:

For years the eminent European anthropologists Enrico Cerulli and I. M. Lewis have been telling us that to understand Somali politics, it is necessary to understand Somali clanship and kinship ties. Their thesis has come under persistent criticism, especially by nationalist historians and politicians anxious to foster a sense of national rather than tribal allegiance in the Somali body

The political history of independent Somalia, however, makes the relevance of Lewis and Cerulli's argument painfully clear.22

The confusion which surrounds the use of these terms is what a learned Somali cleric, Aw Jama Omer Issa, was referring to when he remarked: 'Kinship is dead, Humanness is dead, Barbarism is here'.23 Those who wish to demonstrate that Somali tradition is the main source of the present calamity must unearth the complexity and causal relationships within the traditional ensemble, in order to establish the logic and tendency of that process. Citing lineage structure and its politicised contemporary form, clanism, as the cause of the prevailing havoc, and then repeating these claims many times, does not provide an adequate explanation of the Somali catastrophe.

The arbitrary extraction of blood-ties from the rich and complex social web of which it was only a small part, simply panders to elite opportunism and Eurocentric racism. The essential question which traditionalists need to answer if they are to avoid a 'genetic' explanation, is: What makes Somali blood-ties different from those which exist in any human community? As a matter of fact, there is no precedent in Somali history, and hence tradition, of a small number of evil men dominating and brutalising the rest of the population using kinship as an organising and legitimating tool. The regard for leaders was voluntary and therefore had to be earned: those who broke the tenets of the two pillars of pre-colonial culture, the Xeer and Islam, automatically lost the respect and the following of their group. In the absence of institutionalised bureaucratic structures and public largesse, such a tyrannical individual was isolated and disabled by the constraints built into the political economy.

The significance of the household economy in pre-colonial Somali social life rested, at least to a great extent, on the fact that very few were not engaged in productive activity, and they certainly did not dominate the affairs of the community. In fact, those who were not productive, and consequently unable to care for their households, had no standing in the community, let alone the ability to command any authority. In other words, being a competent pastoral manager or a good peasant was a necessary prerequisite for any leadership post.

The checks and balances built into that old Somali tradition atrophied with the imposition of colonial rule, the establishment of the state and its attendant laws, the commercialisation of the economy and

22 Samatar and Laitin, op. cit. p. 155. For a contrasting view of clanism, see Vail (ed.), op. cit.
the generation of surplus, the emergence of a class of Somalis untethered
to productive labour, the availability of régime-controlled ‘common’
resources, and the advent of competitive politics. Thus, it is the
precipitous decline of the constraining rôle which the household
economy played in the social affairs of the community, as well as the
rise of an influential minority whose command of the state machinery
‘liberated’ them from the rules of the Xeer and the values of Islam,
which led to the Somali calamity. Élite competition in the political and
economic sphere, the neglect of the productive sectors of the economy,
and hence the centrality of state largesse, led to the institutionalisation
of blood politics.

The opportunistic methods by which groups and individuals have
marshalled support to gain or retain access to public resources has
finally destroyed the very institution that laid the golden egg. The void
which followed the collapse of the state led to a scramble in which each
faction assembled a make-shift Bantustan-like structure. The irony is
that opportunism knows no boundaries as the struggle between groups
for dominance intensifies. The tragic events in Mogadishu since the
defeat of Siyad Barre’s régime, and the intra-S.N.M. fighting in Burao
and Berbera in the northern region, are clear manifestations of the
bottomless nature of the hell into which millions of Somalis have fallen.

As factional rivalry proliferates, as the ability of the commanders to
provide for their clients declines, and as all public norms of civility and
respect for the lives of others vanish, so social and individual paranoia
simply merge. Thus, in spite of the supposed power of the loyalty of
blood-ties, the rules of the jungle, everyone against all, become
supreme. This is the barbarism to which Aw Jama Omer Issa and
Ahmed Samatar have referred.

The most important lesson to be learned from the present tragedy is
the recognition that Somali society has been torn apart because blood-
ties without the Xeer have been manipulated by the élite in order to
gain or retain access to unearned resources. The fundamental basis of
pre-colonial social justice was the self-reliance of the household,
coupled with systemic checks on those who wanted to aid the resources
of others. This is not a plea for a return to a tradition that is dead, but
an argument about the need to work for a different future where the
security and the dignity of every citizen is the principal tenet of the law
of the land.
The difficult task of reconstruction has two components: (i) to create an economy in which productive resources are widely distributed, and which channels resources towards productive investment; and (ii) to craft a political order which is accountable, representative, and entrepreneurial, and that does not allow for the personal appropriation of public resources. The warlords who dominate the country, and their associated movements, have neither the vision nor the capacity to undertake such a momentous project. In the absence of an organised indigenous agency which can establish peace and carry out such an agenda in the immediate future, the Somali people must rely on the international community to save them from the horrors and the savagery of petit-bourgeois fascism.\footnote{Cf. Nicos Poulantzas, \textit{Fascism and Dictatorship: the Third International and the problem of fascism} (London, 1979). See also, Mahmoud Mamdani, \textit{Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda} (Nairobi, 1983).}