

Chapter 2: A Political History of Pre-Colonial Somalia

In which the geography of the Horn of Africa generates different socio-political systems, with a preference for pastoralism. Why Somalis could lay claim to a glorious past—and why they don't. How Somali nomads accommodated Arab and Persian traders, integrated urban communities and benefited from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea trade. Where the little that is known about the 500-year Somali imamate of Ajuraan is explored. Why Somalis returned to clan-based self-governance after the Portuguese disrupted regional trade patterns, leading to long-lasting decline. In which Somalis preferred the autonomy of nomadism or religious community life to submission to the State.

Any understanding of political order in Somalia should take as its starting point pre-colonial Somalia. Since the encounter with the colonial state, Somali politics have perforce been heavily influenced by the foreign state. If there is an element of indigenous political order in Somalia today, that logically derives from the pre-colonial period.

It is often assumed that, before colonialism, Somalis simply lived in clans, and that they had no experience of any political order. A cursory look into Somali history shows that is incorrect. The Somalis experienced different forms of political order, external and internal, even if they mostly retained their nomadic pastoralist ways. Hereafter, I briefly discuss the political history of the Somalis since antiquity, to determine the main features of that history. There may be patterns and trends that are still noticeable in Somali politics today, providing a 'longue durée' perspective¹ on current developments.

The history of Somalia is sketchy. The Somalis didn't write about themselves until the 20th century. The following account is based on the following sources:

- History books by foreign scholars like Lee Cassanelli's "The Shaping of Somali Society. Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600-1900" (1982), I.M. Lewis' "A Modern History of the Somali" (2002) and some fragments of Enrico Cerulli's "Somalia: Scritti vari editi e inediti" (1957-1964)
- Books by Somali scholars such as Mohamed Mukhtar ("Historical Dictionary of Somalia, 2003), Abdirahman Abdullahi Baadiyow ("Making Sense of Somali History" Volumes 1 & 2, 2017), Ali Abdirahman Hersi ("The Arab Factor in Somali History", PhD dissertation, 1977), and Hussein Bulhan ("In Between Three Civilizations Vol 1, Archaeology of Social Amnesia and Triple Heritage of Somalis") as well as academic articles by different writers.
- Books and articles covering regional history, for example that of Ethiopia or the East African Coast.

¹ This term, meaning 'long term', comes from the French 'Annales' school of historiography; it implies we should look beyond the events of history that draw our attention to the long-term structural determinants that shape history: for example, how geographical constraints influence the relations between population groups.

- Chronicles of travellers from pre-colonial and early colonial periods that can be found online.
- Evidence from archaeological studies, notably those by Sada Mire, and the results of genetic mapping exercises.

The primary sources for the literature mentioned above are accounts by travellers from other countries, oral traditions captured in stories and poetry, and the few published archaeological reports. Almost all chronicles that mention the Somali region (not yet called Somalia) until the 16th century were written by Arabs; and since then, by Europeans. This introduces an obvious bias against the pre-Islamic and later pre-colonial native cultures, as when places are graded according to how dark-skinned their inhabitants are.² Since Arab and European chroniclers rarely ventured beyond the coast, inland Somali cultures were only described by hearsay. Luckily, over the past decades many new insights have been gained about Somali history thanks to (mainly) Somali scholars who apply linguistics, genetics and other more modern historiographical methods to this topic. This justifies the present attempt to form a new narrative that focuses on the evolution of political order in Somalia.

I also test the hypotheses introduced in the beginning of Chapter One: Graeber & Wengrow's ideas about the plurality of forms of political order that defies the narrative of 'man's rise to civilization through the state'; and James C. Scott's 'states versus nomads' reading of history. Neither of these general theories was written with Somalia in mind; do they shed light on Somali political history?

A Harsh Environment

Somalis inhabit the lowlands of the Horn of Africa, which stretch between the sea and a line starting at the mouth of the Rift Valley in Djibouti, following the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands and then cutting across the plains of northeast Kenya until the Tana River, reaching the Indian Ocean at the Kenyan-Somali border. Currently, there are an estimated 24-25 million Somalis, living in Somalia (12.5m), Somaliland (3.5m), Djibouti (0.5m), Ethiopian Somali Region (5m) and Kenya (3m)³. In this dissertation, I focus only on Somalia and Somaliland.

The terrain Somalis inhabit is exceptionally dry. It mostly receives insufficient rainfall for growing crops, but there is enough to allow rangeland pastoralism throughout the region. In addition, two rivers in central and south Somalia, the Shabelle and the Juba rivers, bring water from the Ethiopian highlands most of the year, allowing sedentary agriculture along the riverbanks. The area comprised between these rivers is called the intra-riverine area, and mostly supports semi-sedentary lifestyles. There is enough rainfall in parts of this intra-riverine area and in a small area west of Hargeisa, Somaliland, to allow for crop production. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (2013), only 1,6% of Somalia's land area is cultivated (sorghum, black-eyed peas, maize and a variety of other crops), providing about 50% of Somali cereal consumption; the rest is imported. About 69% of the land surface is permanent pasture. The seasonal rivers in northern Somalia only flow immediately after heavy rains (causing flash floods), and their waters are not managed through irrigation projects or dams.

² Al-Hamawi (d. 1228), a Muslim traveller who compiled *Al Mu'jam al-Buldan* (The Dictionary of cities), includes entries for Zeyla', Berbera, Mogadishu, and Merka. He notes that *the inhabitants of Berbera are very dark and speak an unwritten language, but that the inhabitants of Mogadishu are not black*. Mukhtar, Mohamed Haji 2003: "Historical Dictionary of Somalia. New Edition", The Scarecrow Press. p.xxvi

³ Based on a variety of data: Ethiopian and Kenyan national census figures (Ethiopian updated since 2007), UNFPA data for Somalia and Somaliland, local sources for Djibouti. Only estimates can be given in the absence of reliable population counts in Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti.



Figure 3: Geography, clans and historic places in the Somali Horn of Africa (made by author)

The land is generally flat except for a mountain spur (the Golis Mountains) that extends from eastern Ethiopia, along the north coast, all the way to the tip of Puntland, Cape Guardafui. The coastal strip from Somaliland through Puntland and south to near Mogadishu is even drier and hotter than the interior, and for lack of fresh water and heat is mostly unpopulated, save for some port towns and fishing villages. From north of Mogadishu to Kismayo, the proximity of rivers makes the coast more inhabitable; this stretch is called the Benadir Coast.

The Somali territory can be roughly separated into three ecosystems: about 85% consists of semi-arid pastureland that extend west into Ethiopia and southwest into Kenya. Sparse and irregular rainfall means that pastoralists often have to travel long distances to find grazing grounds for their herds. The second ecosystem (roughly 10%) is provided by the Juba and Shabelle river valleys, which vary between floods and low levels, but have sufficient flow to allow for riverine agriculture except in drought periods through low rainfall in eastern Ethiopia's Bale Mountains. The third ecosystem (about 5%) is provided by the coasts. Despite the harsh environmental conditions, fish is plenty and trade with other areas surrounding the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea offers livelihoods to its inhabitants.

Over the past millennia, Somalia, which used to host more game, rivers and forests, has become increasingly dry. Climate change is accelerating this trend, threatening to turn the entire Horn of Africa into a desert⁴.

As a result of this geography, most Somalis are pastoralists. Besides raising livestock, they used to make a living from the caravan trade between coastal towns on the Sea of Berbera and the Ethiopian highlands, and between the Benadir Coast, Kenya's Rift Valley and the Great Lakes region. However, both neighbouring countries developed new transport corridors in the early 20th century (from Djibouti and Mombasa) that bypass Somalia, killing the trade between the Somali coast and the African hinterland. The agricultural communities along the rivers and the coastal populations have historically been integrated into the pastoralist and trading economy. In periods of drought, the mobility of nomadic pastoralists gives them an advantage over sedentary agricultural populations that are comparatively harder hit (this pattern was repeated in the mass starvations of 1991-92 and 2011-2012).

Since the semi-arid pastures of the Horn of Africa cannot support large herds, Somali pastoralism is traditionally conducted by small communities with a few hundred animals at most: sheep, goats and camels. Cattle cannot easily travel great distances through dry lands and is less drought-resistant, but it is found in large numbers among the riverine semi-sedentary communities. Given the irregular distribution of rain, Somali pastoralist communities have a loose relationship with the land, and often converge on the same pastures, and to the same watering holes. More permanent population movements from one area to the next and the recomposition of community ties occur sporadically, especially in times of prolonged drought or due to migrations of other peoples into or out of Somali territories. Although the competition for scarce resources drives conflict, the harsh environment also fosters mutual reliance, rewarding cooperation. This applies not only to relations between pastoral

⁴ UN predictions are that by 2080, in a conservative estimate, most of Somalia's interior will be uninhabitable, and Somalis will mostly live on the coast to survive. Climate projections show that climate related disasters and displacement will increase over the coming years in Somalia, coupled with the projected 3-4 degree rise in temperatures by 2080". Christophe Hodder, United Nations Climate Security and Environmental Advisor to Somalia, July 2021:4. Also, UN OCHA 2021: "Humanitarian Response Plan Somalia 2021" p11: "*Climate-related disasters in Somalia have increased dramatically in recent years, both in number and impact. Somalia faces severe environmental challenges related to deforestation, land degradation, increasing aridity and overgrazing, water scarcity, climate change as well as limited governance that has persisted for decades. Somalia has seen an increase in the frequency and intensity of floods and droughts*".

communities, but also to those between them and sedentary populations. Many of the people living in towns and along the rivers belong to communities that have switched from nomadism to semi-sedentary or fully sedentary lifestyles, and they retain kinship ties with their nomadic cousins.

Thus, the geography of the Somali-inhabited lowlands of the Horn of Africa has conditioned social relations between Somalis, favouring small pastoral communities that either compete or collaborate to confront the harsh environment, and who live in close contact with (semi-)sedentary agriculturalists and townspeople, who are often kin-related to the pastoral communities. The exception to this is formed by Bantu communities settled along the rivers (the rest of the Somalis belong to the Cushitic group). These are a mix of old Bantu populations that moved into East Africa about 1,000 years ago, and descendants of 19th century slaves, bought for agricultural or household labour from East Africa and manumitted during the colonial period. Although they have adapted to Somali culture (language, religion, habits, etc.), they are still treated with scorn by Cushitic Somalis because of their different looks. The small and ancient immigrant communities in the coastal towns (descending from Arabs, Persians, Indians and East Africans) have been more easily integrated because of their strong economic position as traders.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will sketch the historic development of Somali political culture, which is—of course—not static. Today, many Somalis have changed—partially or wholly—to an urban lifestyle. Somali political culture, however, is still strongly conditioned by the environmental factors shaping social relations as sketched above, which have resulted in complex, but strong, clan identities. Culture does not evolve as fast as economic conditions, and the hardship to which Somalis have been subjected over the past decades has reaffirmed the social safety-net function provided by the clan system.

2.1 Evidence of Pre-Islamic Political Orders in the Horn of Africa

The common narrative about Somali origins, still widely accepted in Somalia, claims that the lowlands of the Horn of Africa currently inhabited by Somalis were almost empty and devoid of history until the dawn of Islam. Somali history thus starts when Muslim Arabs landed on the Northern coasts of Somalia, during the 10th and 11th centuries, and intermarried with local girls, spawning the Somali clans. Each of the main clan families (Dir, Isaaq, Darood, Hawiye, Rahanweyn) supposedly has an ancestor of the Quraysh tribe, to which Prophet Muhammad also belonged. The fact that most Somalis can recite all their ancestors leading up to this one—a practice called *abtirso*, and which most young people growing up in Somalia learn by heart—makes this narrative seem very real.

The narrative may be historically inaccurate, but revealing. I will discuss this in detail in the next Chapter. Here it can just be pointed out that *abtirso* may be a practice of ancestor worship,⁵ redirected toward the new religion by postulating as ancestor Prophet Mohammed. At the same time, in this patriarchal social model, the 'heathen' African heritage, while avowedly still 50%, is assigned to the mother and disregarded.

Colonial history took this narrative as a starting point and colonial ethnographers described how the Somali people slowly spread southward.⁶ They trusted the Arab historian and geographer Mas'udi who

⁵ Christopher Ehret points out that *abtirso* is rooted in pre-Islamic Cushitic traditions of ancestor worship. See Ehret 1995: "The Eastern Horn of Africa, 1000 BC to 1400 AD: The Historical Roots".

⁶ E.g. the classic historiography written by 'the dean of Somali Studies' I.M. Lewis, "A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa", 2002, and the works of the Italian scholar of Somalia Enrico Cerulli: "*Somalia. Scritti vari editi e inediti*", 3 volumes, 1957-1964, follow this version of Somali history. Even though many Somali people still follow this narrative, Somali scholars reject it on the base of evidence. See also Eno, Mohamed A, 2005: "The Homogeneity of the Somali People. A Study of the Somali Bantu Ethnic Community".

in the early 10th century described the coastal settlements of East Africa, all the way down to the Tanzanian coast, focusing on their Arab inhabitants as if this region had no pre-Arab history.⁷ According to this 'blank slate' version of Somali history, the entire Somali culture, from livestock rearing to trade, agriculture, craftsmanship and popular culture, derives from the Arabian Peninsula.⁸

This history is contradicted by fact. Linguistic, genetic, and archaeological research, among others, demonstrate that this Arabian genealogy cannot be correct. There is also no evidence for mass migration from the Arabian Peninsula to Somalia, while there is ample evidence of human habitation of a relatively high cultural level in pre-Islamic Somalia.

Proto-History of the Somali people

Hereafter, I summarize some of the salient points of the ancient history of the Somali people, taking into account recent or previously unassimilated discoveries in genetics, linguistics, archaeology and historiography.⁹

About 26,000 years ago, a proto-Somali Cushitic population was living along the northern coast of Somalia and eastern Ethiopia. They spread from there—along the Nile—into Chad, along the North African coast; and into the Arabian Peninsula, and from there into Southern Europe. Evidence is provided by the distribution of a genetic subgroup with the highest concentration in eastern Ethiopia and Somalia.¹⁰ Furthermore, a linguistic study by 'Umar 'Abdallah Mansuur¹¹ provides evidence of the close connections between modern Somali—which, with Oromo, Afar, Borana and languages spoken by smaller groups in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia, forms the Cushitic language group—and some of the languages spoken in the above-mentioned areas, including Amazigh and ancient Chadic and Nilotic languages. Contemporary Somali scholars have also investigated linkages between ancient Egyptian and Somali languages¹², suggesting a common ancestry between the two.

The rock paintings found at Laas Geel and Dhambalin in Somaliland, considered by experts to be 4000 to 5000 years old, are evidence of a high cultural level.¹³ The paintings represent cows, men, dogs, camels,

⁷ Al-Mas'udi's book *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems), published in 947 CE, contains descriptions of towns and their socioeconomic life along the coasts of the Sea of Berbera and the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately the English translation I could find (Mas'udi: "The Meadows of Gold. The Abbasids" edited by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, 2010) is abridged and seems not to contain the chapters on the Horn of Africa.

⁸ Interestingly, an early English ethnographer relates that the Isaaq and Dir considered themselves of Arabian origin, but his own conclusion was that "the Somali are an original unmixed African race", on the basis of language, type and customs. Rigby 1867: "On the Origin of the Somali Race, which Inhabits the North-Eastern Portion of Africa". Given this insight, it may appear that the English colonial administrators were inclined to humouring their Somali subjects rather than follow scientific opinion when studying Somali genealogy.

⁹ This section draws heavily on Bulhan, Hussein 2013: "In Between Three Civilizations Vol 1, Archaeology of Social Amnesia and Triple Heritage of Somalis". Other sources as given.

¹⁰ Cruciani et al 2004: "Phylogeographic analysis of haplogroup E3b (E-M215) Y chromosomes reveals multiple migratory events within and out of Africa", published online in March 2004.

¹¹ Mansuur 2008: "Taariikhda iyo Luqadda Bulshada Soomaaliyeed" (The History and Language of Somali Society).

¹² Notably, Bulhan quotes the research of Mohamed Saeed Mohamed Gees ("The Historical Relationship Between the Ancient Egyptians and Somalis"; unpublished) and Mohamed Hussein Abby (personal communication with Bulhan, 2010). Mansuur (see note above) also explores such etymological similarities.

¹³ Laas Geel was 'discovered' by French archaeologists in 2002. The site of Dhambalin was brought to world attention by the Somali archaeologist Sada Mire in 2008. These are the major sites; there are also other rock

elephants, antelopes, baboons, giraffes and horses. Their highly stylized form, regular composition and the lasting quality of the pigments suggest that those that made them had high and stable levels of technical and artistic skills.

Pastoralism seems to have been present in the Horn of Africa at least since 2500 BCE. The paintings at Laas Geel provide unmistakable evidence of pastoralist activity, and skeletal remains confirm this. According to current knowledge, there are no traces of early agricultural activity in the lowlands of the Horn of Africa; people lived either as fishers and hunter/gatherers, or as pastoralists.



Figure 4: Photo of Laas Geel rock art taken by the author in 2017

Before Islam, Cushitic peoples believed in a supreme sky God, 'Waaq'¹⁴. Between the mortals and Waaq was the world of spirits. Prof. Bulhan investigated the ancient Somali belief system in detail. Ancestors were worshipped, and the dead and unborn were thought to reside in the spirit world. Many of the ancient beliefs are reflected in contemporary Somali language, toponyms and mythology¹⁵, and some pre-Islamic practices persist, notably in the field of medicine/spirit exorcism and astrology/divination, albeit in a very clandestine manner¹⁶ as they are suppressed by both Islam and modern science. The beliefs of the Oromo people, some of whom are still animist and worship Waaq, allow scholars to make some inferences about the beliefs of the ancient Somalis.

paintings from the same period across northern Somaliland, Puntland, and in the region of Dire Dawa, Ethiopia.

¹⁴ Sada Mire: "Divine Fertility" 2020.

¹⁵ See for example this Wikipedia page: [Somali Mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somali_Mythology) (accessed 27 November 2020).

¹⁶ For example, in the Saar healing ceremony, ancient words are used that are unintelligible to modern Somalis, accompanied by unfamiliar drumbeats (personal communication of an educated Somali who witnessed such a healing ceremony in Hargeysa, 2019).

Integration in the Ancient World

The Egyptians not only mention 'Pwenet', the Land of Punt, but also refer to this territory as 'Ta Netjet' or 'Ta Nteru', which translates as 'land of the Gods' or 'land of our ancestral origin'.¹⁷ The northern Somali coast traded with Ancient Egypt: records from 2250 BC show that large quantities of incense and electrum had been imported from 'the land of Punt', while a series of hieroglyphs from 1490 BC mention an expedition of eight ships to the land of Punt ordered by Queen Hatshepsut, which returned with myrrh, frankincense, ebony, ivory, kohl, spices, baboons, dogs and leopard skins. Trade between both countries was recorded until Ramses III (12th C BC). The mentioned merchandise suggests that the land of Punt traded with other countries in Africa.

Queen Hatshepsut's expedition record mentions Queen Ati of Punt. She is even depicted on the walls of Queen Hatshepsut's funerary temple in the Valley of the Kings accompanied by her retinue. This suggests that there was a Somali kingdom on the north coast in 1490 BC, governed by a woman.

In 603 BC, according to Herodotus, the Egyptian sovereign Necho II¹⁸ sent an expedition to circumnavigate Africa, which took three years. The land of Punt is mentioned as part of the 'known world' before the ships venture into the unknown.¹⁹ Later, the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (thought to date from the mid-first century AD²⁰) describes in detail several ports and their trade along the coast of Punt, some of which were identified by scholars as Berbera (named Malao), Hiis (Mundu) and Bosaso (Mosyllon). Cosmas Indicopleustes, who travelled from the Somali north coast to Sri Lanka in the early sixth century CE, depicted Somalia as 'a hub of international trade where the inhabitants actively provide products of their country brought from the interior'²¹.

Prof. Sada Mire has uncovered archaeological evidence of Christian and Jewish populations in Aw Barkhadle, Somaliland²², while a Spanish archaeological team has discovered tombstones at Hiis/Mundu in a South Arabian script current in Yemen in the first millennium BC²³. I have purchased and donated to the Berbera municipality, limestone and sandstone statues reportedly excavated in the mountains near

¹⁷ Not all Egyptologists agree that this refers to Puntland. Some scholars place the land of Punt in Southern Sudan, Ethiopia or Eritrea; however, most agree that it does correspond to the southern shore of the Sea of Berbera, given that the Egyptian sources refer to lengthy sea travels. It has been pointed out that Egyptology suffers a birth defect of racism, as the early Egyptologists and their successors, today, tried to isolate ancient Egypt from black Africa; they considered ancient cultural links between Egypt and black Africa highly unlikely despite the evidence. See Ashton 2017: "Race Theory, Racism and Egyptology".

¹⁸ Necho II is also known as Wehimbre Nekao, the ruler of the Egyptian kingdom from 610 to 595 BCE. In his efforts to defend his kingdom against the Babylonians who defeated his Assyrian allies, he sent a crew to sail from the Red Sea southwards, circumnavigate Africa and reach the Mediterranean. Herodotus recorded this trip a century and a half later.

¹⁹ Herodotus, Histories 4.42; the story is recounted and analysed on www.livius.org

²⁰ See Anonymous: "The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea", translated by Wilfred Schoff in 1912.

²¹ S.M-Shidad Hussein (2021): "Ruined towns in Nugaal: A Forgotten Medieval Civilisation in Interior Somalia"; p251. Shidad Hussein, researcher at the Puntland Development Research Centre in Garowe, quotes McCrindle 2010: "The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk"; p51–52.

²² Mire 2015: "Mapping the Archaeology of Somaliland: Religion, Art, Script, Time, Urbanism, Trade and Empire". Strangely, the Somali authorities, probably worried about the reaction of the religious establishment, are very sensitive about any mention of Christian and Jewish heritage; the latter are referred to as 'Himyarites' to avoid easy recognition, even by Sada Mire. The Himyarites, who ruled from 110 BCE to 525 CE over both coasts of the Bab el Mandab separating East Africa from Yemen, converted to Judaism after 390 CE.

²³ Personal communication by the lead archaeologist Jorge de Torres in 2019.

Berbera²⁴ that, if authentic would point to a higher degree of culture in the pre-Islamic period than assumed.

State formation seems to have started early in the Ethiopian highlands, where agriculture seems to have emerged around 5000 BCE, if not earlier²⁵. Ethiopian tradition speaks of a state since at least Makeda, the Queen of Sheba,²⁶ who reputedly had a child by King Solomon: Menelik, the legendary founder of the Jewish Solomonic Ethiopian dynasty around 1000 BCE. This dynasty was revived in the 13th century, ruling Ethiopia (with hiatuses) until 1974. Archaeological discoveries do not confirm the story of the Ethiopian queen of Sheba, but provide evidence of a kingdom tentatively named D'mt in the period 1000-500 BCE. This period also sees the flourishing of the Sabaean and other cultures in South Arabia, just across the Bab-el Mandab straits. These South Arabian kingdoms had advanced state forms for their age, capable of great public works and accomplished art forms, including written language. They were also seafaring.



Figure 5. Statue of a Somali youth reportedly excavated near Berbera, thought to date to the first centuries CE²⁷. Face about 30 cm long. Photo by author.

Little is known about D'mt; but the Aksumite kingdom that emerged in the same area (today's Tigray and Eritrea) during the first century BCE, and lasted until the 10th century CE, is much better documented. Without going into detail, for our purposes it is sufficient to know that it was a powerful and relatively stable state, which projected its influence throughout the Horn of Africa. We may surmise that Somali pastoralists, already used to trading with ancient Egypt, also traded with the Aksumite Kingdom, ancient Saba and the Himyarites (in today's Yemen). These were all areas with sedentary agriculture and urban cultures. There is thus ample reason to believe that the states vs nomads

²⁴ See Robert Kluijver, 2018: [Mysterious Sculptures from Somaliland](https://robertk.space/) on robertk.space.

²⁵ Ehret 1979: "On the Antiquity of Agriculture in Ethiopia".

²⁶ According to Near-Eastern sources the Queen of Sheba was called Bilqis and came from Yemen, but the Ethiopians claim that she came from Ethiopia and have many stories about her trip to King Solomon, the trip back, and Menelik's later voyage to see his father, whence he returned with the Ark of the Covenant which now is supposedly hidden in a church in Axum. See Hancock 1992: "The Sign and the Seal".

²⁷ If it is a fake, as some specialists assume, it has been made by a skilled forger. I examined it carefully and believe it is authentic, although it may have been 'touched up' to make it more attractive to buyers

dialectics mentioned in Chapter One were played out between the sedentary Ethiopian and Yemeni highlands and the pastoral Somali lowlands, facilitated by sea-faring peoples. The connection of the island of Socotra—at the entrance to the Sea of Berbera—to ancient trade routes from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to the Indus Valley has been attested by the discovery of objects and written traces in Indian, Central Asian and proto-Arabian scripts from the early centuries of the Common Era.²⁸ Socotra lies a short distance away from the Somali coast.

This brief overview of Somali history before the arrival of Islam suggests that northern Somalia (contemporary Somaliland and Puntland) has a long history of contact with civilization; it was integrated through commerce and belief systems into the ancient world with its empires and states. Cultural levels in Northern Somalia may have mirrored those on the other side of the Gulf of Aden. Archaeology in the region is still in its infancy, but is very promising. The area of early civilization seems to have covered most of contemporary Somaliland and Puntland, but as yet no evidence of early cultures in Central or South Somalia has been found, to my knowledge.²⁹

It is striking what a rich cultural historiography Somalia could elaborate for itself, posing as one of the most ancient cultures near what is still considered the origin of the human race, the Rift Valley. Despite research by highly regarded Somali academics, such as those quoted above, this knowledge has not yet changed the narrative of Somali Arab genealogy with its direct connection to the Prophet. One may wonder why Somalis do not seize this opportunity of profiling themselves as part of an ancient civilization, which could give them more 'respectability' among the peoples of this world. However, it should be remembered that the Europeans had no interest in their connection to the classical Mediterranean world until the Renaissance; and even then, the interest in the material remains of that glorious past only was sparked in the 19th century. The Egyptians were not interested in their pyramids and ancient temples until the 20th century, while Chinese authorities and revolutionary vanguards tried to erase their own past in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1973). This reminds us of how “constructed” the history of peoples is, and how the narrative keeps changing. The narrative of Somali origins is likely to change over the coming century.

2.2 Somalia under Arab and Islamic Influence (7th to 16th Century)

Somalis were already monotheistic, which helped their conversion to Islam. They simply replaced their God *Waaq* with Allah, and equated djinn and angels with the spirit world they believed in.³⁰ It also appears that they only gradually converted to Islam. A dynamic map would see Islam present along the Benadir coast from the 7th century onward; next its gradual progression inland along the Shabelle and Juba rivers before spreading to other areas of south and central Somalia from the 13th century onward.

²⁸ Vigano: "Sea Routes and Medieval Wealth. Recent discoveries in Socotra, Hararge and Addis Ababa". The proto-Arabian script find includes the longest extant fragment in Palmyrene.

²⁹ Abdi Kusow presents a compelling narrative based on linguistic, genetic and oral history research suggesting that the Cushitic peoples, including the Somalis and the Afar, descend from a proto-Somali population living in the area now shared between Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya, and that they migrated eastward and northward into the Horn of Africa. See Kusow 1995: "The Somali Origin: Myth or Reality?"; p81-106.

³⁰ Bulhan, H. 2013:174-178. Interestingly, the word *Waaq* (وَاقٍ) appears twice in the Quran (in verses 34 and 37 of Sura Al Ra'd); although it was translated as 'defender', this term is unknown in Arabic, and the manner it is used ('they/you will have no Waaq against Allah') suggests it may refer to the Cushitic divinity, as was noted by several Somali scholars (e.g. Said Samatar, 2002, Hussein Bulhan, 2013). But this is not accepted by most scholars of Islam.

Thereafter, it was widely adopted among pastoralist clans of northern and central Somalia from the 14th to the 16th century, and until the 19th century by remaining pockets of Somali population.³¹

Towns of the Benadir

As we saw above, port towns along the Sea of Berbera and around Cape Guardafui, the eastern-most point of Africa, were integrated into the ancient world's trade between the Far East and the Mediterranean through the Red Sea. Arab geographers called the Somalis of the north coast *Berbers*, and the region they inhabited The Coast of Berbera. The Gulf of Aden was called the Sea of Berbera until the English renamed it, but Somalis still call it so, as I will do in this dissertation.

However, the region south of Puntland was described as terra incognita by early seafarers. When the first Arab geographers travelled down the coast, there were no coastal settlements worth mentioning between Berbera and Mareeg (north of Mogadishu, beginning of the Benadir coast). But southward from there, they found coastal settlements actively trading with each other and their hinterland; they were ruled by kings and nobles,³² but little is known about them.³³ Mogadishu, Merka and Baraawe were part of this network. The settlements south and west of the Juba River may have been Bantu, with belief systems that were probably similar to those of today's Mijikenda people along the Kenyan coast.³⁴ North and east of the Juba River were Cushitic peoples with their own belief system, centred on the God Waaq and ancestor worship, but they were joined from the 7th century onward by communities of Muslims. Swahili culture emerged out of the encounter between Bantu inhabitants and Arab and Persian settlers.³⁵ It is not known what drove a relatively large number of Persians (usually called 'Shirazis') to settle along the East African coast, but by the 10th century they formed important communities in several coastal towns.

The Arabs called this stretch of coast, from the Benadir region to northern Mozambique, the land of Zanj (meaning 'black'). Omanis established trading communities in the Benadir in the 7th century³⁶ and, as early as 700, the Umayyad Caliph sent an expeditionary force to the land of Zanj for collecting taxes; taxation by Muslim caliphs continued at least until the 13th century, as the history of tax revolts illustrates.³⁷ Thus, the southern Somali coast was integrated into the Arab-dominated Indian Ocean trade network. Situated along the routes of East Africa toward the Red Sea/Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and India, it prospered. Travellers marvelled at the stone towns with apparently good government of Mogadishu, Merka and Baraawe. Descriptions of available merchandises include many products from the Somali hinterland.

In the early 14th century, Imam Said al Muqdishawi—who, as his name indicates, hailed from 'Muqdisho', the Somali and Arabic pronunciation of Mogadishu—travelled to Yuan China. At that time giraffes, zebras, other exotic animals, horses and ivory from Somalia were traded against ceramics, spices and muskets from China. The Imam from Mogadishu was most likely an informant of Ibn Battuta,

³¹ This is my own interpretation of the sources I read; I have no scholarly confirmation of this approximate timeline.

³² This period of proto-Swahili history is tentatively termed 'Shungwaya' by Chittick and De Vere Allen.

³³ For a fascinating historical investigation of the Swahili coast see De Vere Allen 1993: "Swahili Origins".

³⁴ De Vere Allen 1993.

³⁵ Kassim, Mohamed M. 1995: "Aspects of the Benadir Cultural History: The Case of the Bravan Ulama".

³⁶ Mukhtar 2003: "Historical Dictionary of Somalia", xxv-xxvi.

³⁷ Mogadishu and the other coastal cities initiated a tax revolt against Caliph Harun al Rashid around 800 CE; it lasted until Caliph Al Mamun sent a large expeditionary force in 829; see Baadiyow, Abdirahman Abdullahi 2017 "Making Sense of Somali History" Vol 1; p52.

whom he met in India.³⁸ The latter in 1331 described Mogadishu as an ‘exceedingly large city’ and very prosperous too, famous for high-quality textile that it exported to Egypt. Mogadishu, according to Ibn Battuta, had a university and several splendid mosques, which had earned it the appellation of ‘Madinat al Islam’—an Islamic centre—by the geographer Ibn Sa’id al-Maghribi in 1286.

Trade was mostly in the hands of Arab merchants. Immigrant communities, nourished by successive waves of migrants from Arabia and Persia, apparently mixed well with the Cushitic (Somali) people living in those areas. There are no records of violent conflicts between local and immigrant communities, and coastal communities were early converts to Islam.³⁹ For a long time, Somali scholars assumed the coastal towns of southern Somalia were established and inhabited mainly by Arabs and Persians until they were overrun by inland pastoralist clans in the 16th century, leading to their brutal decline. But a careful reading of Arab sources, such as that by Abdirahman Hersi,⁴⁰ provides ample evidence of Somali co-habitation in these towns, and suggests that immigrant communities were a minority. However, little (almost nothing) is known about the Cushitic populations who lived along the coast before the arrival of Muslims. Archaeological and other research into Somali history may yet deliver surprises.

In terms of political order, travellers—from the first descriptions (Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, first century CE) to the 19th century—record that each of Somalia’s coastal towns (including those of the North) was ruled by its own elders or chiefs. None of the coastal towns seems to have ever submitted another, although at times they came under the common rule of an external power such as the Sultan of Zanzibar. Moreover, travellers describe a very informal type of rule, sometimes with admiration, but usually with disappointment. Only the Sultanate of Mogadishu had more elaborate forms of governance during certain epochs.

In Mogadishu and Baraawe, the Arab and Persian presence seems to have led to higher levels of administrative development between the 13th and 16th centuries. This is revealed by historical records, and the names of Mogadishu’s ruling families are Arab (Qahtani 1300-1330, Fakhruddin 1330-1450) or Persian (Zuzni 1450-1500). The type of government established by these rulers of Arab and Persian descent was usually a sultanate of a city-state type, integrating local self-governance.

The first hereditary government in Mogadishu, according to local sources, was established in 1330, with the nomination of Fakhruddin by the city’s four-man ruling council (*arba’a rukn*).⁴¹ The powerful Qahtani family, which had governed the city before, retained its position as the provider of judges and prayer leaders until the 19th century.⁴² Why the governing council of Mogadishu decided to establish a hereditary sultanate is not clear.

In Ibn Battuta’s description of Mogadishu, which is supposed to be around 1331 and clashes with the local accounts reproduced above,⁴³ the ruler is said to be a Somali (‘Barbar’) sheikh (religious leader, not secular sultan). He describes the court as highly sophisticated, “more like a Persian court than an Arab

³⁸ Baadiyow, A.A. 2017/1:52-53.

³⁹ A tombstone in Mogadishu dates the death of a Muslim to 101 AH (722 AD).

⁴⁰ Hersi 1977: “The Arab Factor in Somali History”; p107.

⁴¹ Interestingly, extant sources not only specify that, by then, Mogadishu had spent three centuries without hereditary rule, but also that a stranger was nominated (Fakhruddin having recently arrived in Mogadishu) to avoid one of the local clans assuming too much power (Cerruli “Somalia, I” p14-15 quoted by Hersi, A.A. 1977:182).

⁴² Pouwels, 1978: “The Medieval Foundations of East African Islam”; p209.

⁴³ It is widely suspected that Ibn Battuta compiled many of his ‘travel reports’ from hearsay and other accounts (cf Elger 2010: “The Wonders of the Orient”) and as seen above he supposedly met an Imam from Mogadishu in West India, so his description of Mogadishu may actually be a description of the city he heard from this visitor, of a period before the Fakhruddin dynasty.

chieftaincy".⁴⁴ The ruler tightly controls trade revenue, and this is presumably his only source of income. In Ibn Battuta's glowingly positive account of Mogadishu, he specifies that people own many camels and sheep/goats, so undeniably the city had a pastoral (Somali) character, and was not only an implant by Arab and Persian traders and urbanites.

In the early 16th century, the Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa was amazed by Mogadishu's wealth and good government; besides the Sultanate of Mogadishu, he also visited the town of Baraawe, which he says was also impressively built and well-governed by a council of twelve elders, who represented the constituent clans of the city's population.⁴⁵ But with the Portuguese came the decline of Arab Indian Ocean trade, while long spells of drought in those same years undermined agricultural production.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the towns of the Benadir retained some of their status and prosperity. Mogadishu went through another spell of increased prosperity when the Muzaffar dynasty came to power at the close of the 16th century. This Arab dynasty was said to have closer links with Somalis in the hinterland than its predecessors⁴⁷ and drew its wealth from peaceful trade with the inland Ajuraan polity.

Little is known about the other coastal towns,⁴⁸ but from what is known it seems that they were generally ruled by clan coalitions (elders) and that the rise of a more developed state form—the sultanate—in Zeyla' and Mogadishu had at least two prerequisites: a strong position on trade routes stretching from the hinterland to foreign markets; and the presence of an Arab or Persian population capable of building the institutions of government the Sultanate needed to function as a political entity.⁴⁹

Somalis exchanged their livestock, agricultural produce and natural resources against other foodstuffs and consumer items with Arab (and later 'Banyan' Indian) merchants in coastal towns. They were not themselves engaged in trade activities, but did sail and crew on Arab dhows (sailing ships). This may explain why the immigrant Muslim communities could integrate so easily along the Somali coast; they did not represent competition, but only new opportunities for development and enrichment. They brought with them their trade networks that spanned from the Mediterranean to China. The Arabs also developed the trade with the hinterland by connecting it to Asian markets.

Somalis were eager sailors and engaged in exploration and conquest themselves, too. In the 10th century, travellers from the Sultanate of Mogadishu established a trading post in Sofala, Mozambique, which traded with Greater Zimbabwe and the gold fields of the interior.⁵⁰ Somali sailors conquered the Maldives in the late 13th century, converting the population to Islam and establishing the Hilaalee

⁴⁴ Hersi 1977:188.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*:197.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*:188-193.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 197:194.

⁴⁸ Between Zeyla' and Mogadishu there were almost no settlements along the coast according to Hersi 1977:210-212. In the early 16th century, a state seems to have covered the current region of Bari, formally vassal of Adal. But travellers from the 9th to the 13th century are very dismissive about the whole area, describing it as hosting a primitive and war-prone society.

⁴⁹ Hersi 1977:197-198 suggests that the Persians were present in greater numbers along the Benadir coast than the Arab travellers mentioned, drawing on local sources as well as on external accounts, and that this presence may have supported the Ajuraan state, as the Persians were notable for their administrative skills, also in the Arab world. See also Cassanelli 1982:100.

⁵⁰ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sofala>: Portuguese chronicler João de Barros (Dec. I, Lib. 10, Cap. 2 (p. 388 ff.) relates that Mogadishu merchants had long kept Sofala a secret from their Kilwan rivals, who rarely sailed beyond Cape Delgado [Kilwa is a trading town of the Swahili coast in Kenya]. However, when Kilwan traders found out about the riches of Sofala in the 1180s, they nudged out the Mogadishans.

dynasty. When Ibn Battuta reportedly visited the islands in 1346, he was greeted by a ruler named 'Sultan Abd al-Aziz of Mogadishu'. This all suggests that Somalis could have become prominent traders, but that they *chose* not to. One can only surmise a cultural reason, which is not difficult to imagine as, until recently, many human communities looked down on traders and those who seek to enrich themselves.⁵¹

Ajuraan

When one asks a Somali today whether there was a state in Somalia before colonization, most will name Ajuraan, not the Sultanate of Adal (see below), or even that of Mogadishu. This is the state that has most firmly marked itself in the Somali national imagination. This may be mainly so as it lasted so long, from the 13th to the 17th century, and because it was the most expansive, spreading out from the area along and between the Shabelle and Juba rivers to the coast. They left forts and stone towns, and hydraulic works (irrigation channels, cisterns, wells, dams, embankments), whose remains still dot the landscape of south and central Somalia today.

Little is known about Ajuraan, as it did not write its own history and no travel accounts remain. It survives mostly in the form of oral history, some hearsay evidence collected by travellers to the Benadir coast, and in the guise of—almost entirely unexplored—archaeological remains. The following section is thus largely based on oral traditions, many of them collected in the colonial period. We will start with the question why Ajuraan emerged there, in which conditions, and why at that time?

The Juba and Shabelle river valleys were—most probably—populated by agricultural Bantu populations in the first millennium of the Common Era. It appears that the Cushitic population groups were culturally rather predisposed to pastoralism, for reasons that may be related to the better lifestyle of nomads compared to settled peoples, as seen above. It is quite likely that they coexisted with the Bantu settled communities and engaged in barter trade.

There is a tradition (quoted as a fact by Mohamed Mukhtar in his Historical Dictionary of Somalia) that during the Riddah Wars, which broke out in the Arabian Peninsula after the death of Prophet Muhammad (632 CE), a group of Arabian exiles left Oman, settled in the Benadir, and later moved up the waterways into the hinterland. They might have been Kharijites, or one of the other groups who did not agree with a dynastic succession to the Prophet Muhammad, the issue that triggered the Riddah wars. This may be legend, but it is a common feature throughout history that groups of 'heretics' flee areas that are controlled by central religious powers to establish themselves in a place where they can freely practice their own belief. Such areas would have included the Benadir coast that, as we saw, was already being taxed by the Caliph in 700. The lush hinterland of the Benadir coast would have provided such a setting for retreat. Somalis speak of a Tunni Sultanate centred on Baraawe and Qoryoley along the Lower Shabelle, that existed between the 9th and the 13th centuries, but very little is known of it.

Until the end of the 19th century, the inter-riverine area remained a place where many Islamic brotherhoods ('*tariqas*',⁵² or loosely named 'Sufis') established themselves. The arrival of successive waves of Muslim groups would have been accompanied by a gradual conversion to Islam of the local population and the partial sedentarization of Somali pastoralists. Islamic doctrine supposes that, to be a good Muslim, one must live a sedentary lifestyle; nomads lack regular access to mosques, Islamic schools and religious scholars, and are more likely to cling to their own pre-Islamic beliefs, engage in warfare and not submit to religious law (Islam means both 'peace' and 'submission'). In the better

⁵¹ Today, many small shops from Cape Town to Minneapolis are run by Somalis, but this seems to be a fairly recent development, probably linked to the remittance economy that emerged since the 1970s.

⁵² This Arabic word means 'path' or 'way' and is used throughout the Muslim world to denote a Sufi community. See below for more explanation.

documented Somali 19th century, several religious centres were established in the inter-riverine area, usually centred on a shrine, a school and a religious endowment, such as the Uwaysiyya brotherhood (Chapter Four).

I would advance that, from the 7th to the 13th century CE, the penetration of such religious brotherhoods in the inter-riverine area transformed local communities.⁵³ It rendered the pastoralists semi-sedentary,⁵⁴ as many of them would identify with one such religious centre, hoping to benefit from the superior skills and knowledge of the immigrants, or intrigued by the religious life. Arab immigrants transformed local farming practices through their agricultural know-how and water management, creating an economy around the religious endowments (*awqaf*) that accompany Islamic centres. By the 13th century, the Indian Ocean trade had developed to such an extent that the hinterland of the Benadir coast could be profitably integrated. This surge in wealth, alongside the downfall of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258 (which allowed for the expression of more Islamic heterogeneity) created favourable conditions for establishing the Ajuraan state. Ajuraan was, by all accounts, a Somali state; there are no reports of it being led by Arabs or Persians. In the interior, Arabs did not come to rule or make money, but to escape religious persecution.

Although it is sometimes called a kingdom and sometimes an empire, it seems Ajuraan referred to themselves as an imamate, which probably resembled the sultanates of Ifat and Adal (see next) as there is little trace of formal institutionalization.⁵⁵ For example, there was no fixed capital; the Ajuraan ruler would spend several months in each part of his realm and had wives and households in different places. Famously, the ruler had the right to sleep with every newly married woman (*ius primae noctis*).⁵⁶ Sometimes Merka is named as the Ajuraan capital; being a port town close to Mogadishu, it probably had the best facilities for the administration. Other towns where the Ajuraan had a permanent presence were Qelafo (now Kelafo in the Ethiopian Ogaden) and Mareeg (a coastal town in Galgaduud).

The administration busied itself with the taxation of agriculture and trade; the minting of money; the upkeep of an army; the administration of justice; and the organization of forced labour. Territorial rule was indirect through local chieftains, so presumably administrative tasks were mostly outsourced. The obligatory community labour mentioned in oral accounts mostly concerned waterworks, fortifications and agriculture.⁵⁷ The administration would force populations under its control to work for them and generally maintained a very fierce reputation, which may be one reason why no travellers' accounts exist of their state. They were backed up by an efficient communication system; what happened in Baraawe in the morning, was known in the Middle Shabelle at noon.⁵⁸

Besides providing some governance and development, their legitimacy was based on their spiritual pedigree; the ruling Gareen dynasty, originally from the Ogaden, claimed to be descended from an Arab sheikh and a Hawiye woman. They were known to strictly apply sharia. To bring the nomadic Somali and Oromo populations under their control, they built stone wells, some of which are still in use today, regulated access to these water points, and established temporary courts at wells and in markets to

⁵³ This is an extrapolation as yet unsupported by evidence, but not contradicted by any known fact.

⁵⁴ Baadiyow 2017:187 Recovering the Somali State, quoting Laitin & Samatar "Nation in Search of a State", 1987.

⁵⁵ In the following, I base myself on Cassanelli 1982:87ff, Hersi 1977 and Baadiyow 2017.

⁵⁶ Lee Cassanelli notes (1982:102) that clan marriages used to be endogamous and that the 'invention' of exogamy allowed the Ajuraan rulers to consolidate their rule; possibly, exogamy only became widely practised after the Ajuraan.

⁵⁷ Cassanelli 1982:103.

⁵⁸ Hersi 1977:195. He bases himself on oral history sources.

settle conflicts between clans. The *qadis* (Islamic judges) seem to have mostly been drawn from 'holy' Arab families, as along the Benadir coast, instead of being political appointees.⁵⁹

The Gareen were allied to the Muzaffar dynasty that ruled Mogadishu in the 16th and early 17th centuries, an alliance that was profitable to both parties. They also had good relations with the inhabitants of Baraawe who, while formally incorporated into the Ajuraan state, enjoyed considerable autonomy according to travellers. Ajuraan provided the cotton that Mogadishu weavers processed; cloth from Mogadishu seems to have been highly appreciated from Malacca and China to Syria.

The rulers of Ajuraan were also involved directly in the Indian Ocean, albeit as Islamic warriors and conquerors, not as traders. It were sailors from Ajuraan who conquered the Maldives and established the Hilalee dynasty there at the end of the 13th Century. They successfully ward off the Oromo invasions that started in the 16th century, and resisted Portugal's efforts to conquer the Benadir coast between 1500 and 1670. Both victories, framed as Islamic wars (jihad) against unbelievers (the Oromo were called Gaal Madow, the black unbelievers), alongside Ahmed Gran's conquest of the Abyssinian empire (see next), imprinted themselves deeply in the Somali national conscious, as stories, poems and sayings.

Ajuraan went into decline at the same time as the rest of the Horn of Africa, but the internal factors of decline seem to have weighed more than in the case of the coastal settlements or Adal. Indeed, local lore recounts how cruel the Gareen rulers and their lieutenants became, and deviated from Islam: their sexual predation and taxation became unbearable.⁶⁰ Finally, they were overthrown by the Hawiye Abgal clan in the mid-17th century, other clans joining the rebellion. From the ruins of Ajuraan the Geledi Sultanate emerged, but it never rivalled Ajuraan in strength.

When defining Ajuraan, the following characteristics emerge:

- Strict autocratic but indirect rule, leaving intact local governance structures (including deliberative ones such as in Baraawe), but obliging populations to provide forced labour and warriors.
- Use of force rather than diplomacy to submit dissent and enemies. Military success, especially Islamic, contributed to early legitimacy; later they became despotic and brutal.
- Legitimacy mainly derived through sharia and piety, and effective application of sharia-based justice to settle conflicts among the population.
- Itinerant centre of government, avoiding centralization in one spot and limiting court size. Effective communication systems to complement the lack of a political centre.
- Economy based on pastoral and agricultural production and trade, and pragmatic relations with neighbouring sultanates and their trade communities, rather than trying to take them over.
- Elevated levels of imposition (rules and taxation), occasionally so high they lead to revolt.

Although present-day knowledge may be insufficient to extract such clearly defined characteristics of Ajuraan, this is the perception today of Somalis, and thus it is at least valid in terms of the *image of the state*. This image today is that of an initially successful and glorious kingdom that, over time, degenerated into a brutal, unjust regime.

Curiously, this is strikingly similar to the basic characteristics of Al Shabaab rule, as we shall see in Chapter Ten. In addition, the boundaries of Al Shabaab's current area of control and influence quite closely follow those of Ajuraan.

⁵⁹ Today this phenomenon still exists: lineages of 'spiritual men' that stand outside the clan system and are welcome everywhere; they claim to be of Arab descent. Their reputation is based on their education and capacity to provide spiritual services.

⁶⁰ Cassanelli 1982:94.

Northern Sultanates

In the fourth century, the Aksumite Kingdom in what is now Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, as well as western Yemen, adopted Christianity, but, from the 7th century onward, Somalis progressively converted to Islam. Religious conflict, however, only began after many centuries of coexistence. Arab traders, starting their expansion from the port of Zeyla' inland in the eighth century, established sultanates in the eastern foothills of the Ethiopian highlands.⁶¹ These were inhabited by the—now extinct—Harla people, probably of Cushitic origin and the ancestors of the Harari people who today inhabit the same area. The Arabs seem not to have been concerned with religious proselytism, but sought to profit from the caravan trade that extended from Zeyla' to the Ethiopian highlands, and through the Ogaden to Central Africa, thus connecting a vast portion of Africa to the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region. These traders were welcomed by the Ethiopians, who needed this connection to the rest of the world. Religious conflict began only in the 13th century, when the newly established Solomonic Christian dynasties in the southeastern Ethiopian highlands decided to tax the Sultanates.

Large stone towns were built in this period throughout the northern and western parts of the Horn of Africa. According to Sada Mire, stone towns were already a feature of pre-Islamic Northern Somalia,⁶² but there may have been a hiatus in urban settlement between, roughly, the sixth and the thirteenth centuries. This corresponds to the decline of the South Arabian and Aksumite empires in the sixth century, and the rise of the Ethiopian Kingdom in the 13th century. A British expedition in the 1930s uncovered the ruins of ten known and eleven new stone towns in the area between Zeyla' and Harar, which the lead explorer dated to the 12th-16th centuries.⁶³ Recently published research indicates there were towns of importance also in the Nugaal plain of inland northeast Somalia (currently Puntland). Three urban centres have been partially explored by Puntland archaeologists east of Garowe, who tentatively date them to the 13th to 16th centuries.⁶⁴

Zeyla' was the main emporium for the Ethiopian highlands in this period. The town became so important that its name was used for referring to north-western Somalia and eastern Ethiopia, and occasionally even for the entire Horn of Africa.⁶⁵ Zeyla' was probably the capital of the Sultanate of Ifat (late 13th – early 15th centuries) and then the capital of the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577).⁶⁶ As to Harar, it had become an Islamic town either in the late 10th century (according to local lore) or at the latest in the 13th century (according to available evidence). Its status as one of the holy cities of Islam—as a place of learning and propagation—dates at least to the time of the Ifat and Adal sultanates. Although situated in territories used as pasture by Somalis, sources agree that the towns of these sultanates were governed by Arabs and other Muslims, and inhabited by local settled populations such as the Harlas, and later the Hararis. The role of the Somalis was to deliver meat and dairy products, protection for caravans and

⁶¹ Hersi 1977:199 names the Mudzumi dynasty as the rulers of that time.

⁶² Mire 2015: "Mapping the Archaeology of Somaliland"; p128.

⁶³ Curle 1937: "The Ruined Towns of Somaliland".

⁶⁴ S.M-Shidad Hussein 2021: "Ruined towns in Nugaal: A Forgotten Medieval Civilisation in Interior Somalia"; p257-58. He believes these towns may be linked to inland Somali towns mentioned by Al Idrisi in the 12th and Ibn Said in the 13th centuries.

⁶⁵ The Egyptian Mamluk historian Al Maqrizi wrote in the early 1400s that "*the length of the land of Zaila' is by land as well as by sea about two months journey, and its width is more than two months (...) It is divided into seven kingdoms, viz Awfat [Ifat], Dawaro, Arabini, Hadya, Sharkha, Bali and Dara*".

⁶⁶ Other historians consider that the Sultanates of Ifat and Adal may have had other capitals, such as Dakkar (close to Harar) or Aussa (in the Afar country) or even in eastern Shewa.

troops when war erupted; unlike the Somalis in the Benadir, they rarely seem to have been part of urban life.⁶⁷

The Arab sultanates were politically and economically dominated by Ethiopia in the 13th-15th centuries. They rivalled with each other to gain the favour of Ethiopian commerce, and the Ethiopian king reportedly intervened in succession struggles to appoint the ruler most amenable to his interests.⁶⁸ Extended periods of profitable cooperation would sometimes be interrupted by rebellions against Ethiopian taxation.⁶⁹ The Sultan of Ifat proclaimed the first jihad in 1376, but the decisive one was proclaimed by Ahmed Gurey from the Adal Sultanate in 1529. Ahmed Gurey (or Gragn as he is called by the Ethiopians, or Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi as the Arabs called him) was probably the son of a local Harari chieftain who rose in the local military. He ransacked the Ethiopian highlands, including the capital Barara and the holy town of Axum, and nearly destroyed the Solomonic dynasty in a long campaign from 1531 until his death in 1543. Ethiopia was saved *in extremis* by Portuguese musketeers. Ahmed Gurey was assisted by Ottoman musketeers and Arabian soldiers after 1540,⁷⁰ turning the Muslim invasion of Christian Ethiopia into an extension of Mediterranean rivalries. After the death in battle of Ahmed Gurey, his widow attempted to rekindle a jihad, but it ended in the capture of the Adal Sultanate by the Ethiopian king in 1557.

Somali pastoralists, in contrast to local settled populations, may have long remained relatively heathen and untouched by Arab culture, as they interacted only marginally with urban Arab communities. This changed during Ahmed Gurey's jihad; most of his troops seem to have been Somali, drawn from all areas of Northern Somalia and the Ogaden. Their participation in this effort, under a non-Somali leader, supported by the Ottomans, and alongside other Arab and non-Arab Muslim troops, certainly strengthened the Muslim identity among Somali pastoralists.⁷¹

In terms of the states vs nomads framework, the participation of Somalis in the destruction of the historic Ethiopian state seems to be explained by Clastres' 'Machine de Guerre' theory rather than by Scott's 'Golden Age' of mutual profit between states and nomads. The Arab intermediaries plucked the fruit of the caravan trade, while Somalis mostly provided ancillary services.

The Arab sultanates were less institutionalized than the Ethiopian state. The latter resembled Medieval European states with a rules-based order, in that the Orthodox church sanctioned the King's rule and his laws. The Muslim sultanates did not enjoy a similar sanction, as both qadi (religious judge) and sultan (ruler) kept their sphere of autonomy. There is no mention of institutions in Muslim sultanates such as Adal; however, chroniclers recount chaotic succession struggles.⁷² In terms of Max Weber's ideal-types of political legitimation, the Ethiopian state's authority was based on tradition, providing stability, while the Arab sultanates were led charismatically, allowing them to accomplish feats like Ahmed Gurey's conquest of Ethiopia, but providing little stability.

As to the Somali pastoralists, they seem to have retained their structures of clan self-governance. Chroniclers of that period describe how each clan was ruled by an advisory council consisting of all adult males.⁷³ There were no terms denoting hierarchy. There seems to have been no social differentiation based on status among Somali pastoralists until at least the mid-16th century (when chronicles ceased

⁶⁷ Hersi 1977.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*:201 quoting Al 'Umari.

⁶⁹ Curle 1937:325 quoting Marius Saineano.

⁷⁰ Cassanelli 1982.

⁷¹ Hersi 1977:213.

⁷² This is mentioned by several chroniclers of that age as a weakness that undercut the strength of the Muslim sultanates. See Hersi 1977 and Cassanelli 1982.

to be written). The first record of such hierarchy dates from the 19th century. Somali clans applied *xeer*, their social contract (see next Chapter), but to deal with the Arab towns and sultanates, and as part of their Muslim identity, they also accepted sharia. This double legal basis continues to exist among Somali pastoralists today. While Somalis adapted to Arab and Islamic culture, the Ethiopian state and church remained the hostile 'Other' for them.

When the Arab sultanates disappeared, the towns were abandoned (except those along the coast).⁷⁴ There are no reports of Ethiopian highlanders establishing trade activities anywhere in Somalia, or indeed elsewhere in the region. Although they met and traded in places like Harar, Somalis and Ethiopians interfered little in each other's politics after the Ethiopian-Muslim wars. Somali nomads did not raid the Ethiopian highlands, while Ethiopians only started exerting control over Somali-inhabited lands at the end of the 19th century, when King Menelik II conquered Harar. Neither Somalis nor Ethiopian highlanders sought to perpetuate the mutually beneficent economic relations after the departure of the Arabs, who in retrospect seem to have been necessary intermediaries.⁷⁵

⁷³ Hersi 1977 quoting Al 'Umari and other sources, p193ff.

⁷⁴ Curle 1937.

⁷⁵ In Richard Burton's 1856 account of his travels between the Somali coast and Harar, he described how far apart the pastoral Somali and the urban Harari culture were. Harar was then not yet part of Ethiopia and had been an independent town for at least 600 years. Trade may have been discouraged by this cultural chasm. Burton 1856: "First Footsteps in East Africa or An Exploration of Harar".

2.3 Somalia Marginalized (16th to 19th Century)

Decline and Reversal to Clan Self-Governance

The arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century was a catastrophe for Somalia. The Portuguese wilfully disrupted the Arab Indian Ocean trade. Their expansion into the Indian Ocean was a continuation of the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula, which was completed in 1492 with the fall of *Al Andalus*.⁷⁶ Conversion to Christianity was a tool to submit and ally populations, and a way to justify imperial actions at home, but establishing a monopoly over the lucrative Indian Ocean spice trade was the main Portuguese objective.

The Portuguese established a system of passes: Muslim ships that sailed without them were looted and the sailors often killed.⁷⁷ The Portuguese also imposed taxes on all produce entering or leaving African and Arab ports.⁷⁸ Hindu (Gujarati) merchants, who allied with the Portuguese against the Arabs, soon became dominant all over East Africa, establishing trading posts along the coast. They built and owned most of the dhows. In East Africa the Gujaratis and other South Asians were known as 'Banyan'.

Upon his return from India in 1499, Vasco Da Gama bombarded Mogadishu, apparently without provocation.⁷⁹ The Portuguese destroyed Baraawe, renowned for centuries as a place of Islamic scholarship and regional trade, in 1506,⁸⁰ Zeyla' in 1517 and Berbera in 1518, because they would not submit to Portuguese rule. Portugal attempted to submit the Benadir coastal towns a few more times, before it was replaced in the region by Oman. In 1671, Mogadishu supported Oman against the Portuguese, leading to their definitive departure from Somali waters.

However, the major long-term effect for Somalia was its marginalization on global trade routes. The Portuguese crossed the ocean directly and Somalia became part of only a regional trade network, extending from Mozambique to the Persian Gulf. Omanis controlled this network, first from Muscat and later from Zanzibar. Somalia remained a backwater on global trade routes until 1869, when the Suez Canal opened.

While this catastrophe unfolded on the seas, mass migrations affected Somalis inland. The Oromo people, who lived to the west and southwest of the Somalis, started an east- and northward migration. They were stopped by the Ajuraan, but their migrations provoked large-scale movements of Somali clans to new areas. Darood moved into Hawiye areas, Hawiye clans moved into the Ajuraan state and later took over Mogadishu, while some Dir populations from north-western Somalia sought refuge along the Banadir coast and its hinterland. Somali oral history recounts how many clans were split and displaced by these migrations.

The Oromo also invaded the southern Ethiopian highlands and occupied the Bale mountains and the areas surrounding Harar. Ethiopia and the Muslim sultanates had exhausted each other in warfare, and they both fell easily. Ethiopia became isolated and, like Somalia, went into a long recession. The little remaining Ethiopian trade with the rest of the world now went through Red Sea ports controlled by the

⁷⁶ King Manuel of Portugal told Dom Francisco de Almeida, his first viceroy in India (1505-1509), "to seize and enslave all Muslim merchants at Sofala, but not to do any harm to the local negroes" (Hersi 1977:217, quoting C.R. Boxer 1963 "Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire" p41). Dom Francisco had participated in the expulsion of the last Moors from Granada in 1492.

⁷⁷ Hersi describes a reign of terror in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*:218 quoting Boxer.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*:217.

⁸⁰ "Great cruelty was reported" Hersi 1977:222.

Ottomans. Zeyla' and Berbera didn't recover; in 1670 they were incorporated as outposts into the Ottoman empire, from where they continued to benefit marginally from the caravan trade through Harar, but practically nothing was heard from Northern Somalia until the 19th century.

The Benadir coast resisted a little longer, in part because of internal trade between its towns and the hinterland. By the late 17th century, however, the curtain of history fell on this part of Somalia too. It is remarkable how little mention Somalia receives in any of the available sources from the mid-16th century until the late colonial 'scramble for Africa'.⁸¹ The areas that today are Somaliland, Puntland, Mudug and the Ogaden reverted entirely to clan self-governance, into the atemporal state that European explorers discovered when they arrived on the Somali coasts in the second half of the 19th century.

While north and west Somalia disappeared from the historical record and the coastal cities were in continuous decline, the intra-riverine area became politically fragmented after the fall of Ajuraan. The Geledi sultanate that emerged out of the ruins of Ajuraan in 1750 was much less powerful than its predecessor, and its power did not extend much beyond the Lower Shabelle region around its capital Afgooye. Several theocratic city-states⁸² emerged in Luuq (on the Upper Juba), Sarmaan (south of Hudur), Mareerey (Lower Shabelle) and Baardheere (upper to middle Juba) and retained their spiritual importance until the late 19th or early 20th centuries. The spiritual leaders usually combined religious scholarship and lineage prestige. They fulfilled an important function for the Rahanweyn people, but not—it seems—for other Somali clan families. Thus, the Somalia that was encountered by European colonizers in the 19th century was but a shadow of its former self. During the two- to three-century interval even the memory of its own past had largely faded from Somali national consciousness; moreover, it was politically split along clan lines.

The Emergence of Clan-States

The first mention of a Somali clan name that survives today comes from Al-Idrisi, a Muslim geographer, who in 1154 reported that there were Hawiye settlements on the Benadir coast;⁸³ he differentiates them from the Benadir towns that he visited, where Arabs (and Persians) played a dominant political role, but does not describe any Hawiye settlement. Darood and Isaaq clans are also mentioned in Arab chronicles of the jihad against the Ethiopian state.⁸⁴

It may be wondered whether the first purely Somali polity, Ajuraan, was based on clan. Cassanelli argues that the core of Ajuraan consisted of Hawiye clans, and that they formed a 'pastoral aristocracy' over the semi-settled Rahanweyn people of the intra-riverine area. This was based on four sources of power: the control of wells (broadly speaking: resources), the 'baraka' (divine favour) bestowed upon the Gareen dynasty, the fighting strength of the Hawiye pastoral clans, and the establishment of ties with other clans through the practice of exogamy.⁸⁵ Cassanelli surmises that only the Hawiye tribes were fully

⁸¹ In the chronology established by Mohamed Mukhtar in "Historical Dictionary of Somalia" (2003) there are only three entries for the 17th century, and only one for the 18th century, compared to five entries for the 13th century, seven for the 14th century, five for the 15th century and fourteen for the 16th century.

⁸² Mukhtar 2003 mentions Luug Aw Madow, Sarmaan Aw Umur, Mereerey Aw Hassan and Baardheere.

⁸³ *ibid.*:xxvi.

⁸⁴ Ahmad ibn Abd-el Kadir, in "Histoire de la Conquête de l'Abyssinie (Publications de l'École Supérieure des Lettres d'Alger, n.d.), drawing upon ancient Ethiopian sources, mentions 'the people of Mait' (the Isaaq, whose ancestor's tomb is in Maydh) alongside several Darood clans, including the Marehan, Herti, Bartiire and Giri) and the Yibir, now a 'professional minority'.

⁸⁵ Cassanelli 1982:101-105.

integrated into Ajuraan, and that there was no territorial continuity, as other clans living in the area they controlled would have felt less included. However, Cassanelli's characterization of Ajuraan as a clan-based polity is doubtful. Today there is a clan called the Ajuraan, but it is a minor member of the Hawiye clan family that lives mostly between Kenya and Ethiopia, and nothing explains why this once so powerful Ajuraan would have descended to such insignificance. Moreover, I have rarely heard Somalis refer to Ajuraan as a *Hawiye* polity. In the eyes of most Somalis today it transcended clan.

What is certain, however, is that the states that emerged out of the ruin of Ajuraan were clan-based. The Geledi sultanate was mentioned already. The Hiraab imamate replaced Ajuraan in central Somalia from the 17th to the 19th centuries.⁸⁶ Very little is known about this imamate, and it seems likely it was very loosely organized, like other clan states that emerged in the 19th century, such as the Majerteen, Warsangeli and Isaaq sultanates and the Bimal confederacy centred on Merka.

From the early 19th century onward, Somali encounters with European powers increased; this seems to have fostered the emergence of clan states with a ruler. Besides the British and the French, the Sublime Porte also presented a potential friend, or foe, who could most easily be engaged by establishing a state-like structure. Elsewhere, I have examined how the British presence in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea stabilized previously volatile tribal politics.⁸⁷ The British need for stability led them to freeze the political situation at the time they encountered these societies, and British imperial policies were often directed at maintaining in power dynasties that they could control.⁸⁸ When required, the British would intervene in succession struggles. They used the carrot (yearly stipends paid to rulers) and stick (gunboat diplomacy) to maintain the status quo. Before the arrival of the British, however, these societies had seen leadership constantly shifting from one group to the other, true to the etymological meaning of '*dawlah*' (see Chapter One).

There is evidence of links between Somalia and the Arab princes of the Persian Gulf. The Al Qasimi pirates from Ras al Khaimah, whose attacks on British ships increased at the end of the 18th century, reportedly had a base in Socotra, and the old name of Bosaso, Bandar Qasim ('Port Qasim'),⁸⁹ suggests that they may have had a presence there too. It is possible that the Somalis learnt plundering shipwrecked British ships—their first acts of 'piracy'—from Al Qasimi pirates.⁹⁰ To the west, the 'Idagalle Sultan Farah wrote to the Al Qasimi sultan of Ras al Khaimah—who was then (in the 1810s and 20s) spearheading resistance against British domination in the Persian Gulf—to request his support against the British. Evidently, such a request would be harder to make if it were issued by 'a group of adult males representing the 'Idagalle clan'; coming from a 'Sultan' the request carried more weight.⁹¹ But nothing indicates the 'Idagalle sultan effectively presided over any institutions or structures of rule.

Richard Burton made accurate descriptions of local social, political and cultural life during his 1854-55 visit to Zeyla, Harar and Berbera. He makes no mention of any 'sultan' or other hereditary leader among the Isaaq clans (but does describe at length the Sultan of Harar and the Warsangeli Sultan in Laasqoray).

⁸⁶ The Hiraab branch of the Hawiye clan family includes the Habar Gedir, the Abgal, the Duduble and the Sheekhal, that is: most of the Hawiye.

⁸⁷ Kluijver 2013: "Introduction to the Gulf Art World".

⁸⁸ The Al Sabah family (Kuwait), the Al Saud (Saudi Arabia), the Al Khalifa (Bahrain), the Al Qasimi (Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah), the Al Maktoum (Dubai), the Al Nahyan (Abu Dhabi), the Al Said (Muscat) and the Al Thani (Qatar) were kept in power by Great Britain through 'protectorate agreements' drawn up between 1747 and 1868. As a testimony to the success of this policy, these families still rule the region today and the British remain present in mentoring positions, such as advisors to the rulers on matters of national security and fiscal management.

⁸⁹ Described by Charles Guillain in 1854 as the 'most important village' of Northeast Somalia.

⁹⁰ Ingiriis 2013: "The History of Somali Piracy: From Classical Piracy to Contemporary Piracy, c. 1801-2011"; p251.

⁹¹ Sultan Farah's letter was, however, not answered. The Arabic original was published [here](#).

This visit took place in the context of mounting clashes between the British and Somalis over the looting of shipwrecks. The British protectorate established in Somaliland in 1884 was preceded by about six decades of occasionally violent encounters; it seems the emergence of what was in the 19th century the strongest polity in Somalia, the Majerteen sultanate, was shaped by this conflict. Both Majerteen sultans, the rivals Usman Mohamud Yusuf (1866-1927) and Yusuf Ali Kenadid (1884-1911), used piracy to gain recognition from the imperial powers and extract advantages with which they could consolidate their rule over the interior.⁹² *"Majerteen rulers attracted the imperial spotlight by inciting unrest at sea, pinning the blame on their clan rivals and styling themselves as the real guardians of British imperial interests. They thus sought to interpose themselves [...] as 'gatekeepers' between the international community and local networks and resources".*⁹³ The parallels with how Majerteen rulers handled the wave of piracy in the early 21st century are stunning: allowing piracy to develop, profiting from it, and then attracting foreign patronage to reduce it.⁹⁴

This brings us to an essential aspect of state-building: it can be undertaken for purely external reasons, to provide access to a foreign state.

Of the clan-'states' mentioned above, it is hard to find either a built structure (a fort, a palace, a court, a mosque...), a contribution to local society, or any other form of domestic legacy. The Geledi, Hiraab, Majerteen and Isaaq sultanates did not leave behind any institutions of rule. But through what is sometimes called 'isomorphic' or 'mimetic' state-building,⁹⁵ some of the early Somali sultanates did succeed in attracting yearly stipends and occasional arms shipments, in exchange for their protection of British interests. The colonial period of Somalia is further dealt with in Chapter Four.

Reflections on the Role of Islam

Until recently, the consensus about Islam was that it had been imported by Persian and Arab immigrants to the East African coast, and that the 'passive' Africans—whose religions were considered 'inferior' to monotheistic Islam—were brought into the course of history, or 'civilized', or 'enlightened', through contact with the superior, virile Islam. This frankly racist view⁹⁶ has been modified by a closer examination of the belief structures and political economy of Medieval East Africa.⁹⁷ It is clear that local cultural practices, social structures and trade networks had a dominant influence on East African Islam.

Somali Islam was similarly syncretic, and has long integrated pagan, pre-Islamic beliefs. See Hersi, where he speaks about ascribing special powers to clan heads in Southern Somalia,⁹⁸ or Cerulli: *"Ancient heathen magicians have been replaced by Muslim scholars, although they have kept their name wadaad and may be also applied to magical practices"*.⁹⁹

With the falling apart of the theocratic and despotic Ajuraan state and the reduced role of Arabs (and Persians) in the Indian Ocean trade, the Arab and Islamic factors in Somalia declined. The clan

⁹² Smith 2015: "The machinations of the Majerteen Sultans: Somali pirates of the late nineteenth century?"

⁹³ Cooper 2002: "Africa since 1940"; p21.

⁹⁴ De Waal 2015: The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa; p126-128.

⁹⁵ Pritchett, Woolcock & Andrews 2012: "Looking Like a State: Techniques of Persistent Failure in State Capability for Implementation".

⁹⁶ Pouwels 1978: "The Medieval Foundations of East African Islam".

⁹⁷ see for example the works by Neville Chittick and James De Vere Allen on Swahili culture.

⁹⁸ Hersi 1977:265.

⁹⁹ Cerrulli 1957: "Somalia. Scritti vari editi e inediti"; p149.

confederacies that arose in several places (Bimal, Rahanweyn, Majerteen/Harti, Isaaq) adopted ancient Somali titles for their leaders (*ugas*, *boqor*, *islao*, *garaad*, *waber*) instead of Arabic ones—such as *amir* or *wazir*; only *sultan* was used—and returned to their own social contract, *xeer*, instead of sharia (see next chapter). Clan elders took on religious duties such as being a judge, a position long reserved for Islamic scholars from prominent urban families.¹⁰⁰ Sufi saints were seen as *wadaado*, spiritual men who could marshal supernatural forces *and* interpret religious texts. There was thus a fusion of pre-Islamic pastoral culture with Islamic religion, or a de-Arabization of Somali Islam.¹⁰¹ The *asraar*, the mystical secrets, as they were taught in Baraawe and other places of learning, became an important tool for religious and political ascendancy in Somali society. "By the 19th century, if not earlier, the power of the saints and the power of the clan heads had joined in the person of the Geledi Sultan".¹⁰²

This Somalization of Islam in turn prompted adherents of purer forms of Islam to rebel against the corrupt intertwining of temporal and spiritual power. For example, during the Baardheere jihad, (1838-1843),¹⁰³ tobacco and dancing were prohibited, the veil imposed, social intercourse between men and women restrained; and the jihadis spread their message with force, sacking Baraawe in 1840. While Sufi sainthood was generally hereditary, Baardheere leadership was merit-based, so charismatic.

The *tariqas* represented a form of communal solidarity over and above clan and territorial ties. Their sheikhs provided some leadership when necessary, but they were not interested in politics and rarely participated directly in the anti-colonial resistance.¹⁰⁴

Somalia was only marginally concerned by political developments in the Muslim world. It hardly seems to have been impacted by these developments until the late 19th century, when there were two main currents of Islamic reform: Al Nahda (rise), which sought to reconcile the Europe of reason and scientific progress with Islam, and Salafism (predecessors) that affirmed that a Muslim community could be refashioned on the roots of the original Islam, uncorrupted by subsequent political developments.¹⁰⁵

These early reformist ideas prompted Somalis to see themselves as part of a wider religious community and helped them forge a common identity in the modern world. The age-old sense of being a frontline Muslim population against Christian Ethiopia and animist 'Black Africa' acquired new political overtones. The urge to modernize Islam was, to an extent, a reaction to colonialism,¹⁰⁶ though colonial authorities in Somalia condoned the spread of these reformist ideas, which they saw as positive for the general development of their colonial subjects.¹⁰⁷ This tolerance of Muslim reformist thought did not lead to

¹⁰⁰ Cassanelli 1982:129-130.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*:130.

¹⁰² *ibid.*:134. The Geledi were described above as quite inefficient and powerless. Cassanelli refers to Yusuf Mahamud (1820-1848), who is often seen as the greatest of Geledi sultans, along with his father Mohamud Ibrahim Adeer (late 18th century - 1820).

¹⁰³ *ibid.*:135-146.

¹⁰⁴ Cassanelli 1982:196 & 237

¹⁰⁵ It must be noted that the original Salafism that inspired the Dervish leader (see 4.2) and many of his contemporaries was somewhat different from what is called Salafism today. It was a modernizing force, seeking a positive response to the challenge of Western progress and material superiority. The difference between the two streams of reform mentioned here were not always clear-cut. See for example Glassé 1989: "*The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*", entry under Salafiyah. Or, for a succinct overview: Filiu 2015: « *Les Arabes, leur destin et le nôtre – Histoire d'une libération* », chapter 1.

¹⁰⁶ An argument made by Kassab 2009: "*Contemporary Arab Thought*". See her discussion of the Nahda p17-47.

¹⁰⁷ Cassanelli 2009:9-10. Following quotation from page 10

mutual understanding, however, and political Islam evolved separately from the colonial state-formation process, only triggered occasionally by a public issue.

*"If we think of Islamic intellectual and associational life solely as forms of resistance to European colonial rule, we deprive them of a creative and autonomous history of their own. We fail to appreciate Islamic knowledge as an independent stream of creative ideas and engaged commentary on the state of affairs--that is, as a distinct source of knowledge production whose antecedents date back well before the European era."*¹⁰⁸

2.4 Political Order in Pre-Colonial Somalia

The evolution of political order in Somali-inhabited areas proves that one cannot speak of a clear evolution from small self-governed units to the modern State. Graeber and Wengrow's point about humans moving back and forth between different political orders (1.1) is confirmed by the Somali experience. This seems to have been a matter of choice, not necessity, although the choice was conditioned at least partially by environmental factors, which in Somalia encourage pastoralism. This choice is seen in the preference of contemporary Somalis for their demonstrably fictional Arab Islamic clan genealogy. The north coast of Somalia was integrated into the classical world, but Somalis are not interested in deriving any civilizational 'grandeur' from it, maybe because it does not stroke with their self-governing clan culture and Muslim identity.

Environmental factors in the Horn of Africa gave rise to three Somali socio-economic systems: pastoralism, settled agriculture and coastal trading and fishing. Each had its associated form of polity in history. Coastal communities have generally lived in self-ruled city-states together with foreigners, and these foreigners or their descendants either ruled these territories with simple institutions, or staffed their administrations. Inland agricultural communities seem to have formed through the implantation of Islamic settlements, which allowed Somali clans to integrate sedentary populations. And pastoralists have generally been stateless and organized in self-governed clans. Pastoralism has also been the main socio-economic system throughout Somali history, and had a strong political influence on both (semi-)sedentary agricultural and coastal settlements.

James C. Scott's analysis of a double—antagonistic and cooperative—relation between states and nomads, seems to apply quite well to Somalia. As in ancient Mesopotamia, centrally organized polities were short-lived affairs with long blanks between them. The nomads profited from it, but in only one instance—Ajuraan—were they motivated to establish their own hierarchical political order. Otherwise, structures of rule were created within their territories by others (Arabs and Persians), mostly for commercial purposes. Somalis participated in the trade and the institutions that supported it, such as the observance of sharia and the submission to the authority of a *qadi*, but rarely in leading roles. They provided fighters, sailors, caravans, and meat, dairy and other products, but let others rule those polities, in both temporal and spiritual dimensions. When the Arab sultanates went into decline, Somalis did not attempt to revive them, but returned to the pastoralist lifestyle, while a reduced urban Somali population remained in the declining towns. Somalis thus stuck to the 'nomad' side of the 'states vs nomads' interpretation framework of history that James C. Scott suggested. They were familiar with centralized hierarchical rule, not least because of their long exposure to neighbouring Ethiopian kingdoms, but would not adopt it for themselves. For centuries, the Somali nomads thus moved in and out of the 'state' ambit, seemingly at their discretion.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.:10

The view that Somalis were 'civilized' by Arab and Persian Muslims, which was common during the 20th century and aligns with the evolutionary view of human history, is undermined by findings of the past decades. East Africans, including Somalis, were already trading before the arrival of Islam, and they influenced East African Islam in ways that medieval Arab chroniclers may have wanted to ignore, but that are increasingly well documented. Somalis may have integrated many of their pre-Islamic beliefs in their practice of Islam *after* the Arab factor in Somalia declined in the 16th century.

Islam at once made Somalis feel part of a larger community—the *umma*—especially during the jihad against the Ethiopians, and it gave them a group identity as *Somali Muslims*. Somalis assimilated Arab statehood (the *dawlat*) easier, because of its closeness to pastoral culture and because they had adopted Islam. In their dealings with foreigners and non-related Somalis in Arab market towns, they adapted to the imported rules, embraced sharia and accepted the authority of the *qadi* (judge). But the centralized Ethiopian kingdom (the *status*), of which the Somalis have had a long experience, did not attract them and they never tried to emulate it. They had no need for a state to govern them and this did not cause a 'war of all against all'. It seems that, generally, *xeer* and sharia combined to keep social peace and order among Somali clans.

Most historical sources make little mention of conflict; neither between Somalis and the Arabs who established the Sultanates; nor between Somali polities. Despite the simultaneous existence of independent cities and sultanates that presumably were neighbouring commercial rivals—Mogadishu, Baraawe and Merka—the extant literature provides almost no accounts of battles between them, or attempts to take one another over. Ajuraan surprisingly seems to have lived in harmony next to the prosperous, but independent, Mogadishu for many centuries: why wouldn't the Kings of Ajuraan try to capture it? Even relations with the Ethiopians seem to have been generally peaceful until the 16th century. Travellers of all times speak of the fearsome Somali warriors, but Somali polities seem not to have engaged in the type of warfare that characterized, for example, Europe during those centuries.

Of the Somali polities, only Ajuraan clearly established a strong rule, with public works, an effective defence against enemies, taxation and a central administration. But Somalis today mostly remember Ajuraan for its despotic inclinations, high taxation and immoral behaviour, not for its civilizational achievements. This memory may explain why Somalis later did not allow the appearance of another such strong state, but reverted to clan self-governance instead.

The notion of institution seems alien to Somali forms of governance; even in the few accepted institutional positions such as *qadi* (judge) or sultan, personality seems to prime over status and foreigners are accepted. Moreover, accounts of the towns of the Benadir and inland sedentary communities repeatedly mention that Somalis self-governed through councils of elders representing the different clans present, often parallel to a foreign 'Sultan'. According to extant sources, self-governance seems to have been a constant feature throughout Somali history.

The clan-states that emerged after the 17th century were really not 'states' at all, as they lacked even the most elementary forms of centralized administration, but they apparently always included councils of elders of all sub-clans in their territory. Early European travellers rarely mention these clan-states, as if they were unaware of their existence. Only the two rival Majerteen sultanates, discussed in Chapter Four, were recognized by the colonial powers of the late 19th century.

It is remarkable how the three different Islamic polities I have discussed in some length here—the towns of the Benadir, Ajuraan, and the Sultanates of the Northwest—not only correspond to the coastal, agricultural and pastoral socio-economic systems discussed above, but how they find parallels in the three forms of rule that I will discuss in Part III of this dissertation: 1) the Federal Government of Somalia, centred on Mogadishu and a few other towns with heavy foreign involvement; 2) Al Shabaab rule in south and central Somalia, in an area corresponding roughly to Ajuraan; and 3) Somaliland in the northwest. At the very least these parallels suggest that a long-term perspective can help understand today's different political orders in Somalia.

Another lesson offered by this brief political history of pre-colonial Somalia is the disruptive effect of the interventions by Europeans in the 16th century, which signalled the end of a relatively prosperous and culturally and politically dynamic period for Somalia that lasted several centuries. The Portuguese repeatedly bombarded Somali port cities to force them into submission, but, rather than submit to foreign rule, Somalia went into a long decline, the Somali people reverting to self-governance.