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ASPECTS  
OF  
DEVELOPMENT

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## THE SOMALI NOMAD

### Introduction

The development of modern science shows us, notably with data processing, that the knowledge of nature and social phenomena tends towards a mathematical formula meaning to say the increasing rigour and objectivity presiding over the scientific approach in view of grasping reality as a whole and the life of the elements composing it. The application of this method to human sciences, sociology for example, places us in contact with notions of individual, group force, opposition and conflict whose general resultant proves to be closely linked to the internal and external conditions operating at the base and determining the situation, orientation and evolution of a given society.

Present day Somalian society is basically nomad, both through its origin and through its composition to 80%. Its internal situation and its problems faced with the demands of the contemporary world are explained to a great extent by this major characteristic that intellectual understanding must take into consideration. We should like to submit to your reflection certain observations relating to the psychological portrait of the nomad so as to attempt to elucidate certain attitudes, certain behaviours which are also, generally, those of the Somalian community. This is also an initial outline that we hope to enrich by future studies. Our paper will consist of three sections:

- the psychology of the nomad;
- his concept of space and time;
- the changes produced by the revolution of October 1969.

### The Psychology of the Nomad

The psychology of the nomad<sup>I</sup> is characterized by:

- tendency towards a critical mind, more negative than constructive;
- tendency towards temerity;
- an exaggerated sense of pride and liberty with a little megalomania and anarchy;
- impatience and impulsiveness in action and consequently:
- no sense of discipline and a sort of allergy to constraint;
- no modesty; expressions, even justified, such as "you cannot", "you do not know" are often felt as an attempt to lower, to humiliate. They run up against the high idea that the Somalis have of themselves and triggers off a reflex of defence, opposition.

Features which can to a certain extent be considered as qualities, such as courage, soberness, endurance, etc. due to a great extent to the hard necessities of nomad life, somewhat reinforce this "latent resistance", his critical mind and fierce independence.

The question then arises: if these psychological characteristics, it must be said asocial, are really the salient features of the Somali nomads mentality, how do they however succeed in forming a vital community to preserve the existence and dignity of each one? On what basis is this community founded to create solid ties amongst its members enabling them to maintain the life and perennity of the group despite this centrifugal tendency of its component elements?

To put forward that rationality remains a constant, fundamental factor in the Somali mentality may appear contradictory. Nevertheless, this is so: whatever his sense of honour and pride, the Somali is willing to bow before "reason" as long as he proved wrong (Gar-Daro); he accepts the judgement rendered on this basis by the council of 'ancients'. This fidelity, this free submission of each one to reason governs

the relations between the members of the group and, generally speaking, relations between the different tribes. From this point of view there are no prerogatives nor privileges within them, but equality and strict justice between men. Consequently all disputes are solved within the context of procedure and law (the Gar\_iyo\_Xeer) universally recognized by the Somali nomad society: judicial approaches and verdicts are in fact the same for the same cases.

The pacific and dispassionate, contradictory and public, democratic and educative character of the court proceedings should be stressed. The judgement takes place after the following conditions have been fulfilled:

- the adverse parties together with the witnesses called by them or convened by the assembly has been heard;
- the adverse parties and the assembly have approved the summary of the discussions by the rapporteur;
- lastly, the adverse parties have agreed to the composition of the jury who will deliberate apart.

The sentence is characterized, in the eyes of all, by its conformity to reason and truth. It is rendered in this way, accepted and assumed by the disputing parties as such. Any one who rejects it whereas it satisfies these conditions cannot incur a more severe moral condemnation; practically an excommunication. The proverb in fact states that "whoever denies the Gar denies God". Nevertheless, if the losing party considers himself wronged a flaw in the substance or the form, he may appeal, up to twelve times and if necessary bring his case before judges of other tribes. However, it is rare to arrive at this extremity: the trust in the sincerity and wisdom of the 'ancients' ("God, they are accustomed to say at the start of the case, will not pardon partially, but does not punish us for our ignorance!"), the fear of attracting general disapproval, the influence of the tribe which is both responsible, protector and guide of the parties

generally suffice for the term of the judgement to be accepted. As an illustration we should like to give here an example of a verdict and an anecdote.

In his book 'Xeerkii Soomaalidii Hore' (Somali law in former days) Axmad Sheekh Cali Axmad (Buraale) (1977:II) mentions the following case which occurred only some 60 years ago: a young woman always fled from the family home. Her father brought her back for the third time and warned his son-in-law that this was the last. The unfortunate husband could find no other solution than to tie up his untamable wife and suspend her to the roof! Incorrigible, she told him that he would finally detach her and then she would escape. Furious he drew his knife, cut her shins and ironically invited her to leave "Go now!". Obviously she fell down trying to stand up. This was a serious and bloody affair, and the jury met immediately, as was the custom in such cases. It rendered the following admirable sentence:

- the tribe to which the victim belonged would not ask for material or moral reparation of the infirmity inflicted on her;
- the husband could no longer divorce her;
- no more could he take a second wife with her;
- he would have to buy her a mount, given that she was deprived of the use of her limbs;
- he would have to give her special attention and care owing to the inferiority he had caused.

The jury sought first of all to restore as far as possible the dignity of the woman and assure her future; then to preserve the unity of the home. She gave birth to twelve children ...

The anecdote: The father, informed that his son had lost the case inquired:

"Lost, agreed; but did he accept the cogency?"

"Yes."

"Then I recognize my son in him," he concluded with satisfaction.

Otherwise stated the son was in error; by accepting his error, he had recovered his reason, hence become better, whence the contentment of the father.

Reason demands truth which leads to justice; which in turn requires equality between men and democracy as a suitable atmosphere where all the members participate in producing the decision. Because, precisely, according in producing the "judicial decision is the result and synthesis of individual, partial and multiple contributions from all men" (mala rag wa mudacyo afkood).

Per contra, injustice is felt as a caprice, as an irrational movement, an encroachment on the dignity and freedom of others.

The reparatory and not the repressive nature of court action should be observed, together with its role as reconciler tending to re-establish the fraternity temporarily broken. In fact, the culprit normally asks his victim for pardon, which is generally granted. The judgement, which never orders the death sentence, imprisonment or corporal punishment<sup>2</sup> on the contrary finishes with a prayer to obtain unity and understanding of hearts, peace and prosperity, paradise, etc. Lastly, the divine light in order that men take the right way ...

The general consensus as to the Gar and to the Xeer places a regulating control over excessive individual initiatives and also limits the range of their social consequence. It creates a social environment around man where he evolves with the same ease as in nature or pastures his animals. Finally, in this nomad society where there is neither exploitation or individual property (all belonging to the family or to the tribe, the enlarged family) and where everything is in common, both in peace and in war, infringements to the customs and law prove relatively few in number owing to the simplicity

of this way of life and the small size of the group. Finally, it must be recalled that this nomad community has always led an independent existence; that it lived outside colonization and that after the advent of independence it preserved the same distance from the central authority until the literacy campaign initiated in 1974 by the revolution of 21st October 1969 and the reinstallation of the nomads in rural or maritime areas subsequent to the long drought of 1973 - 1975.

These two circumstances integrated nomad society, until then confined in an ancestral existence, into the life of the nation, and at the same time, rediscovered its misery and grandeur.

Today, citydwellers correspond to under 30% of the global population. If we consider that this 'citydweller' himself is still a semi-nomad who, most often, was born and grown up in the countryside before emigrating to the town, it can be of interest to question the way in which this nomad-become-city-dweller has reacted to the unaccustomed and complex mesh of administrative, juridical and political structures, firstly introduced by the colonizer, then adopted and developed by the national authorities? To the supra-individual, abstract and general, all powerful authority of the state? Fundamental research, indispensable and complementary to the government's effort to produce social-economic transformation, remains to be done. This study will not fail to indicate suggestions, if not recommendations which would require suitable translation at political, school and institutional level; this integration taking into account the rationality and democratic spirit, encouraging, by better understanding, an improvement to the behaviour of the Somali versus the authorities and its necessities. We observe today "bewilderment" and dis-orientation of the "nomad citizen" and also difficulty in the government getting the message over. This research would

aid in defining the screens and defining the means of suppressing or at least attenuating them so as to facilitate evolution and progress.

#### His Concept of Space and Time

We should now like to analyze an apparently harmless notion quite unrelated to what we have just stated but which in truth remains closely tied firstly to the culture of this nomad society and secondly to the problems arising from development: i.e. the concept of time and space with the nomad and its implications.

The nomad lives on his herds. These are born, grow up and reproduce all alone. The task of the shepherd is basically limited to watching over them and occasionally giving them some supplementary care. In return, they provide him with milk, meat, skin, transport and sometimes act as currency to purchase certain articles in town such as clothing, sugar, etc.

In short, the nomad gathers the fruits of nature, but does not produce. This is why he has no notion of productivity, which explains the absence of perseverance and patience that we have noted above and hence to a certain extent, this feeling of freedom and touchy pride, not as yet really sobered down. Because productivity assumes not only methodic and continuous action on matter, but also the intelligence of free submission to the necessary constraints of effort.<sup>3</sup> Now the space - time reference of the nomad are revealing in this respect: for example, the day is marked by the sunrise, moment at which the herds are freed from the pen; by the midday rest, the men and beasts rest when the sun is at the zenith and the heat strongest; lastly, by the sunset, moment when everybody returns to the camp to pass the night; and the same everyday. The same applies to the seasons which follow each other and

are repeated from one year to another. In fact, it is a question of a perpetual present time, a time closed onto itself, a circular time without perspective and no longer linear. As for space, it can be said that it has two dimensions, horizontal and flat; it is a depthless space, a graphic space, invented (if one may say so) by the herd followed by the shepherd as and where the pastures are found. Its measurement is as imprecise as that of time; it is a space both circumscribed by the naturally limited movement of the animals and nevertheless indefinite because without any cohesion in its deployment; whence a very broad and hazy notion in which the structure and presence of matter is missing.

This results in important consequences in the historical and cultural, economic, scientific and technological, social-political fields.

#### Historical and cultural

The nomad way of life creates a special tendency to dream owing precisely to the calm, silence and solitude of the shepherd in nature, amongst his animals; this is why the Somali very specially favours the proverb, poetry and song which produce a profound impact on minds. But these are, by definition, cultural forms outside the flow of time, in the intemporal and which draw their charm and power from this fact of outside duration. The national life, the popular spirit is basically maintained and developed through this oral expression where memory plays a primordial part, even though failing. It is in fact significant that the Somali nomad does not relate the events which mark out the course of his existence (birth, marriage, drought, war, etc.) to a fixed temporal reference, to situate them in time as it is done for example in the Western World where historical dating commences from the birth of Christ. A mother, for example,

will most often say that her son is 'one year old', 'two years old', etc., rather than say 'he is born in ....'. The awareness of the succession of facts and their internal liaison confers on history its determinating importance for the national life. It generates the determination of men to act in turn on the course of history and to modify it in the direction of their design. However, the nomad leads an existence whose rhythms are merged with the cosmic cycles. His concept of the world, owing to his innocence, leaves out this decisive significance of history, the progress that it marks from one stage to another, the prospect that it can open as to the future and as to freedom. It is thus impossible to analyze objectively the present day historical situation, still less go back to its causes, if it is true as Hegel stated, that "what has happened is nothing without knowing how"; that is to say, without the intelligence of his dialectic and historical genesis, in the successive developments through which it has gone and progressively reached its present state.

This attitude of mind is a serious obstacle to the understanding of history, and firstly of the history of the nation. It is true that the Somali's interest has been scarcely stimulated in this respect by the rarity of documents, practically inexistent in the national territory, or inaccessible owing to their remoteness (in the former colonial capitals) or the foreign language in which they are drafted, for men who, until recently, were practically illiterate, except for a very small minority who benefited from the possibilities of modern education and who, despite all, remain themselves profoundly impregnated by this traditional culture.

#### Economic

As we have said, the nomad obtains his subsistence from his animals. We have seen that, precisely for this reason, he

has no notion of productivity. Human activity which tends towards the production of goods is based on the minimum working time necessary (but variable according to circumstances) to produce a given value; this reciprocally reveals the valuable nature of time ("time, it is said, is money") whereas space appears as the place of creation. Productive activity covers matter placed so to speak in the heart of space and time, its two ways of existence. It is the direct contact, through work, with matter which reveals the veritable dimension of the space - time factor.

However, the nomad lives to a certain extent outside this matter. He maintains only a mediate relation with it, through his animals. He ignores both this wildcat work, i.e. the natural process, purposeless and unmeasurable, and conscious human work, by which man attempts to insert his action into this vast process to attempt to change the course and quality: his herd looks after both and offers him the fruits of the synthesis which can thus explain his little eagerness for work and his generosity as to time and space.

#### Scientific and technological

However work on matter, apart from time and space, refers to the dual intellectual and technical instrument indispensable to transform it: theoretical understanding and practical manipulation alone give control over it. "Nature is only controlled by obeying it", said Bacon. In other words, matter requires from men that he carries a message (knowledge) and an 'arm' (tool) in order to fulfill his desire, submit itself to his will. Now science (where intelligence decomposes, calculates, spatializes as Bergson would say) is defined precisely as the measurement (and mastery) of this matter and its movement; whereas the technological infrastructure, increasingly complex, appears to tend towards the restoration of a second natural matrix (within the meaning of Aristotle

stating that habit is a "second nature") aiming at compensating for the first in view of reproduction of phenomena as required. Man thus seeks to superpose on the universe, dominated by admirable but blind laws, a world of rational harmony of his own creation and which should progressively assimilate in itself this nature left on its own, as with Freud the ego tends to assimilate the id.

Work-matter-time and space-science and technology are closely tied; their fecundity lies in the unity and continuity of the whole. The nomad appears to be the man who has not yet grasped the first link in this chain. Moreover, other factors are involved to worsen this situation: insufficient food which makes all physical effort exhausting; the religious fatalism which devalorizes the effect of human action; the khat which lowers determination, etc.

#### Social-political

The social organization is the permanent search for an order which, in its rationality, continues and reflects the natural order and also satisfies a human ethical requirement. This regulation, in accordance with the laws of nature and moral logic, of relations between men and with the environment requires in practice a correspondence between the social-economic structure, the juridical architecture and the administrative organization of the community. How then, in view of the mentality we have tried to roughly outline, does the Somali see their complementarity, their interdependence and their reciprocal determination? What idea does he have of his contribution, as a citizen, to the institution and improvement of this rational order in the general interest?

#### The Revolution's Contributions

The revolution of 21st October 1969 introduced important

changes in this respect:

Firstly, something quite new, the reference to science ("scientific socialism": Hantiwadaga Cilmiga ku Dhisan) and to the history of humanity (Taariikhda Beniiadamku soo maray).

Secondly, there is the notion of productivity (Wax soo Saarka), the revalorization of intellectual and manual work (Maskaxdeena iyo Murugeena an Maalo), its practical and collective application (Iska Wax U Qabso: help yourself and God will help you) and the primacy given to the human element.

Third, the adoption of the national language as official language with the fortunate consequences that this has produced:

- a change from oral tradition to writing;
- the practically total elimination of illiteracy;
- the enrichment of the culture and better knowledge of the national history (oral literature, history written, edification of monuments to the glory of heroes, etc.).

Four, the development of the productive apparatus, practically inexistent.

Five, the reconversion of a considerable part of the nomad community, victim of the drought, into farmers and fishermen with the triple aim of saving human lives, enabling the victims to ensure their existence and lastly to contribute thus to the development of the national economy.

Six, the rehabilitation of the status and social role of the women.

### Conclusions

The revolution has attempted to promote in-depth transformations, it has wished to restructure the way of thought and the economic and social organization of the Somali community. These changes have not yet been the subject of any serious

and complete theoretical reflection which would define the historical importance of this experiment, the insufficiencies latent in their internal cohesion together with its limits relative to the level of the development of the society.

### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This description would appear to concern initially the 'town nomads' (superficial modernism and profound traditionalism) but relates naturally to bush nomad, "his contemporary ancestor".
- <sup>2</sup> It is true that nomad way of life neither requires nor allows for the institution of the structures required.
- <sup>3</sup> The celebrated dialectic of the Master and Slave with Hegel will be recalled: the slave is freed from his social condition by a new mastery: that of matter, by work, at the same time as the master ruins himself in idleness where time and space, no longer useful, vanish for him ...

### REFERENCES

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