

studi somali

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**LESSONS IN SURVIVAL:
THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
OF SOMALIA**

Thirty Years of Somali Studies

edited by

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THE LINGUISTIC AND ETHNO-CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY OF SOMALI PEOPLE

The Somalis, like other peoples of the world, have different origins, with groups from different areas characterized by different activities. They reached the Horn of Africa at different times and were Camitic hunters and Camitic shepherds (both from the border area between Sudan and Eritrea), Arab traders (from Arabia) and Bantu farmers (mostly from southern East Africa, particularly from present day Kenya and Tanzania). In spite of such varied origins, Somalia has always been described as one of the rare state-nations of black Africa, together with Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana. In other words, in Sub-Saharan Africa there are very few people as compact as Somalis from a linguistic point of view, regarding their uniform somatic features and the large number of cultural aspects they have in common.

In the whole area of the Horn of Africa inhabited by Somali people (Somalia, Somaliland, Ogadenia (Ethiopia), Djibouti and the Northern Frontier District of Kenya) only one language, Somali (of Cushitic origin) is spoken.¹ Of course even this language is divided – as all languages are – into different dialects. And only one religion is professed: Sunni Islam. This contrasts with other African countries, such as Ethiopia, where there are 73 languages spoken and where different groups belong to different religions, or Nigeria where there are over 200 languages.

In analysing various aspects of the Somali oral tradition, there are mainly three factors involved in determining the linguistic and ethno-cultural homogeneity of Somali people: *the migration of Somalis from north to south, the practice of exogamy and the nomadism of camel-herders.*

1. The north to south migration

In the seventh century A.D. Arabs and Persians began arriving on the coast of the Horn of Africa. The contact between these communities and the Somalis was the origin of a new kind of society of Islamic culture, in which the Arab merchants and the Islamized Somalis were considered a sort of *aristocracy*. Such a culture spread from the many coastal cities where the Arabs arrived, both in the north and in the south of Somalia.

Around the twelfth century, the northern Somali shepherds, following intermarriage with Arabs, started to migrate towards the south; this occurred mainly because of the continual scarcity of rain in their territory and as a result of later defeats inflicted on them by the kingdom of Abyssinia and the Adel sultanate in the sixteenth century. This migration continued up to the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, there is mention in the Somali oral tradition of migration always taking place from north towards south and never vice versa, and there is a Somali saying which says “*Soomaalidu waa ab’ogaa iyo abaari-keentey*” (the Somalis are autochthonous and migrants for reasons of famine).

Every migrant group settled in places where integration with the autochthonous community took place. The forms of integration were varied and were determined by the number of the immigrants involved and by their power.

1. When an emigrant group is not able to defend itself on its own, it is forced to “rely upon” or to integrate with the local clan, as the proverb says: “*haddaadan Buur ahayn buur ku tiirsanow*” (if you are not a mountain try to lean on a mountain) and for this reason the group becomes *sheegato*, i.e. someone who declares they belong to a clan which is different from his original one. As a result, such a group is obliged to give up its genealogy and its original clan totally.

2. When a group of immigrants is not able to survive by itself as an independent clan, but needs the territory that belongs to

the autochthonous clan, they become their allies and need to take the name of the indigenous clan although they do not lose their own original genealogy.

3. On the contrary, when the immigrant group is more powerful than the indigenous one, the latter will be sent away or will be *sheegato*.

According to tradition, the Somali nation is represented symbolically by a great family tree and so nearly all Somali people are said to descend from a single founder, the mythical *Hiil*. According to the Somali tradition, there are four great clans or *tol*, which descend from this founder (*Dir*, *Daarood*, *Hawiye* and *Digil-Mirifle*). In turn, each of these is divided into various clans and sub clans, and the segmentation continues and even takes place within a family. Analysing the structure of the *genealogy* and various *sayings* of Somali tradition, we notice that the members of each *tol* are not blood related, as is often thought, but come from various groups that merged into one clan for common interests. In the savannah and on the dry land of the Horn of Africa, blood ties (natural or acquired) contributed to make communities which were fairly united and peaceful in order to assure the production of the means of survival. In addition they guaranteed all members a personal identity, defence from aggression, and observance of the rules of living together.

1.1. The sayings

Various Somali sayings bear witness to the cohesion between the people and at the same time the composite nature of the clan family:

- *Tol waa tolane* (the clan is like something sewn together)
- *Tol waa tog* (the clan family is like a large river made up of the confluence of small streams)
- *Tol waa qobtol*, (the clan is like *qobtol*, i.e. a kind of blanket

made up of pieces of different materials sewn together that is used on the back of animals before loading them with baggage).

- *Reewin kebda aroos wu* (the Raxaweyn family clan is like the mass of vegetable fibre mats that the women of the village collect in order to build a hut for a new bride).

1.2. The genealogy

Family trees show that many clans or sub-clans are made up of various groups that joined together.

1.2.1. Associated groups

In the genealogy, we notice some clans' names through which we can discover the individual members of the groups that formed the clan. Examples include the following clans with the number of associated groups added in brackets:

- *Shanta Aleemo (Digil)* (the 5 of Aleemo)
- *Shan-Gamaas (Tunni, Digil)* (the 5 Gamaas)
- *Ciise (Dir): saddex Ciise iyo saddex Sooraac* (the Isse clan is divided into 3 (native) Isse and the 3 associated ones, i.e. *Sooraac*).
- *Hadama (Mirifle): seddex Olyari iyo seddex Okuri* (Hadame clan is divided into 3 Olyari and 3 Okuri)
- *Todobada Aw Digil* (the 7 clans of Holyman Digil)
- *Lite Aw Edde (Mirifle)* (the 6 clans of holyman Edde in the Mirifle sub-clans)
- *Mirifle: Sagaal iyo Siyeed* (the Mirifle clan is divided into two groups called *Nine* and *Eight*, which means that in the past there were groups made up of 9 and 8 subgroups)
- *Sagaal ilma Samaale* (the 9 sons of *Samaale*, the forfather of most Somali).

1.2.2. Two associated groups, dualism

Another frequent manner in which groups associate is when: two groups join to form a clan. Observing the segmentation of the genealogical tree we notice a frequent phenomenon: a progenitor or ancestor gives birth to only two sons, from whom all the people of the clan or (those of) sub-clans descend. And one wonders, why those ancestors gave birth to only two sons given that at that time there was obviously no system of birth control. In reality those "two sons" represent the ancestors of two different groups that joined together in remote times.

This binary system seems to be represented even in the basic organization present in different spheres of Somali culture, where two different elements combine to make a single whole.

This is shown by linguistic data, in usage which relates not only to a general sphere but also to social and economic areas.

There are words that have opposite meanings, but which become complementary. They are combined in pairs, and they are often alliterative. Some examples are:

a) In the general area:

- *cad* iyo *caano* (meat and milk, the main nutrition of Somali shepherds)
- *biyo* iyo *baad* (water and pasture, the main food of domestic animals)
- *miyi* iyo *magaalo* (the countryside and city)

b) This binary structure is again applied with respect to social organization where:

- *Sab* iyo *Samaale* (Sab and Samaale are considered the two ancestors for nearly all Somalis)
- *May* iyo *Maxaatiri* (dividing Somali society according to the names of the two main dialects)
- *Culmo* iyo *Caamo* (Islamic scholars and illiterate people)

- *Dhalyo* iyo *Dhareerwadaag* (relatives and relatives by marriage)
- *ab'ogaa* iyo *abaarikeentay* (indigenous people and famine-induced immigrants)
- *xidid* and *xigaal* (relatives acquired through wife & relatives).

Incidentally, this binary articulation can also be found in other Cushitic populations who consider themselves the result of a merging of two groups, for example:

- Oromo: *Borana* and *Baraytuma* (the Oromo are divided into two groups: Borana (the native clan) and Baraytuma (the non-native clans))
- Afar: *Asaw Mara* and *Adow Mara* (the brown Mara and the white Mara)
- Beja: *Badawiye* and *Banuucaamir*
- Sidamo: *Side* and *Moldaa*.

c) In the area of genealogy.

If we go back to Somali genealogy, in every Somali clan we find this kind of dualistic division that represents the joining of two groups of people. In some genealogies this phenomenon is noticed in an explicit way, reflected in the names of two different groups, as in the example of the following clans of *Dir* and *Digil-Mirifle*:

- Geledi (Digil): *Dhiig iyo Degaan* (blood and environment)
- Hubeer (Mirifle): *Dhalad iyo Dhaqan* (native and tradition)
- Jiidddu (Digil): *Udub iyo Afaaf* (the pole of the hut and the entrance)
- Hadama: *3 Olyari iyo 3 Okuri*
- Biimaal (Dir): *Udub iyo Afaaf* (the pole of the hut and the entrance)
- Ciie (Dir): *3 Ciise iyo 3 Sooraac* (the 3 Isse and the 3 followers)
- Gadabursi (Dir): *Makadoor iyo Sooraac* (Makador and followers).

Here is a synthesis of the great genealogy tree that represents clan organization in Somali society. The clans and subclans that illustrate the dualism under discussion are highlighted.



The repeated presence of this dualism that can be seen in the whole of the genealogical tree indicates that the migrations and/or the integrations did not occur in just one period, but continued over approximately eight centuries. As a matter of fact in 1903 the British, who at that time were colonizing Kenya, approved a law which prevented Somali people from continuing their immigration to the territory of their colony.

Another fact that confirms the continuity of the migration is provided by the fact that some sub-clans are divided into three groups. Even if each of the three groups has a specific proper name, the first two groups collectively known as *Tolweyne* (big clan) and they are recognized as the first group (the firstborn), while the third group is given the name *Yabadhaale* (the younger son). This means that the people in the *Tolweyne* are themselves made up of two groups that merged (as the result of the migration of one of the two groups involved), and then a third group arrived later and joined with the first two, taking the name *Yibidhaale*. Let us see some examples of this:

- *Abgaal: Tolweyne* (*Harti iyo Wachuudhan*) iyo *Yibidhaale* (*Wacaysle*)
- *Duduble Awraadeen: Tolweyne* (*Xasan iyo Nabiraac*) iyo *Yibidhaale* (*Aadan*)
- *Baadacadde Ciise: Tolweyne* (*Quraanjecel iyo Quuriwaaye*) iyo *Yibidhaale* (*Gacal*)
- *Geledi Subag: Tolweyne* (*Yarow iyo Warantable*) iyo *Yebidhaale* (*Guurile*).

It is quite clear that most of this large genealogical tree does not represent the true blood relationship of all the clans present in it. Its inaccuracy is also shown by the fact that this tree is represented in different ways in different Somali communities. What then is the meaning of this common genealogical tree?

In my opinion, its real meaning is related to the close relationship that exists between all Somali people due to integration caused by continuous migration from north to south and by two other factors – the practice of exogamy and the tradi-

tion of nomadism – which will now be discussed. For this reason, there is no sense in describing Somali communities as ethnic groups or tribes, while it is valid to refer to them as clans or clan families.

2. The practice of exogamy

In the past, according to the traditions of Somali pastoral society, it was a sin for anyone to marry a girl from his own sub-clan. This was comparable to a marriage between brother and sister and was the reason why men had to choose a wife from a different clan. This tradition was still alive in the middle of last century in northern Somalia or Somaliland. Subsequently, there was a campaign launched by religious heads to convince people that this tradition was not part of Islamic law. There is clear evidence of such a tradition:

- a) According to genealogy, there are some groups within various clans that have the names of their mother's (different) clan. Here are some examples:
 - Majeerteen (Darood) have a sub clan called *Bah Dir* (which means this group originally came from offspring whose mother belonged to another clan called *Dir*),
 - Ogaadeen (Daarood): *Bah Xawaadle* (sons of a Xawaadle-Hawiye mother)
 - Cayr (Hawiye): *Bah Aji* (sons of a Daarood/ Dir mother)
 - Dhulbahante (Daarood): *Bah Hawiye* (sons of a Hawiye mother)
 - Gugundhabe (Hawiye): *Bah Abgaal Warsangeli* (sons of a Hawiye mother)
 - Ciise (Dir): *Bah Xarle* (sons of a Daarood mother)
- b) In the Somali language there is the term *heerin/heeran*, now rarely used and known to few people, that refers to girls. The expression *gabdho heerin ah* refers to "a group of girls that leaves the original clan and travels with the aim of finding a husband in a different clan". This tradition was recalled by the elders of the Academy of Arts and Sciences (whose con-

versations about themes in Somali traditional culture were recorded in Mogadishu in the 1980s). The elders remembered that those girls used to go to the house of the chief of the clan saying "*rag iyo Rabbi doon baanu nahay*" (we are looking for husbands and God, i.e. faith". It was then a duty for the head of the clan to look among the members of the clan to find some young man that would marry the girls.

- c) When the conflict between two clans came to an end, girls were often exchanged in marriage to forge a lasting peace. This is testified by the saying "*Meel xinjiri ku daadatay xilo iyo xoolo ayaa lagu bogsiiyaa*" (where bloodshed occurs, it must be healed with marriage and camels (in payment for the bloodshed)).

The tradition of marrying a person from a different clan also exists among other Cushitic people who are related to the Somali people from a linguistic point of view such as the *Oromo*, *Sidamo*, *Iraqw* and *Rendille*. An *Oromo* man cannot marry a woman of his clan if they are not inter-related for at least seven generations.

It is traditionally thought by Cushitic people that children born within exogamic unions are better than those born of parents who are relatives, both in terms of personality and intelligence. For example the *Harro*, who belong to the *Rendille* group, believe that children born from exogamic relations are more active and better equipped for the difficulties of everyday life. Among the southern Somali people there is even the expression "*but who do you think I am? The son of my aunt!*" (intending to mean "I am not stupid!").

3. The nomadism of the camel herders

Most Somali people raised *camels*, *cattle* and *sheep*, although they have always given, and still give, greatest importance to the *camel*. This animal, more than any other domestic animal, represents among other things a means of survival, a symbol of prestige and a means of social relations. But the

shortage of water and pastures rendered the life of the shepherds and their flocks extremely difficult. The camel-herders were therefore forced to move from place to place, thus becoming permanent nomads. The camel-herders never respected territorial borders, going wherever they could to find water and pasture. Unfortunately, this fact, together with the practice of raiding camels, became the main cause for the antagonisms that over time developed between various groups of animal breeders. However, peace was often achieved among them according the usual custom, sealing it with an exchange of girls in marriage. This prevented the continuation of the conflict.

Raids were frequent since the *camel* was considered the most valuable and indispensable thing in the life of the Somali shepherd. This is clearly conveyed by sayings such as "*geel la'aan waa geeri*" (a lack of camels means being dead). For this reason cooperation between camel herders is necessary in pastoral society in order to defend the camels belonging to one group against the raids of another group. Therefore the camel creates strong ties between relatives or clan members (whether they are related by blood or acquired). The following lines by the poet *Cilmi Carab* summarizes this concept:

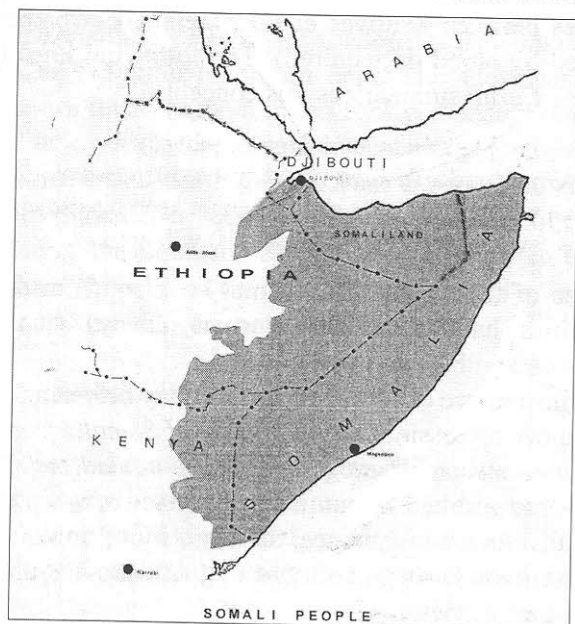
*Xejin waayey geel niman tolkii lagu xurmaynayne
Kol hadday xigtadaadu kugu yartahay kuu xasili waaye
'The man whose clan is not strong, cannot keep his camels
If he has few relatives, they (the camels) will not last.'*

Because of their nomadism, camel-breeders from different communities, have, for better or worse, always been in frequent contact with each other.

In conclusion, we can say that the interplay between the three factors under discussion: *the migration of Somalis from north to south, the custom of exogamy and the nomadism of camel herders* - has resulted in continuous contact between the different clans. As a consequence, the majority of Somali people share a common heritage both from a linguistic and an ethno-cultural point of view.

Furthermore the Somali language can be divided into three main groups. Because of the frequent contact between the communities of nomadic shepherds scattered across the entire Horn of Africa, the homogeneity of their dialects strengthened enormously and they are generally called *Maxaatiry*.

The Somali people in the inter-river zone, even if most of them raise animals (cattle, camels and sheep), do not have to move since in the area of the two rivers there is enough water and pasture; many of them are also sedentary farmers. This kind of life leads to less frequent contact between such agro-pastoral communities while the two rivers create something of a barrier in their contact with nomadic communities. For these reasons we find two groups of dialects there, "*May*" and "*Digil*", which are quite different from each other and unlike the *Maxaatiri* group of dialects. Nonetheless, there has been a certain amount of contact between these communities and the nomads migrating from north to south, and this is shown both by their genealogy and by their sayings. This has also resulted in the presence of common somatic and cultural features.



NOTES

¹ In some very isolated places in the south of Somalia, Swahili dialects are also spoken.

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