

**PUTTING AFRICAN HISTORY ON FILM:
A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE SOMALIA FILM PROJECT**

Charles L. Gesheker
Department of History
California State University, Chico

The Six Phases of a Project

1. Enthusiam
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic
4. Search for the Guilty
5. Punishment of the Innocent
6. Praise and Honors for the Non-Participants

"The road to hell is paved with works-in-progress." Philip Roth

INTRODUCTION

This retrospective on the production of a documentary film about 20th century Somalia attempts to explain how historical materials may be designed for communication through cinema. It examines a case study of collaboration between filmmakers and a historian which exemplified the inherent difficulties and potential rewards of such an undertaking. Developed in partnership with state agencies in Somalia with funding from the United States, the production became unusually complex primarily because the filmmakers attempted to fundamentally shift the structure of the project away from its original format. The process of writing and re-writing scripts, assemblage of visual materials, search for funds, identification of experienced personnel (and their subsequent replacement), and international collaboration in a region of Africa embroiled in war wrought vacillation between enthusiasm and despair—a laborious emotional roller coaster rider familiar among filmmakers—which imposed physical, mental and intellectual demands novel perhaps to a historian.¹

The narrative of events associated with the project is interspersed with reflections about aesthetic and scholarly considerations, the context of production, and the mechanisms of filmmaking. According to historian Paul Smith:

Unless the historian has some grasp of the nature of film and the basic procedure involved in using it as a medium of expression, he is going to find difficulty in ensuring that the media specialists produce the kind of result he wants ... the academic should know enough to be his own producer.²

As the film nears completion, I know enough now to produce my own film thanks to a protracted process that demystified filmmaking and confirmed that practical experience in making films probably is the prerequisite for a historian to fully comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of that medium. My experience suggests that the historian who attempts to translate scholarly materials onto a cinematic format should not accept merely a consultative or advisory role but must be willing to function as the co-producer.

FILM AND HISTORY

Whether historical material is disseminated in a printed form or displayed through film, the effectiveness of its message depends on content, process, and structural format. "Content" refers

to analysis and interpretation of the basic information, its confirmation with evidence, the "story" crafted by a historian thoroughly familiar with the subject matter. "Process" entails the assembly, treatment, and transmission of the contents from a comprehensive yet precise viewpoint that focuses the audience's attention enabling it to understand the details. The "format" is the mode of display or a style of exposition for historical findings either on a printed page, on television, or projected through film.

Content and process for films are initially similar to historical writing. The cinematic format, however, imposes significant shifts in terms of what we can say, show, or explain on the screen compared to the printed page, differences which inevitably affect content and process in that medium. A film is a fabricated narrative structure, the manifestation of the social and intellectual activity of the film-makers. "Finishing and showing a film cannot be compared to publishing a book," claims one filmmaker, since "many books are published very year whereas ... there are very few films."⁴

Yet a film's "reality" is not self-evidently given since truth cannot be immediately captured by the camera. Like books, films reach their observers or readers in a highly edited form derived from raw materials which are represented to the audience in a partial, selective way. It is more difficult on film than with print to avoid the relatively superficial record that captures only the external appearance of subjects while offering few insights into processes, relationships, causes and motives which are the historian's concerns. One need only see what happened when films were made of Graham Greene's novels to realize the potential for disastrous results if the author (or scholar) is not involved in the screenplay itself. The historian engaged in filmmaking has an obligation to uphold the integrity and principles of his profession, a responsibility that requires attentiveness to most aspects of filmmaking to assure that the final product faithfully records his outlook and intentions. These obligations cannot be met if the historian is relegated to the position of mere "adviser."

Those who produce documentaries or compilation films select material from old newsreels, written documentation, graphics and artwork, portraits, snapshot stills, maps, and cinematic interviews with participants. With films, unlike print, an added dimension is learning how to meld images with sound (including music) to make the film more coherent and understandable since pictures and cinematic materials alone are often fragmentary and limited in expression. There is a tremendous difference between what images and sound can do. In a compilation or documentary film where information, images, and explanation are more important than suspense and drama, the music usually needs to be specially composed and scored. Finally, the connections between sequences must be explained in the narrative script, a critical dimension discussed below.

Film is a lively, exciting medium for historical expression, but it can be expensive, fragmentary, and limited. When film becomes an instrument for historical communication, it is the historian who must identify and evaluate the components of the visual message which eventually will be selected for combination in a documentary film. The historian-as-filmmaker functions like any writer who has some notion about the nature of the audience for which he writes. Manuscripts submitted to refereed journals or university presses, for instance, adhere to standards of style, exposition, evidence, and a comparative framework all of which combine presumably to advance knowledge. If academic prose appears pretentious, unclear, or chaotic it usually suggests that the author hasn't figured out precisely what he wants to say. "Good, scholarly writing," advises publisher Donald Holden, "is a service you perform for a stranger. To write well, you must put yourself in that stranger's shoes and imagine that you are the reader. Whether that reader is a scholar or a layman, your primary responsibility is to him."⁵

Likewise in filmmaking, in order for a historian to make clear precisely which historical themes or topics are to be explained on film, he must have the authority (either as producer or co-producer) to assure their visual implementation. Unlike a book, one cannot simply turn back the film for a moment to look again at earlier sequences. The composition of the film from the point of view of the historian will determine which documents or elements the director will utilize to craft the product. Those involved in the creation of a film develop an "audience image" of the presumed attitudes and preferences of the people expected to watch the finished product. Professionally sensitive to the difficulties of translating one culture to another, the Somalia project represents a rigorous effort to inform public attitudes about the Islamic religion, the political nature of colonial rule, and the role of the humanities in a contemporary African country. Film is indispensable in reaching a certain type of "public," especially mass audiences for whom the "television documentary may be their only contact with history presented as such (and) for many of them it will not be an interpretation but a final statement of the truth about its subject, driven home with all the force of visual demonstration."⁶

The film's commentary must be succinct, clearly expressed, and open to one explanation only. Some suggest that time allotted for reading the script should not exceed 25 percent of the running time of the film. Thus, for a thirty minute documentary the historian-turned-scriptwriter must compose a narration that takes less than eight minutes to read!

A fundamental difference between historical writing and film-making is that the "author" in the latter activity almost always consists of two-man "teams:" the historian and the director, and later the historian and the film editor. The identification and utilization of documents precedes their composition into a film. Identification and composition are different fields which require their own experts. On this critical point, director and historian must agree on a division of responsibility to avoid or minimize quarrels. "Mutual respect and some care not to interfere with each other's responsibilities are without doubt the basis of a good film."

This commitment to a give-and-take style and to search for compromise are acknowledged prerequisites which I found easier to prescribe than to practice. Both historian and filmmaker must be flexible enough to allow the other to use his capacity to make certain the film accords with the findings of historical research and can provide entertainment to the general public. With many films being produced by artists whose sensibilities derive from disciplines other than the cinema, it's not surprising that professional filmmakers themselves rarely seem to agree on what filmmaking is all about in the first place.

NARRATIVE RETROSPECTIVE

My written scholarship provided a descriptive analysis of the past century of Somali history. The themes running through that history included the division of Somali-speaking people and their rangelands by multiple colonizing powers; the process whereby Somali nomadic pastoralists were incorporated into the global economy and the class antagonisms that resulted from it; techniques used by Somalis to collaborate with or to resist alien governments; and the role of Islam and secular political parties in 20th century Somali efforts at territorial reunification leading to the establishment of the independent state of Somalia in 1960.

Somalis from different regions, clans, or social classes may dispute the details and implications of these themes but most agree that the genesis, spread, and demise of the Somali Dervish Movement (1899-1920) led by Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan played a fundamental role in shaping 20th century Somalia. The Dervishes were initially a self-defense movement designed to protect Somalis against Abyssinian armies that raided their villages and plundered livestock in the late 19th century. The Dervishes used religious brotherhood (*tarigas*) as the organizational basis for an alternative state apparatus that sought Somali allegiance to challenge Abyssinian and European colonizers and to defend Muslim lands from foreign attempts at domination. Such resistance during the heyday of imperialism in Africa was intolerable to European colonialist powers who waged vigorous campaigns to subdue the Sayyid and his followers.

The Dervishes used guerrilla tactics, a shrewd system of double-agents, and international arms trade to keep their enemies at bay for two decades. For inspiration and tactical policy-making, Sayyid Muhammad relied on Somali poetic verse, the ideal cultural device to transmit information, motivate and encourage his supporters, and vilify his enemies. His oratorical skills helped generate social action and instructed Somalis about the dangers of colonial control. A master of Somali dialects, the Sayyid effectively used regional terms and phraseologies to cultivate political intimacy with audiences throughout the Somali interior. He relied on traditional warrior values but trained women to play a larger role in his movement.

The Dervish Movement collapsed in early 1920 and Sayyid Muhammad died of influenza later that year. The movement had become wracked by internal disaffections and the exactions of waging war for twenty years even before the British military delivered the coup de grace--a coordinated assault in January 1920 which combined Camel Corps regiments, ships from the Royal Navy, and a special RAF fleet of twelve DeHaviland airplanes known as the "Z Unit."¹⁰

Using Islamic principles to express political dissent and to organize his followers, Sayyid Muhammad left behind a vital legacy of national resistance to colonialism in his struggle to create a politically unified Somali state. Some Somalis insist that the Dervish Movement laid the foundations for contemporary Somalia. The Sayyid had used traditional Somali political craftsmanship and warrior skills to resist foreign domination, but he was also a modernizer and a political visionary willing to experiment with new political forms, a flexibility characteristic of Somalis to this day.

Over the past thirty years, historians have reconstructed and reinterpreted Africa's past so that today African history is an established intellectual discipline with a scholarly tradition, methodology, literature, and an international group of experts. African historians helped to reconfirm that documents alone do not make history by showing that oral traditions can serve as a legitimate basis to reconstruct the past. Knowledge about the past among Africans is far more substantial than most historians may realize but, even where conventional written sources do exist they document only a limited portion of the field.¹¹

Having extracted and interpreted historical information from African societies, to what extent are non-African historians subsequently able to share their findings with people of the host culture itself? Have African historians attempted to disseminate their findings to non-academic audiences? Research and writing about African history may be less dominated by non-Africans nowadays than thirty years ago but training institutes, research funds, academic bases of support, library resources, and opportunities for professional mobility still remain skewed towards scholars from the developed countries of the North Atlantic world. Some African historians even believe their field suffers from a "crisis of imbalance between theories and data," symptomatic of a discipline in adolescence where "consensus over its aims, methods, and even over the simple meaning of the results which it has produced so far, disintegrates more than it coalesces."¹² Debate over the "meaning of the results" appears especially important to an African public.

To design and implement field research in Somalia made me conscious of the difficulties of writing good history about a nomadic pastoralist society. The disparity between those who assisted me in Somalia (and whose history it was) and those who were able to criticize the results of that research made clear why it's increasingly difficult for Western historians to justify their demands on the time and resources of people in Third World countries. My writing too was designed for dissemination primarily among English-speaking audiences whose international readership for articles or monographs on African history probably numbers less than 1500.

When one considers film as a feasible medium for the preservation and transfer of historical materials, its potential audience conceivably runs into the millions. Senegalese film director Safi Faye even suggests that film may be a "natural" art for African audiences because so many people still cannot read while images are readily understood.¹³ The power and effectiveness of that medium also raises the question of how Africa and its history have previously been depicted on film where overtly racist stereotypes have given way to subtly demeaning messages. There is the question of audience sympathy, understanding and identification of characters or themes. With films about Africa much will depend on the film researcher's angle of vision and his method of analysis. The historian's method, although developed for literary sources, can provide an excellent content analysis of images, themes, and icons in a film.¹⁴

Most Somalis lack the resources to obtain even a fraction of the publications about the Horn of Africa and are outside the circles of informal academic exchanges. Somalis who were essential to my field work seldom had opportunities to criticize or clarify the social significance (or insignificance) that my research held for them. Africans justifiably annoyed at foreigners who pontificate about them on the basis of superficial understanding may heartily agree with the Nigerian who claimed that when he reads "what the white man has written of our customs, I laugh, for it is the custom of our people to lie as a matter of course to outsiders, especially the white man."¹⁵ But no one monopolizes critical insights or evaluations about any social phenomenon. Analysis by an "outsider" may even be more impartial and persuasive than that provided by an "insider" committed to a particular region, ethnic faction, or social class. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville expressed the opinion that Americans would only learn certain things about themselves by hearing it from others. Like de Tocqueville's Democracy in America or the writings of Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal whose An American Dilemma remained until the 1960s the most exhaustive study of American race relations, outside scholars also should disdain any unnecessary reticence when writing about Africa. It is worth noting that in 1984 a controversy arose of Danny Santiago's critically acclaimed novel Famous All Over Town, written purportedly by a Chicano "insider" uniquely sensitive and familiar with life in the East Los Angeles barrio. It was subsequently revealed that "Danny Santiago" was actually one Daniel James, an aging Stalinist from an upper middle class family in Kansas City.

Throughout my research on 20th century colonial interaction in the Horn, I had blended European archival sources with field interviews with Somali poets, merchants, politicians, teachers, and colonial government clerks and interspersed those sources with "field" interviews in Great Britain with ex-colonial civil servants. The process enabled me to analyze statistical, visual, and anecdotal evidence with personal reminiscences about British colonialism in northeast Africa, particularly the confrontations that occurred there between 1899 and 1920.

The organizational principles of the Somali Dervish movement had been based on Islamic brotherhoods that cut across clan divisions, but its historical causes arose from the nature of alien colonial administrations imposed on the Somalis which threatened their religion and by the imposition of colonial boundaries which promised to disrupt their access to vital pasture lands for survival. Among nomadic pastoralists, where the loss of access to even small pastures can threaten life itself, national boundaries imposed by outsiders are not only meaningless they are insulting.

Confronted by a movement of devout Muslims, such as the Dervishes under Sayyid Muhammad, opposed to the imposition of Christian rule in the early 20th century colonialist authorities routinely dismissed them, *ipso facto*, as hopelessly misguided, backward-looking, or simply insane—or a combination of all three! British colonial officials accordingly branded Sayyid Muhammad "The Mad Mullah," although technically he was not a Mullah and clinically he was not mad. To destroy the Dervishes once and for all, the British government in 1920 took unprecedented military action in sub-Saharan Africa when they dispatched to Somalia specially equipped airplanes outfitted with machine guns to bomb Dervish locations, terrify people, and scatter their animals.

As part of my study, the Air Historical Branch of the British Ministry of Defense helped locate four pilots from that 1920 expedition who were still alive, two of whom consented to meet me in 1978. During my interview with Air Vice Marshal John Gray, I asked whether members of the Royal Air Force's "Z unit" had taken photographs to document this early extension of air power into Africa. Surprised that anyone would want photographs of "airplanes, sand, and wild nomads," the 81-year-old Vice Marshal muttered about eccentric American scholars as he retrieved his old photographs taken during what he termed the "RAF's 'show' against the wily Mad Mullah."

It turned out that Gray and another pilot, Captain Charles Flinn, between them had a collection of old photographs that graphically demonstrated the lengths that European armies were required to go to eliminate anti-colonial resistance. The photographs conversely showed the steps that Somalis were obliged to take by building fortresses and stone structures as the physical basis for a state created to repel colonial intruders. As one noted authority on Somalia observed, "the novelty of the Sayyid's movement was the ideal of creating an Islamic state which would give a political entity to a nation which had long been in existence. For he was well enough travelled to know what the colonial powers did to nations not recognized officially as sovereign states."¹⁶ Many of the photographs were taken of previously inaccessible Dervish fortresses before their destruction by colonial armed forces.

Gray and Flinn let me borrow their 150 photographs which I took to the Imperial War Museum in London where the Photographic Division enlarged and duplicated them and made each one into a slide. A few months later I brought a second complete set to Mogadishu and deposited them at the Somali Academy of Arts and Sciences. In December 1978, my series of public lectures in Somalia was augmented by these visual elements which elicited enthusiastic, inquisitive responses from Somali audiences. In February 1979, on the plane ride back to California, I first pondered the possibility of using the old photographs as the basis for making a short documentary film about the anti-colonial struggle of Sayyid Muhammad and the Somali Dervishes. I had interviewed two pilots from the colonial side and while doing fieldwork in northern Somalia had recently met 86-year-old Tohyaar Muhammad Ali, the Dervish wife of the Sayyid's food-taster and an eye-witness to the aerial bombardments of the Dervish fortress capital in January-February 1920. To somehow juxtapose interviews with the aging RAF pilots with those of the feisty Dervish woman might offer a fascinating and effective basis for a short documentary film.

In the United States, my proposal to develop a film drew mixed reactions. Academic colleagues suggested that, as a scholarly pursuit leading to publication as a monograph, the reconstruction of 20th century Somali history was a worthier objective than "making movies." Foundations which supported documentary film productions wondered how I planned to persuade their review panels that turn-of-the-century Somalia, a "mad Mullah," and Somali poetic traditions about the movement and its legacy could be made interesting or educational for American audiences who knew little (and probably cared less) about a marginal corner of the world called the Horn of Africa. Regardless of how I decided to implement my idea, funding agencies consistently admonished me to cooperate with a filmmaker with a proven record of accomplishment to assure a collaborative division of labor lest anyone make the preposterous assumption that screenplay, script, or film treatment was going to be written by "some dumb scholar."

Making a film involves considerable salesmanship and the practiced art of persuasion. If the historian originates the idea for a film he will need a companion filmmaker to help him raise production funding. Since indentifying such a filmmaker requires entrance into the filmmaker's network of contacts, the historian should first register a film treatment before circulating any conceptual papers among principals in the television or film industry. I composed a brief treatment of the

proposed documentary which explained the film's subject matter and premises, the possible visual elements, potential types of interviewees, Somali oral traditions and poetic recitations, and various filming locations in Somalia and registered the document with the Writer's Guild. Furthermore, whenever an academic considers a film treatment based on concepts or ideas which have grown out of his scholarship he should obtain the requisite documents and applications forms from the U.S. Copyright Office and, if applicable, submit them as well.

When I circulated my registered materials to selected U.S.-based filmmakers who had produced documentaries about Africa, a few found the topic uninteresting, some were committed to ongoing projects, and others claimed never to collaborate on such so-called "spec" (speculative) ventures. Those who were interested immediately proposed dubious often ahistorical changes or simply seemed not to have the right personal chemistry or temperament for collaboration with a scholar. Finally, an American film producer who had made a trilogy of documentaries about 20th century Kenya, another one on racism in Britain, and was completing film about Israel agreed to collaborate with me on the initial funding proposal. His academic background was comparable to mine, we seemed personally and ideologically compatible, and his previous films impressed me by their visual coherence. Our respective talents, complementary writing skills, and similar levels of energy—"energy breeds energy"—evidently augured well for a harmonious working relationship.

From its loose and vague beginnings, the film producer and I submitted an initial proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for research and script development. NEH accepted our proposal and agreed in 1980 to support the preliminary phase designed to promote the collaboration between a humanist and a filmmaker which could lead to production of a documentary film. Its panelists believed it would be timely to support an historical film produced for the Public Broadcasting System in which Islam, oral traditions, and African reactions to colonialism were carefully explained as the behavior of individuals and of a society in a specific time and place. They were also persuaded by the fact that an academic humanist knowledgeable about the particular society had joined with a filmmaker in a collaborative fashion.

Before committing funds for the full production, NEH would have to know precisely which elements (graphics, stills, historical footage, contemporary shots, interviews) would be included along with evidence of their location, accessibility, and replicability. As principal humanist for the project, my task was to identify visual and photographic materials, scrutinize primary and secondary writings, and suggest Somali oral and dramatic events that might provide reference points in the development of a film script. As the one responsible for the cultural authenticity and historical accuracy of the film, my duties included safeguarding the project from a filmmaker's artistic propensity to introduce rhetorical excess or apocryphal elements. Above all, project personnel were expected to establish, sustain, and demonstrate support from Somali intellectuals, poets, scholars and educational institutions.

In June 1980, we filmed a 20-minute interview with Air Vice Marshal Gray in England and two months later conducted site evaluations throughout Somalia. In Somalia, we were joined by an American director whom the producer had selected to work with us. We conferred with government officials in Somalia's capital of Mogadishu and met with district representatives in the primary areas of Dervish activities. In the countryside, some Somali nomads scoffed upon learning that we intended to compress two decades of historical activities into a one-hour film. A film about Sayyid Muhammad and the Dervishes, they advised solemnly, could not possibly run for less than twenty hours!

It was vitally important to establish the elements of mutual trust to reaffirm our genuine interest in Somali cultural and political history, especially since more than a few Somalis reminded us about previous Americans who made the large promises which ultimately went unfulfilled. In September 1980, following our initial reconnaissance, I left Somalia convinced that my film-making colleagues and I would not let that happen with this project. Four years later, however, I regret to admit that Gilbert and Sullivan were right when they sang: "things are never as they seem; skim milk masquerades as cream."

From the outset we acknowledged that our primary objective was not to produce a biography of Sayyid Muhammad as "the hero of Somali history" but rather to use film to explore the antecedent causes of the Dervish Movement, explain Somali mobilization skills, depict life under colonialism as Somalis experienced it, and to show how understanding Dervish and colonial history informs Somali life today. To guard against the sentimentality that sometimes creeps into studies about African figures, we needed to portray Sayyid Muhammad's quirky—sometimes unpleasant, occasionally brutal—personality traits. In understanding how Somalis interpret their history we recognized that they can also express divided views about the legacy of Sayyid Muhammad, similar in many ways to the controversy over Pancho Villa's legacy in Mexico.

We agreed that the most sensible working arrangement would entail a partnership whereby the assets offered by the NEH-supported group would complement the skills of Somalis from various institutes and agencies. Somalis would make critical contributions in the planning and implementation of the project and be encouraged to direct key aspects themselves. We jointly identified topics and themes, cultural resources, locations and elderly historical informants.

Somali institutions would obtain copies of the film as stipulated in an agreement to be drawn up that would specify international distribution rights and provide for an equitable division of gross receipts. The responsibility for drafting and negotiating the contractual terms was left primarily to the producer to conduct with our Somali counterparts. Despite impressive credentials and accomplishments as an independent filmmaker, he was unable to conduct effective contractual negotiations allowing them to drag on for nearly two years without final ratification.¹⁷

The delineation of responsibilities among the producer, the director, and the historian also drifted aimlessly without reaching a satisfactory conclusion. While completion of such basic procedural agreements seems *de rigueur* to minimize misunderstanding among the principals, many filmmakers apparently will try to postpone such contracts or avoid them entirely. The academic runs a considerable risk by not finalizing these agreements before starting production. Some filmmakers tend to perceive written contracts as a threat to their artistic creativity. However, filmmakers are not birds free to fly off wherever they wish, taking along the historian's ideas. Filmmakers must be permitted ample room to range freely and artistically within a carefully identified "garden" with a clear obligation to return "home" to the historical analysis. Should the historian who originated the film's ideas and concepts encounter unreasonable delays or inexplicable evasiveness from his filmmaking colleagues he should seriously consider replacing them.

While ratification of these internal agreements was pending, NEH accepted our production proposal and awarded us funds in late 1981 convinced that accessible and replicable visual materials existed in Somalia and Europe from which to produce a one-hour scripted documentary with some dramatic reconstructions tentatively entitled "The Parching Heat of the Wind." Our Somali associates provided strong written support for our efforts, official assurance that their cultural history was not about to be misconstrued or objectified by outsiders.

Now accomplished in the art of grant-writing for film funds, our group (North Valley Films) entered the rough and tumble world of filmmaking in Africa in 1982 just as military tensions escalated in the Horn. Ethiopian soldiers captured two towns inside Somalia and could not be repelled. Numerous anti-government rebellions broke out in northern Somalia adjacent to the proposed filming locations. Internal travel was increasingly restricted as the government declared a state of emergency. The enormous burden of caring for over 700,000 refugees displaced by Ethiopian-Somali fighting in the Ogaden compounded our logistical problems as key Somali personnel and support vehicles were subject to redeployment. In May 1982, two Somali researchers assigned to our project fled across a nearby border into Ethiopia where a few weeks later they began broadcasting propaganda against the Somali government from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, much to the consternation of Somali officials and project personnel alike. In June, an important Somali Minister associated with our project from its inception was put in jail, charged with plotting to overthrow the government.

While these developments were unsettling enough, they proved less disruptive than deepening rifts between the producer and director, both of whom progressively disagreed with me about the direction of the film. Basically, the two filmmakers (both Americans) allowed their reach to exceed their grasp after the Somali government (in April 1982) matched our funding from the United States by agreeing to provide comparable levels of support in Somalia through in-kind assistance, accommodations, and the re-assignment of local officials to work with us on the project. The Somali government had previously demonstrated its commitment and support for African filmmaking--a rarity among African states--by inaugurating MOGPAFIS, the Mogadishu Pan-African Film Symposium and participating fully in Pan-African and Arab League Film Conferences.¹⁸

Emboldened by the generosity of the host country, the rather inexperienced director enthusiastically labored to help produce a full-length feature film based entirely on dramatic reconstructions while the producer, despite his experience, proved unwilling or unable to restrain him as they permitted an already lengthy and overdue project to deviate substantially from its original treatment which called simply for a documentary film with some dramatic elements. With numerous incremental changes taking place in the field during the pre-production phase, it was impossible for me (in California) to appreciate at the time the nature or implications of these developments.

As the project grew steadily more complex, an inordinate amount of time from June to December 1982 was squandered in futile attempts to mediate between these two extraordinarily difficult

individuals. Therein lies a critical but elementary lesson for the historian about to embark on filmmaking: make absolutely certain that all obligations and responsibilities between academics and filmmakers are spelled out in writing carefully, precisely and contractually, before permitting any expenditure of funds. Trust and mutual respect between filmmaker and historian should ideally exist from the outset of such a project, but the historian should never underestimate the potential eccentricities of the filmmaker, many times too breathtaking to recall with composure.

A documentary film based on historical scholarship is not better than its sources. We did not have sufficient visual materials to permit us to show the Dervish side of the colonial relationship or to depict daily life inside the resistance movement. The available visual elements included photographs of airplanes being unloaded at Berbera, aerial views of Dervish forts, captured Dervish livestock, the experimental aspects of the air unit including "hospital" planes, and the use of African labor to assemble the airplanes and load bombs. There were another 300 drawings, sketches, photographs, and cartoons duplicated from books, magazines, and pamphlets from the early 20th century. Although I had initially considered making only a straight documentary film on the Dervishes, the extant photographs primarily showed only colonialists and the Somali "friendlies" who fought with the British and Italians against the Dervishes. We remained in a certain state of ignorance about how to show (rather than explain) the Somali perspectives on many critical events surrounding the Dervish Movement.

To convey how colonialism was perceived at a grass-roots African level would be unsatisfactory if dependent on a single category of information, particularly one dominated by colonial archival materials. To reconstruct in an imaginative but authentic way a considerable part of what we would try to show about Dervish life, we located elderly Somalis who could conceivably serve as "witnesses" in an interview format that might have resembled what Warren Beatty used in his film "Reds." For basic materials about Dervish history such as dialogue, clothing and hair styles, and tactics, we relied on a rich source of information about Somali culture: traditional types of poetry, particularly memorable verses composed during the Dervish Movement.

By November 1982, amidst interminable debates over the location of scenes, employment of actors and actresses, composition of the crew, nationality of the director of photography, or even availability of costumes and props—critical issues customarily resolved long before beginning production—relations between director and producer became openly contemptuous. Having mobilized considerable manpower and resources to help make the film, Somali government officials were understandably annoyed at the filmmaker's inability to comply with their own established starting date. Without an agreed-upon script to serve as the blueprint for the shooting and confronted with a producer and director barely able to speak to each other without rancor, it was necessary to persuade all parties to suspend work on the project, at least until the script could be entirely re-written.

Although this caused disappointment and loss of momentum on both sides, the circumstances made this painful decision unavoidable. By the end of 1982, the animus between the black director and the white producer had degenerated into irreconcilable differences over personal, artistic, and professional issues.

With the production schedule interrupted and all funds frozen, the script was entirely re-written between November 1982 and February 1983 co-authored by the film producer and a talented Somali playwright, Said Saleh Ahmed. It was imaginative, bold, dramatic, historically accurate—and quite impractical. To implement it as the basis for a film would have required seven times more funding than we had on hand. During a meeting at NEH in mid-February, the producer calmly indicated that he expected to request an additional \$500,000 to complete this film, even though after working fifteen months on the project he was still unable to show them a single foot of motion picture film. Such problems, he claimed, "were the problems of success."

NEH officials were horrified. A few weeks later the producer summarily resigned, followed six months later by the director. The Somali Film Agency, having committed considerable financial resources to the project with manpower mobilization to match, decided to adopt our re-written script as the basis for an elaborate co-production not with the fragmented and discredited American group, but with an Indian film company instead. By September 1983, I could play only a marginal advisory role from afar when production commenced in Somalia to shoot a full-length feature film entitled "Somali Dervish."

In the United States, I surveyed the remnants of the NEH project now faced with an official ultimatum: either resubmit a revised budget to utilize the remaining funds, identify a new director and producer, and develop a new documentary treatment—no later than December 31st—or else the entire project would be terminated. I telephoned numerous filmmakers across the country each of

whom either demanded exorbitant fees, requested six months to consider the offer, or demanded exorbitant fees, requested six months to consider the offer, or hinted of personal idiosyncracies of a sort quite familiar to me by now.

By October, disconsolate and on the verge of resignation myself, I asked Metropolitan Pittsburgh Public Broadcasting (PBS-affiliate WQED) if they would consider involvement with a project designed to produce a documentary film on Somali history and culture. After he scrutinized the remaining budget and critically examined the previous treatments and assorted scripts that had guided (or misguided) the filmmakers at various times, WQED Vice President David Roland suggested that with a carefully redesigned format the project might still merit production as a shorter documentary film. When I agreed to help reconceptualize the film into a 30-minute documentary, he immediately assigned a producer-director (George Vicas) to assist me. Roland, Vicas, and I conferred in Washington in early December with NEH officials who supported our efforts to save the project before December 31st. Three days later we met in California for exhaustive consultations. I showed them hundreds of slides of Somalia and a comparable number of historical photographs, compressed my knowledge of Somali history and culture, explained the nature of working conditions in Somalia, explained the troubled history of the project, and warned of the skepticism with which Somali officials might justifiably greet this latest attempt to salvage it.

Working with an established television station at least reduced the evasiveness that had characterized the previous "independents." Contractual terms were candidly debated, agreements concluded, and firm deadlines established in a business-like manner that seemed anathema to the previous project personnel. An opportunity still existed to produce an important film given WQED's experience and reputation for making documentaries in difficult locations such as the Amazon, Yukon, and China for the National Geographic Society.

Within two weeks, a new treatment and properly aligned budget were submitted to NEH which approved it a month later. In February 1984, Vicas and I made the final pre-production visit to Somalia where we explained all location elements we expected to film, reviewed in detail the revamped focus of the film, concluded logistical arrangements, and met with Somali officials who accepted our time frame and assigned liaisons to help us. By mid-March, WQED had hired an experienced Dutch film crew. After hectic telegramming and telephoning between Holland, the United States and Somalia to reconfirm all arrangements, Vicas and I met the three-man crew in Frankfurt on March 30th. That same day we flew to Somalia and on March 31st we began three weeks of intense film production.

In twenty-one days, we shot 14,000 feet of film, nearly seven hours worth, including various interviews with Somalis concerned with history and higher education, health, rangeland economy, and women's issues. We filmed poetry recitations at Radio Mogadishu, at the National Academy, in the southern Somalia countryside around campfires, and as part of a dress rehearsal at the National Theater. We were permitted to film inside the Islamic Cooperative Mosque during Friday's communal prayers and shot considerable footage inside schools and at outdoor Arabic classes. We captured a diversity of urban scenes including camel markets, commercial transactions, handicrafts, historical monuments, women in training for national service, patients being treated at Benadir Hospital, women's mobilization activities, and complemented them with considerable aerial footage taken from a helicopter. While filming nomadic encampments amidst a protracted dry season, we were suddenly caught in a blinding dust storm that nearly obliterated the landscape but permitted us to capture dramatically the harsh realities of nomadic life. These assorted visual elements combined with historical interviews, turn-of-the-century newspaper accounts, black and white photographs, original artwork, and animated maps were crafted into several intermediate rough cut versions preliminary to the final cut which should be available by the end of 1984.

It is difficult to summarize in print five years' work that led to the production of a film. The process itself is one which American and African filmmakers together with their respective agencies and supported perhaps should anticipate whenever they consider co-productions to stretch resources and increase the possibility of distribution across boundaries. There remain basic questions about which audience any film about Africa should be directed. In this case, is it a Somali audience? If so, an urban one in Mogadishu, the descendants of Dervish partisans and/or those of his opponents? I cannot comment on "Somali Dervish" but our documentary film is one that Somalis will recognize yet it is also designed for urban and rural American audiences alike.

By November 1984, two films were nearly completed: a two-and-a-half hour feature film in Somali (with English and Arabic subtitles) entitled "Somali Dervish" and an English-language thirty-minute documentary called "The Parching Heat of the Wind." The two complement each other but use divergent structures and treatments. "Somali Dervish" is based on the screenplay I helped to substantiate for historical authenticity and fidelity to Somali culture and colonial history, although

I cannot ascertain whether subsequent modifications occurred during actual production. The shorter documentary film is suitable for public television and university audiences. Films made for television for commercial distribution can complement each other which we hope to achieve in this case.

Both films attempt to show and explain several key themes and principles. First, there is the issue of the role of African languages in films. In 1977, a joint Swiss-French venture won the Academy Award for best foreign film with "Black and White in Color" which some critics contend should not have been designated "African" since its language was French. Our documentary film utilizes expressions, insights, sense of humor, imagery, and pithy phraseology for which Somali poets are so adroit and famous. We show how the Somali language was used to mobilize people, to argue about policy and tactics, and to explain early 20th century Somali life, a cinematic device to forcefully repudiate the racist stereotype perpetuated by Hollywood of African languages as senseless mumbo-jumbo.

Second, the films show that the Dervish anti-colonialist struggle was not some inexplicable phenomenon inspired by a madman. European intrusions obliged Africans to organize efforts to defend themselves from foreigners intent on colonization. Aware that Christian powers had colonized Muslim lands throughout the Middle East and Africa in the last 19th century, Sayyid Muhammad was outraged when he returned to his homeland in 1895 and was confronted by an English naval officer who demanded payment of an "entry tax" to enter his own country. Among his nomadic kinfolk, the Sayyid tauntingly asked them, "if this land is your land why aren't you its government? If you are Muslims why do you submit to infidel overlords?" When the British accused Sayyid Muhammad of stealing a rifle, he responded by saying, "pay us a protective tax." The documentary film succinctly reviews this early history and the subsequent Dervish struggle through original artwork while the feature film uses longer elaborate dramatic reconstructions. The feature film explains that the Somali Dervishes had connections with Muslim peoples in Yemen, Turkey, Egypt and the Middle East and that the Dervishes understood what had occurred in the Sudan involving the Mahdi in the 1880s and 1890s.

Third, it is important to explain the international linkages utilized by colonialist powers to mobilize soldiers and materials to defeat an anti-colonialist movement like the Dervishes. The British expeditionary forces sent to the Horn consisted of Nyasas from Central Africa, Boer militiamen from South Africa, Sikhs from South Asia, and units of Somali collaborators obtained by methods that were seldom closely scrutinized. Since the Somali lands were subjected to multiple colonization—from overseas by France, Italy, and Britain and from overland by the neighboring Abyssinian Empire—we show how such diverse (usually competitive) imperial powers cooperated in their efforts to contain the Dervish resistance which threatened them all.

Fourth, we indicate how the destructive potential of modern weaponry was used experimentally in a colonial context to terrorize and control people. In tracing the origins of nuclear strategy, military historian Lawrence Freedman gives considerable credit to strategists of the 1920s who insisted that the destructive power of aerial bombardments could by itself end a war in a matter of days, thereby enabling a nation that possessed such a capability to deter aggression from any quarter. The archival documentation on the decision to use airplanes in Somalia substantiates that the same assumptions about aerial bombings—its element of surprise, great demoralizing effect, mobility to achieve quick decisive victory, and promise of cost-effectiveness—had persuaded the British Cabinet to test its applicability against an acknowledged "rebel of the Empire," Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan.

The contribution of the airplane in defeating the Somali Dervishes was the sort of success that "strengthened the claims of ambitious airmen for a separate and autonomous service commanding a major share of the military budget," especially in Britain where, according to Freedman, "much of the RAF's confidence in strategic bombing derived from its apparent efficiency in controlling wild tribesmen in Somalia..."²⁰ With the effectiveness of air power confirmed by the Somaliland operations, airplanes were soon used again as "the policeman of the Empire" in Iraq and Mesopotamia.

Finally, we explain the mechanisms and cultural devices that Somalis use to maintain their traditions, in this case poetry and drama. For instance, the documentary film shows nomads as they transmit historical information around a nighttime campfire, while Somali scholars from the National Academy have been filmed with modern recorders and headsets in a language lab transcribing those oral traditions, and latterly how the radio station broadcasts this historical material for education and entertainment.

Primarily in the feature film but less so with the documentary we tried to develop a training component while there was an American-Somali co-production as those of us on the American side tried to assure that skills, techniques, information and documentation essential for filmmaking were shared openly and regularly with our Somali colleagues.

CONCLUSION

African cinema is still at an early stage of development with much to be done before it masters the medium of film to express its own culture and to convey history. In addition to enormous problems of financing and distribution, questions arise of who or what are African film audiences? There are hundreds of African personalities, episodes, and historical processes about which films could be made. As they endeavor to preserve through cinematic and print archives the memories of people whose lives and recollections span several generations, historians and filmmakers should remember the words of Amadou Hampate BA, the Malian sage, that "whenever an old man dies in Africa, a library has burned down."

The effort and skill necessary to recover visual elements and return them to African countries for use by filmmakers, students, and scholars deserves high priority among historians particularly those able to draw on academic and institutional resources abroad. My contributions to the production of the "Somali Dervish" feature film and "The Paraching Heat of the Wind" documentary are merely preliminary hints of what can be attempted and what might be accomplished in Africa to link historical scholarship and diverse visual elements into cinematic formats.

NOTES

- 1 Required reading for a historian considering collaboration on a documentary film is: John Grenville, "The Historian as Film-Maker," in Paul Smith (ed.) The Historian and Film (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 132-41.
- 2 Smith, op. cit., p. 10.
- 3 See also, William Hughes, "Proposal for a Course on Films and History," University Vision, #8 (1972), pp. 9-18.
- 4 Pierre Sorlin, The Film in History, (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1980), p. 208.
- 5 Donald Holden, "Why Profs Can't Write," New York Times, 4 February 1979.
- 6 Smith, op. cit., p. 11.
- 7 Smith, op. cit., p. 126.
- 8 See, for examples: Joseph McBride (ed.), Filmmakers on Filmmaking, (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1983) where Federico Fellini claims that "making a movie is a mathematical operation, like sending a missile to the moon," while Jean Renoir counters that "to talk about method is our profession is childish, because there is no method."
- 9 For comprehensive treatments of language, politics, and history in Somalia, see: Said S. Samatar, Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and, David D. Laitin, Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).
- 10 For general histories of the Dervish Movement, see: I. M. Lewis, Modern History of Somalia (New York: Longman, 1980), chapter four; B. G. Martin, Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), chapter seven; and, Robert Hess, "The Poor Man of God - Muhammad Abdullah Hassan," in Norman Bennett (ed.), Leadership in Eastern Africa (Boston: Boston University Press, 1968), pp. 65-108.
- 11 See, for instance, Jan Vansina, "Towards a History of Lost Corners in the World," Economic History Review, XXXV, #2 (May 1982), pp. 165-78.
- 12 Gwyn Prins, "The End of the Beginning of African History," Social History, IV, #3 (October 1979), p. 495.
- 13 For further discussion see: "Carthage Comes to Life," South, #4 (January 1981), pp. 37-40.
- 14 A thorough review of this subject is contained in the special issue of Screen, vol. 24, #2 (March/April 1983) on "Colonialism, Racism and Representastion."

- 15 Quoted by Frank A. Salamone, "The Methodological Significance of the Lying Informant," Anthropological Quarterly, 50, #3 (July 1977).
- 16 B.W. Andrzejewski, quoted in Basil Davidson, The People's Cause (London: Longman, 1981), p. 47.
- 17 John Grenville warns that "unless the historian is prepared to work with an existing organization dedicated to the production of academic film, the negotiations necessary before he can begin are likely to occupy him for at least a year," Smith, op. cit., p. 137.
- 18 The first two meetings of MOGPAFIS convened in Mogadishu, Somalia in October 1981 and October 1983 respectively. For the proceedings of the first MOGPAFIS, see: Ibrahim M. Awed, Hussein M. Adam, and Lionel Ngakane (eds.), Pan-African Cinema: Which Way Ahead? (Mogadishu: MOGPAFIS Management Committee, 1983).
- 19 This point is made with considerable force in V. G. Kiernan, From Conquest to Collapse: European Empires from 1815-1960 (New York: Pantheon, 1982).
- 20 Lawrence Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 6.