

The State and its Fragments: Debates on Kinship and the State in Somalia



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Abstract

This article has two primary objectives: a) to introduce the debate about kinship systems and socio-political identity and organization in Somalia. I do this by reviewing an exchange at a British tribunal between two prominent academics in Somali studies: Abdi I. Samatar and I. M. Lewis; b) to reflect on what is at stake in this debate by pointing at some of the potential consequences of the current U.N.-led state-building project in Somalia, which has embraced one side of this debate.

Keywords: Somalia, kinship system, Somali political identity, clanism, state-building, genealogy, colonialism, and anthropology

Introduction

One of the central debates in Somali studies deals with the relationship between Somali kinship systems and socio-political identity and organization. On one side of the debate is what is referred to as the “traditionalist” position, whose main proponent is the well-known, at least within the small field of Somali studies, British social anthropologist I. M. Lewis. In his long career and many publications Lewis has maintained that the enduring principle determining Somali political identity and social organization is the segmentary lineage system based on patrilineal descent. He argues that through genealogical reckoning based on patrilineal descent such socio-political units as the “*diya*-paying group,” “sub-clan,” “clan,” and “clan-family” are established as the organizing social and political units throughout the Somali nation. Though in some of his early writings Lewis was open to the view that Somali genealogy was partly a social and historical construct, it appears that since the 1990s he has upheld a position that stresses the kinship system as the basic and enduring explanatory principle in Somali society.¹ It’s as if Lewis understood the Somali civil war as a validation of the enduring nature of the “clan.”

On the other side of this debate is what is referred to as the “transformationist” position, whose main proponents are geographer Abdi I. Samatar (1992) and American cultural anthropologist Catherine Besteman (1996). The transformationists’ position is that developments during the colonial and post-colonial periods have led to dramatic transformations in Somali society, including the nature of kinship relations, such that it’s impossible to invest any explanatory power with lineages or clans as analytical categories. The transformationists consider various historical developments, including the imposition of European colonial rule on the Somali people, Somalia’s immersion and peripheral position in a global economy, the country’s strategic geographical location which renders it a playground in a global geopolitical game, and

the emergence of an urban political elite as key to understanding Somalia's economic and political realities, including the disintegration of the state in 1991 and the ensuing civil war. The transformationists contend that to utilize lineages and clans as analytical categories is to blind oneself to these complex historical developments and to assume that Somali kinship-based identities exist outside of history.

Needless to say, this short summary doesn't do justice to the arguments of Lewis and Samatar.²

Part I: Debating Somali Identity before a British Court

Turning now to the Lewis-Samatar exchange; I chose to focus on the following exchange for a number of reasons. First, the exchange between Lewis and Samatar clearly demonstrates their respective positions with regards to the question of Somali socio-political identity and organization in a relatively short space. Second, and more significantly, this exchange between two leading academics on Somalia debating Somali kinship systems and political identity in front of a British court illustrates how this debate isn't simply an outdated academic debate, but practically impacts the lives of Somalis today. In short, this case illustrates most poignantly what is at stake in the debate, a point underlined by the fact that Somali identity is being debated at a British tribunal, the former colonial power, with much consequence for Somalis.

The exchanges between Lewis and Samatar are published in an article titled *Debating Somali Identity in a British Tribunal: The Case of the BBC Somali Service*.³ The exchanges took place as part of a British court case having to do with a discrimination lawsuit against the BBC Somali service, a discrimination that was said to have occurred in the process of streamlining the staff at the service in 2000. Out of 200 Somali applicants, 3 were selected for the three long term posts. Some of the

applicants accused the new head of the service, a Somali man, of favoritism because the three successful applicants were young journalists coming from the same genealogical group as the head of the service. Claiming discrimination, the unsuccessful candidates requested from the BBC authorities that the hiring process be investigated for nepotism and discrimination. The claimants argued that the Somali man leading the hiring process “had given undue advantage to the successful candidates by favoring his own genealogical group and that this had resulted in their unfair dismissal because of their clan identity. Further, they contended that this amounted to racial or ethnic discrimination on the basis of clan affiliation” (Abdi 2010: 47). Because the plaintiffs claimed an ethnic/racial motivated prejudice, the tribunal asked expert witnesses to testify whether the case could fall under the purview of the *British Race Relations Act of 1976* (hereafter the *Act*). The claimants called on I. M. Lewis to testify and confirm that Somali genealogical groups could be viewed as distinct ethnic/racial groups, while the defense called on Abdi I. Samatar to argue that Somali genealogical differences couldn’t be equated with ethnic/racial differences as the Act intended. Other than the introduction and conclusion by Samatar, the submissions to the court by the two respective witnesses are reproduced in the article, verbatim. Four submissions are reproduced in the article, two per witness.

The two expert witnesses were asked to testify whether genealogical differences within Somali society could qualify as ethnic/racial differences, thereby justifying the plaintiff’s accusation that the selection of three individuals from the same genealogical group amounted to ethnic/racial discrimination under the Act. As the article points out, according to the Act, a group could be considered to constitute an ethnic/racial group if it had the following characteristics: a common geographical origin and language, a common literature and religion that distinguishes it from neighboring groups, and a history of being an oppressed minority (Abdi 2010: 48-49).

We will begin with a summary of the submissions by Lewis who argues that Somali genealogical groups meet these requirements thereby constituting different ethnic/racial groups and, therefore, the claimants were justified in accusing the head of the BBC Somali service of discrimination. Lewis starts out by underlining his unique qualifications to answer this question as an anthropologist. He writes, genealogy is “a form of social and political organization on which, as a professional Social Anthropologist, I have been specializing for almost fifty years. . . . I find that I am generally regarded internationally as the leading academic authority on Somali issues, and frequently consulted by governments and the media on Somali matters” (2010: 50). Hence, no-one is better positioned to speak on this issue, Lewis implies.

As for Samatar, Lewis questions his qualifications, as a geographer, to speak on this issue: “in my fifty years of university research and teaching I have never encountered a geographer who was expert in the complexities of African systems of kinship and clanship which are, as it were, bread and butter to the professional Social Anthropologist. Having reviewed, either in manuscript or published versions, most of Professor Samatar’s Somali writings, I know of nothing to suggest that he has the technical expertise to master this highly specialized field” (2010: 59). Having thus dismissed Samatar’s professional qualifications as a geographer to speak on the matter of Somali systems of kinship, Lewis asserts that being a Somali also doesn’t qualify Abdi to speak on this issue, “it should perhaps be emphasized, here, that while being a Somali necessarily gives one, direct, personal experience of Somali kinship and clanship, this is not the same as an objective analytical understanding based on systematic anthropological (or sociological) research” (2010: 59-60). Additionally, he adds that being a “Westernized Somali,” Abdi is in any case, distanced from the Somali social reality. Having established that he, as an anthropologist, who has mastered the “highly specialized field” of “African systems of kinship and clanship” is uniquely qualified

to speak on Somali systems of kinship, while, at the same time, dismissing Samatar's credentials and objectivity, Lewis goes on to state his case.

He begins by claiming that Somali political identity is unchanging and fixed at birth, "Somalis receive their fundamental social and political identity at birth through membership of their father's clan" (2010: 50). This is a profound statement by someone who elsewhere defended himself against the charge that lineage political identity as he frames it is an essentializing and ahistorical concept. Regardless, he explains that at an early age a Somali child is taught to trace his/her genealogy exclusively through paternal ancestors up to the ancestors of the "clan-family." A clan-family is a term Lewis coined to refer to the largest genealogical groupings in Somalia. He points out that the Somali people are made up of 5 such clan-families: Dir, Issaq, Darod, Hawiye, and Digil and Rahanweyn. These large genealogical groups, he claims, are treated by Somalis "like species of genus distinctions in nature, and regard them in short as natural divisions with the biological bases expressed in their genealogies" (2010: 61). Furthermore, these genealogies operate as "a source of pride and all members of the clan have a lively sense of clan superiority and distinctiveness and potential hostility toward those who do not share their descent" (52). In addition, these clan-families have specific histories which separate them from other clan-families. Lastly, Lewis maintains that Somali genealogical groups are equivalents of distinct ethnic groups is proved by "the presumption which Somalis manifestly hold, that those who share the same genealogy and belong to the same 'clan' (or 'sub-clan') should support each other at all times, and resort to nepotism utilizing every possible connection for the benefit of their own clansmen, at the expense of members of other clans, in on par with racism and ethnicity elsewhere" (2010: 60).

In sum, according to Lewis, a Somali individual is said to be absorbed in unchanging genealogical loyalty which commits the individual to identify

with a clan-family often constituting of over millions of members spread throughout the Horn of Africa, and in diasporic Somali communities around the world. These clan loyalties played out, Lewis contends, when the Somali Republic fell apart along clan lines. This clanism or politics of genealogy played out despite the assertions of the Somali military socialist regime, Somali nationalists, and Westernized elites that clanism was a thing of the past, he adds. Given his claim that Somali people are separated into genealogical groups with distinct feelings, characteristics, and histories, his conclusion is therefore “any organization which aspires to representative credibility must patiently display a balance of clan-family members which roughly corresponds to that of its public” (53). The violation of this all-important principle should be seen by the tribunal as tantamount to ethnic/racial discrimination, he concludes.

We now turn to Samatar’s two submissions. To begin with, Samatar highlights that his academic credentials as a geographer, and his firsthand knowledge as a native of the country, as well as his mastery of the Somali language and poetry qualify him to speak expertly on the issue of Somali identity. Responding to Lewis’s disparaging remarks about his qualifications, Samatar writes “It is not the first time that Professor Lewis has resorted to name-calling rather than engaging scholars who disagree with his ideas” (2010: 62). He points out that Lewis’s claim that a geographer can’t possibly be expected to be an expert on Somali systems of kinship and genealogy demonstrates that Lewis’s understanding of genealogy is “mechanically deterministic and permits little leeway for human agency and social change.” A position which “implies that one does not need to study the dynamics of a society and its larger context to better understand the shifting nature of politics. For Lewis, genealogy alone is enough” (2010: 63). It’s only under the influence of an old anthropological assumption that Somali political identity and social organization is primarily determined by genealogical reckoning that one can maintain the topic of Somali political identity is outside a

geographer's area of expertise, Samatar notes. Regarding Lewis's assertion that Samatar is a Westernized Somali and by implication removed from the Somali world, Samatar asks the obvious question, "given the fact that Professor Lewis hails from the Western world, would it not also be appropriate to say that his perspective is 'Westernized'" (2010: 64). Having thus defended himself against the charge that he is unqualified to speak on Somali kinship issues, Samatar turns to the issue in front of the tribunal: Do differences within Somali genealogical groups fit the Act's definition of ethnicity/race?

Samatar begins by noting that "genealogical 'groups' (clans) range in size from an extended family to a collection of such groups at the regional and national levels. Thus, the numbers of genealogical groups and sub-groups are contingently defined and not determined a priori" (2010: 55). The existence of genealogical groups, however, doesn't necessarily entail differences along genealogical lines, "the vast majority of the people in the country have same fundamental social, cultural and religious values that defined the nature of traditional Somali identity: Islam, Somali language, genealogy, oral and poetic literature, *xeer* (customary law), and sharing material risks. Collectively, these traits bounded Somali identity" (2010: 55). In fact, genealogical groupings and the cognizance of genealogy has traditionally been one of the unifying features of Somali society and a defining characteristic of Somali culture. Samatar argues that a distinction needs to be made between 'traditional' Somali genealogy and contemporary clanism, "Somali genealogies embedded in that old tradition, which was grounded in inclusive shared values, must not be conflated with the instrumentally induced recent political practice and concept – clanism. This practice was invented by competing elite factions in their struggle to illegitimately privatize public resources, including political power. Clanism is therefore bereft of tradition" (2010: 56). Additionally, and in contradiction to the Act's definition of ethnic/racial groups and Lewis's claim, Somali genealogical groups "do

not have a distinct history that distinguishes it from other Somalis,” and that “each Somali genealogical family lacks its unique cultural tradition, customs, manners, etc.” (2010: 56). In summary, Samatar contends that Somali genealogical groups aren’t equivalents of ethnic/race distinctions as defined by the Act, and the attempt to render them equal dovetails well with the agenda of “sectarian entrepreneurs that profit from un-civic manipulations of normal but benign human differences” (57).

After weighing the testimonies of the two experts and the arguments of the lawyers “the tribunal concluded that Somali clans do not meet the requirements of the RRA” (76). The court, therefore, agreed with Samatar and ruled against the plaintiffs.

Before we get to the significance of this case, let’s take a look at one of the arguments of Lewis: his assertion that African systems of kinship are a highly specialized field which he, as an anthropologist, is uniquely qualified to speak to. This claim that the Somali system of kinship is a highly complex and almost mysterious phenomenon whose workings is completely understood by very few is a claim Lewis has made on other occasions. Particularly when his emphasis on the segmentary lineage system or clan as the defining feature of Somali social organization and political identity was questioned. In the well-known debate⁴ between Lewis and Catherine Besteman, Lewis also questioned Besteman’s understanding of the segmentary lineage system. He wrote, Besteman “follows my terminology but does not fully understand its implications” (1998: 101). What lies behind Lewis’s claim that the segmentary lineage system is a highly complex phenomenon that only few specially trained anthropologists can fully comprehend?

The answer, I submit, is partly due to anthropologists’ aspiration to be the bearer of mysterious and exotic knowledge about non-Western i.e. “primitive” or “simple” societies to which he/she could then expertly

explain and sell to a Western audience. It is the disciplinary market niche of early anthropology to fashion itself as the decipherer of the mysterious and exotic beliefs and practices of the other. It is what one anthropologist referred to as the “savage slot,”⁵ which was anthropology’s object of study in the Western knowledge production division of labor, and whose disappearance due to global transformations provoked existential anxiety among anthropologists. One such transformation was brought about by the process of decolonization in the 1960s, which gave political power and the ability to speak on and about their own histories and society to the previously colonized, particularly the supposedly “primitive” Africans. This essentially meant the disappearance of anthropology’s object of study, the “primitive” or “simple” societies of Africa. To assert that in order to understand Somali social organizations and political identities one need not resort to uncovering the ‘mysterious’ workings of segmentary lineage and ancient blood ties is to rob the old anthropologist of his disciplinary market niche. Perhaps this explains Lewis’s claim that segmentary lineage system is a complex phenomenon which few understand, and his stubborn insistence that it’s *the* key to understanding everything Somali.

One of the arguments which Lewis has refused to accept is that his own emphasis on genealogy and clans as *the* key to understanding Somali society was self-fulfilling in that it was part of a discourse which helped to establish “the clan” as a social reality. Ironically, this case in front of a British court demonstrates that Lewis’s emphasis on kinship doesn’t happen in a vacuum and has consequences, often negative, for Somalis. What was the significance of the court’s decision? What was at stake in this debate? Samatar highlights four potential consequences for Somalis had the tribunal accepted Lewis’s argument. First, it “would have reinforced the notion, present in much of the literature, that genealogy is politics and that a Somali’s political identity is fixed from the day of his or her birth” (2010: 79). Second, an acceptance of Lewis’s argument would have established that Somalis consist of distinct ethnic/racial

groups, which would “have enhanced the credibility of sectarian assertions that Somalia should be divided into clan fiefdoms” institutionalizing lineage identity-based politics (2010: 80).⁶ Third, an outcome in favor of the plaintiffs “would have established clan representation as the foundation criterion for allocating employment opportunities in the Somali world” (2010: 80). This would potentially relegate considerations of merit to a secondary status with negative consequences for public life. Fourth, a ruling in favor of Lewis’s argument “would have sanctioned the notion that Somalis cannot assess one another professionally, even in British institutions such as the BBC, and will always favor individuals from their own genealogical group even when they are unqualified” (2010: 80). This would mean that only non-Somalis are “able to evaluate Somalis’ qualifications, and ‘native’ Somalis would never be able to overcome their ingrained malady” (2010: 81). It’s worth taking a moment to reflect on what it says that a ruling by a British tribunal would have led to such important consequences for the Somali people.

This court case proves that Lewis’s emphasis on clan as the key to understanding Somali society has had a lasting impact because as a member of the colonizing society his categorization had the power to influence the daily practices of the “natives” thereby becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. Lidwien Kapteijns makes this point when she writes “the Lewisian paradigm with its overemphasis on clanship not only has a history of which its unaware but, because of that history, has also contributed to the clan discourse that continues to dominate thinking about Somalia today” (Kapteijns 2004-2011: 3). The potential consequences that Samatar highlighted, had the court agreed with Lewis’s position, testify to the power Lewis’s emphasis on clan exercised and still exercises. With his qualifications as an expert, who, as he pointed out, was constantly consulted by governments, NGOs, IGOs, and media organization, his concepts and framework had the potential to exercise real and far-reaching influence. That Lewis’s act of defining Somali

identity at a British court case could have such a drastic and lasting impact on Somali lives is a testament to the continuing domination of the Somali people by British/European countries long after the end of formal colonial relations. It is also a clear validation, if one was needed, of the argument that, immersed as s/he is in a world of unequal relations, the anthropologist's conceptual framework is both a reflection and an extension of the actual relations of power between the anthropologist's society and the one he/she studies. This leads us to a consideration of a slightly different kind than that which has been the hallmark of academic debate about clan and clanism in Somali studies.

Part II: Historicizing the “Clan”

One of the central critiques of anthropology during the colonial era dealt with anthropology's assumption that the “simple” societies which anthropologists studied were ahistorical and isolated from the rest of the world. This was a convenient assumption for the anthropologist for two reasons. First, the British school of functionalist anthropology, which dominated African anthropology until the 1960s and which influenced Lewis's studies of the Somali people,⁷ was based on the premise that a society constituted a holistic structure with clear boundaries separating it from other societies. The anthropologist could then study the interlinking functional parts that created the whole social structure. A historical approach that problematized the existence of clear boundaries between different social groupings would have seriously questioned structural functionalism as a school of thought. Second, since the so-called simple societies the anthropologist was studying were often colonized by the very society to which the anthropologist belonged, a historical approach would have undermined the “objective” and “scientific” stance which the anthropologist assumed. In fact, it was very often the existence of the colonial system that made the anthropological undertaking feasible thus

framing the anthropologist's inquiry and analytical categories. Anthropology's assumption that the society being studied was isolated and timeless was, therefore, convenient because it enabled the anthropologist to ignore the colonial system in her/his analysis. And by ignoring the colonial system the anthropologist ignored how his/her study was made possible by the conditions created by the colonial system and how the anthropologist's conceptual apparatus were entangled with that colonial system.

This critique of anthropology, which emerged in the 1970s,⁸ wasn't simply accusing anthropology of being the handmaiden of colonialism because many anthropologists from that era were quite critical of the colonial system and sympathetic to the colonized. The critique took anthropology to task for not thinking more theoretically and reflectively about the discipline's emergence in the encounter between a colonizing Europe and the colonized. Particularly, how the emergence of the discipline is conditioned by the unequal relations between Europe and its colonized African and Asiatic societies, and how this impacts anthropological theories. For instance, much of anthropology's theory about the social organization of "simple" or "primitive" societies was partial and biased because of the anthropologist's refusal to include in his/her analysis the colonizing society. To include the colonial apparatus in the analysis of the colonized would have led the anthropologist to critically reflect on her/his positionality, to analyze her/his conceptual categories, categories which the anthropologist often shared with the colonial administrator. Hence, the anthropologist would have realized that the so-called "traditional" African society or African "customary law" or "tribe" or "clan" were categories that either came into existence or were drastically altered in the course of the formation of the colonial administrative system. In other words, the anthropologist would have incorporated the colonizing European society, including himself, in the making of the African scene which he was studying.

Let's take a look at how an approach that incorporates the colonizing European society differs from one that treats the African society in isolation. One of the anthropologists that led the critique of anthropology in the 1970s is the distinguished anthropologist Talal Asad. In a collection of essays put together in honor of Edward Evans-Pritchard titled *Essays in Sudan Ethnography, Presented to Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard*, is included an essay by Asad titled *Political Inequality in the Kababish Tribe*. In this essay Asad is interested in analyzing the type of political inequality the "tribe" constitutes as a structure of domination. To do this Asad undertakes an analysis of the historical formation of "the Kababish tribe" and the current reality of domination that the category of the "tribe" helps to maintain structurally and ideologically. Such a critical analysis of the concept of the tribe incorporated three targets that through mutual confirmation helped to establish and maintain the category of the "tribe:" the colonial administrator, the Kababish, and the anthropologist:

"For the first, 'the tribe' as an administrative convenience represented a unit of authentic interest, regulated but not shaped by the colonial government. For the second, 'the tribe' as an experience of structured inequality appeared as part of a just and natural world of rulers and ruled. For the third, 'the tribe' as a theoretical construct for approaching the problem of political domination was ultimately based on specific assumptions about the nature of man, assumptions which he shared with the colonial administrator to the extent that both participated in a common cultural tradition. The first helped to create, the second to maintain, and the third to validate the structural inequality which was the tribe" (1972: 128).

Prior to the establishment of British colonial administration in Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian regime the Kababish "was the name of a loose confederation of tribes of diverse origin which occupied what is now the north-western region of the Sudan" (1972: 128). The Kababish didn't

have a clear boundary which marked them off or their territory from other groups, “groups appear to have joined and left the confederation at different periods, and migrated from one locality to another” (1972: 128). This fluid nature of tribal identity changed, however, with the imposition of a colonial administration. In establishing control over the Sudan the British created a system of governance known as Native Administration which arranged the Natives into “tribes,” each headed by a representative leader and assigned a specific area as its traditional home. A particular sheikh was recognized by the colonial administration as the leader of the “Kababish tribe” and northern Kordofan was recognized to be its traditional home. In establishing and recognizing the formal and legal authority of a particular sheikh the colonial administration enabled this sheikh to eliminate any alternative source of power. All the important executive and judicial posts were kept within the sheikh’s family, which eventually developed into a privileged lineage. The “Kababish tribe” which came into being through the policies of the colonial regime was thus “necessary to the colonial regime, as the colonial regime became necessary to the tribe” (1972: 130). The anthropologist, or any other academic for that matter, who in his/her analysis failed to examine the historical formation of the structural inequality, which the “tribe” represented, helped to validate a structure that was created by the colonial system.

How does this analysis of the formation of a “tribe” in Sudan help us regarding the debate about “clan” and “clanism” in Somalia? One of the things that is missing from the debate within Somali studies is a historical genealogy of the “clan” or “sub-clan” within Somali society.⁹ In particular, analyses of how developments and transformations during the colonial era changed the nature of kinship relations. The debate in Somali studies often seems to come down to whether or not lineage relations and clan is the defining and enduring feature of Somali socio-political organization. On one side of this debate is the contention that lineage reckoning through patrilineal descent is the basic principle determining

socio-political identity and the mechanism through which such categories as the “clan” and “sub-clan” are constituted. This side contends that the lineage principle has endured throughout Somali history. The argument on the other side is that societal transformations during the colonial and post-colonial periods altered the nature of the traditional clan system making possible the formation of the destructive force of “clanism,” where political entrepreneurs manipulate kinship ties in their competition for political office. The latter position is no doubt the correct one, but it has often been misinterpreted to mean that without the political manipulation of political elites “clan” or “sub-clan” affiliation would be absent at the local level among ordinary Somalis. And, consequently, evidence of the existence of lineage identity and affiliation at the local level has been interpreted as a validation of Lewis’s argument that lineage or clan identity is the enduring and timeless feature of Somali socio-political organization. To say that the category of the tribe or clan was enmeshed in colonial policies and used to categorize groups on the ground in such a way that they might be governed more easily, or that it was used as a convenient category by Western academics doesn’t ipso facto mean that it wasn’t an important local cultural construct. It’s to argue that its utilization by a powerful foreign administration dramatically influenced and altered the pre-colonial usage and significance of the term.

What the above analysis of “the Kababish tribe” by Asad does is to link the existence of “the Kababish tribe” as a natural identity among ordinary “Kababish” to the effects of the colonial elaboration of the Native Administration system which utilized the “tribe” as an administrative category by arranging the Natives into “tribes.” It thus doesn’t assume the existence of “the Kababish tribe” as an identity among ordinary people invalidates its historical formation or transformation in the colonial encounter. In fact, it takes it for granted that such an identity exists among ordinary “Kababish.” What is lacking in Somali studies is a similar analysis that brings together the historical formation of “clan” as a

political identity among the Somalis to its deployment as an administrative category representing a unit of authentic interest by the colonizing powers. There are hints in Lewis's study of the effects that the British use of the "clan" as an administrative category had on the structure of clan authority. For example, he writes that there was no hierarchy of leadership among Somali lineage groups, which British colonial officials could utilize to establish their preferred system of *indirect rule*. Indirect rule needed local or indigenous leaders who could be used as a cost-effective means of establishing and legitimating colonial rule. There were traditional elders and symbolic figure-heads such as *sultan* or *aqil* in northern Somalia, but decisions were collectively made in consultations that were open to all males of a certain age. Lewis, however, points out that British colonial administration found this situation untenable and, therefore, chose a particular person as the *chief* of each *diya*-paying group, thus instituting a hierarchical authority:

"Bewailing the absence of clearly defined local chiefs, and anything remotely resembling the famous West African 'golden stool', the British found it very difficult to introduce their favorite system of indirect rule (the most economical form of colonial management then known). They did, however, eventually (1950) develop the earlier system of salaried 'chiefs' and elders into 'local authorities' with powers to levy local market and slaughter taxes. In principle, each diya-paying group had one salaried local authority, and administration remained primarily in the hands of the expatriate District Commissioners, who also acted as magistrates" (1995: 5).

We can imagine the effect this had on the nature of authority and identity of the *diya*-paying groups. It's also interesting to note that both the British colonial officials and Lewis assumed the *diya*-paying group to be one of the few authentic and coherent units in Somali social organization. Since Lewis tells us that *diya*-paying groups didn't have a recognized leader

prior to the establishment of the position of the chief by the colonial administration, it's not unreasonable to assume that the *diya*-paying group was more fluid and less cohesive than Lewis presents it in his studies. Relatedly, it is reasonable to suspect that since the colonial authorities needed an aggregate unit with authentic interest to rationally administer the colonized, the creation of a hierarchical authority under the figure of the chief was part of a process which led to the establishment of the *diya*-paying group as such a unit. Because Lewis didn't involve the colonial administration in his analysis of Somali kinship systems and socio-political organizations, we don't have a fuller picture of how the administrative categories of the colonial authorities influenced kinship-based socio-political units. Such shortcoming is of course a reflection of the critique which was made of colonial era anthropology. That is, in failing to incorporate the colonial regime in their studies, anthropologists ignored a major feature of the colonized world which they studied.

This brings us to the situation in Somalia today. The "international community" led by the U.N. has undertaken a state-building project in Somalia over the past decade. Influenced perhaps by Lewis's contention that "clans are the most natural building blocks" (1995: 13) in establishing a state in Somalia, the U.N., along with various Somali players, have chosen the "clan" or "clan-family" as the basic unit upon which to establish a state. Not surprisingly, the institutionalization of the clan as the basic unit of political organization has reignited "clan" conflict in various regions of the country and created numerous clan fault-lines. One of the underlying assumptions informing the institutionalization of the clan as the basic building block for state formation is the idea that the previous Somali Republic was undone by clan competition over power at the state level. Thus it's assumed that an equal distribution of power between clans has to be achieved to anchor the new state-building project on a solid footing. How is it then that the institutionalization of the clan which was meant to prevent conflict is proving to be the source of

conflict? Why is the treatment exacerbating the very malady it was meant to heal? Perhaps the fault lies in the diagnosis.

The view that “clan” was the major cause of the previous Somali state’s disintegration, and that the “clan” should therefore be the basic building block in the new state-building project is premised on the fiction that there were and are clearly bounded and readily identifiable “clan” units with their specific interests. In factuality clan identities are much more fluid and interpenetrating. The notion that “clan” is the enduring and stable social unit existing outside of and prior to the contingent historical factors of the day, and therefore, *the* key to understanding and solving Somalia’s myriad problems has blinded many to the political and economic pathologies of Somalia. It’s a seductive over-simplification and reduction of a much more complex reality for purposes of administrative and analytical convenience. Unfortunately, the institutionalization of “clan” under the current state-building project means the institutionalization and politicization of such fiction. Leading, most likely, to the formation of rigid boundaries between politicized clans, where previously such identities either didn’t exist or were fluid. In this sense, the current international-led state-building project and its utilization of “clans” bears some similarities to the colonial project, in so far as both involve the governing of the Somali population through the category of “the clan.” The current situation, therefore, calls for and presents us with an opportunity to move forward the debate about lineages/clans and socio-political organization and identity in Somali society.

Conclusion

I am calling for an analysis of the kind of political and social life the category of the “clan” is being enshrined in this new environment. How is the politicization and institutionalization of kinship identity effecting communal relations and identities in myriad and unexpected ways? What

kind of structure of inequality and domination is being created through the politics of representation based on “clans?” Above all, how is the “international community’s” utilization of “clans” as a convenient administrative category creating a new “clan” reality on the ground in Somalia? As mentioned above, a glaring shortcoming of Lewis’s understanding of the “clan” as a stable principle existing outside of history is that he never finds it necessary to undertake an analysis of the complex historical genealogy and social life of this category. A historical genealogy of the category of the “clan” would no doubt have involved an analysis of its utilization as an administrative category by the colonial administrators, and as an analytical category by academics. A proper understanding of the social life of the category of the “clan” today must also include the U.N.-led state-building project, which views it as the most convenient and “natural” category in setting in place a political process encompassing the entire country. In this sense, the current environment provides an opportunity to undertake an analysis of kinship systems and socio-political identity and organization in Somalia that incorporates external efforts to manage the Somali territory and population. A correction to I. M. Lewis’s blind spot and an opportunity to move the debate about kinship systems and political identity forward.

My argument isn’t that “clans” should not be the basic building blocks of the state-building project (though this is a very logical position to hold for a variety of reasons), nor that the “clan” is simply a product of external governance projects. Rather, I am suggesting that this external governance project, which takes and institutionalizes the “clan” as the basic unit of political representation, is creating a new reality on the ground. One that can be analyzed to move forward the debate about Somali kinship systems and political identity.

Notes

- ¹ As an example of this, see Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red sea Press, Inc., 1994.
- ² For more on the approaches of the respective authors, I direct the reader to these two books: Lewis, I. M. *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961; Samatar, Abdi I. *The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- ³ Abdi I. Samatar, “Debating Somali Identity in a British Tribunal: The Case of the BBC Somali Service,” *Bildhaan: an International Journal of Somali Studies*, Vol. 10 (2010): 36-88.
- ⁴ There was an important exchange between C. Besteman (1996, 1998) and Lewis (1998) in the journal *Cultural Anthropology*. For another critique of Lewis’s emphasis on kinship, see Abdi I. Samatar (1992).
- ⁵ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan. 2003.
- ⁶ The division of the country into clan-based federal regions, which today is well underway, was proposed in 1995 in an EU, EC Somali Unit, and UNDP office for Somalia sponsored document titled “*A Study of Decentralized Political Structures for Somalia: A Menu of Options*.” In this document Lewis writes, “The reality, here, is that traditional Somali society could not be more ‘decentralized’, and remote in terms of political organization from the modern ‘state’. The instability inherent in this uncentralized, segmentary system is reinforced today by the easy access to automatic weapons throughout the country. More generally, *state formation in such uncentralized conditions rarely takes place without some form of external intervention*” (Preface III, emphasis added).
- ⁷ Studies of African kinship systems, particularly the theory of segmentary lineage system, was the defining theoretical contribution of this school, the British school of functionalist anthropology. Lewis’s studies of Somali kinship was an application on the Somali peninsula of the segmentary lineage theory advanced by E. E. Evans-Pritchard and M. Fortes. See, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. London, Oxford University Press, 1940; M. Fortes, *the Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*. London, Oxford University Press, 1945.

⁸ For an influential critique of anthropology from that period is Talal Asad's (ed.) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 1973.

⁹ For an interesting analysis of the formation of a Bantu identity, see Ken Menkhaus, "The Question of Ethnicity in Somali Studies: The Case of Somali Bantu." In *Peace and Milk, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics*, eds., Markus V. Hoehne and Virginia Lulling (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010).

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