

“ Somaliland ”: The Nostalgia of a Former British Colonial Officer A Critique

On

I. M. Lewis': “Academic View of Somaliland 's Recognition”

By Abdalla A. Hirad , January 29, 2005

Surfing the web on Saturday, January 22, 2005 , I came across an article by Professor I. M. Lewis, an anthropologist and a former British Colonial Officer, who has, over the years, written expansively about the culture and social structure of the Somali people. I encountered the article, entitled “ Academic View of Somaliland's Recognition ”, in Midnimo Information Center . The article was posted in Midnimo on January 13, 2005 . Apparently a certain Mr. Mohamoud Yusuf of (diktoor@yahoo.com) forwarded the document to www.midnimo.com.

First of all, I must deeply thank Mr. Yusuf—no matter on which side of the fence he stands on the question of “ Somaliland ”. I must also equally thank Midnimo.com for having posted the article, despite its likely political stance as per its name, “ Midnimo ”, the Somali word for unity. Here, I am only assuming that the name reflects the motto of the Center. Hence, I apologize for any misconception. Most significantly, however, and more conveniently for Midnimo, the phrase “ Information Center ” perhaps says it all as to why the Center posted it. It is for public information; and that is worthy of our admiration and respect for the site.

Although the article does not have a date of authorship, one can only glean from its body that the Professor wrote it at a time he, on passing, refers to as the “fourteenth month” of the two-year long IGAD-sponsored Somali National Reconciliation Conference, which ended in October 2004, held in the Republic of Kenya . That, in my estimate, falls into about 8 months before the conclusion of the Conference in October 2004, bringing the date of authorship to perhaps February or March 2004. And the date of authorship is of high inference, given that the author almost makes a predication as to the future of the Conference then, based on the events at the time. Those events will be viewed a little more elaborately, a bit later in this discussion. Suffice it to say, at this stage of my writing, that the article is so provocative that I could not help but respond to it—and in a manner bordering on the visceral, as you may notice.

The Professor speaks the Somali language—I understand—better than many Somalis, and without an accent. Both his friends and adversaries agree on that and I respect him for this excellence. Knowing the language is key to understanding a strange culture. In addition, Professor I. M. Lewis is a social scientist—perhaps from an old school of thought, in my opinion—I must add. The fact is that he has written so much about my people and culture, at a time when there was hardly anyone to do so in any language. Indeed, he is considered one of the few western authorities, if not the only, on the Somali

culture and social structure. Despite my deep respect for him, I could not help but respond critically to the Professor's article this time around.

If I, however, err or offend the Professor in any way, shape or form, I extend to him “Haal”, the Somali word for “public apology”, and would “throw my shawl to him” in that spirit—if at all—which is how we, Somalis, express our apology in public. I am writing this with a smile on my face, almost certain that the Professor fully knows the expression. Surely the Professor must have been in the Somali “geed”, the Somali word for the concept of “court”, albeit customary in this context. In passing, the term “geed” may be related to the word “gada” in the Oromo Language—a brother language of the Somali—both of which are branches of the Cushitic family of languages. The word “gada”, according to Oromo sources, stands for a “Council”, an “institution”, perhaps even a “court”. The word “gada” may even be a shared word or may have passed into the Somali, where one of the main clans in the North is called “Gada Bursi”. Roughly translated, it may mean, “council maximizing”—in the sense that they take full advantage of the “gada”—the “geed”; in other words, they maximize democracy. The Professor would know that better than I. Therefore, I stand to be corrected here, if at all.

Given all the credentials the Professor has enjoyed in relation to his involvement with the Somali people, as above, I am tongue tied as to why someone who has perhaps spent a good time of his life, as he says, helping the nation's colonial partitions to attain “self-determination” for independence, and perhaps re-amalgamation, come out so forcefully now to dismember it? Why does he discredit himself at the end of a life most of which he has invested in the welfare of one ethnic group—the Somali people? Why is Professor Lewis seeking to dismember Somalia is what I, honestly, seek to understand! For lack of any answers, I will dwell on my exclamation—unless, that is, all this is a matter of an “academic” exercise for the Professor, as is implied in the title of his paper. If true, the Somali saying, “Kids kill a lizard out of fun; but the deed is fatal to the lizard” applies here.

Strangely enough, and despite my disappointment with the Professor's general tenet of argument, I must admit that I managed to find a point of agreement with him in his otherwise targeted campaign to dismember my country. Before I bare the secret, however, I must stress the fact—that I am from the former “British Somaliland”—only accentuates my pain with the Professor's campaign, contrary to his hopes and expectations. The secret is that he speaks so positively about the constructive developments in the northern regions of my country, which he now calls “Somaliland”. I am sure, I as well as any sane Somali, anywhere in this world, will be glad to hear these positive achievements by our fellow citizens in the North—my homestead. The developments in the North have always been a beacon of hope, for all Somalis, that if something has worked here, then soon things will move to the better everywhere else. I just hope that both Professor Lewis and I live long enough to see it happen.

I am safe to assume this eventuality—that things will improve in all parts of the Republic—if the shared culture, religion and language between all Somalis mean anything. Here, I must also recognize the Professor for having been one of the first to

note that Somalia was a homogeneous society that shared all the attributes of a nation. In any case, there are all the signs that things are going in the right direction all over Somalia. For example, the process of which Professor Lewis is very proud of with regard to the North has also taken place in “Puntland”, later adopted in the Djibouti Conference, to be also repeated in the Kenya Conference—all part and product of the Somali ingenuity, in their search for an answer to their constitutional and institutional problems. That “spontaneous Somali democracy” which the Professor attributes to the northern regions in particular is innately inherent in the concept and process of the gada system.

And I do not disagree with the Professor, at all, that “Somaliland” has excellently reactivated the Gada mechanism at a time of need—after more than a century of colonization and imposition of western government—and not surprisingly, but incidentally, in Boroma, the main town of the Gada Bursi clan. But “Somaliland” could only achieve that because they are Somalis like those in all the other parts. Therefore, the achievements are only Somali. Foreigners can only describe that process in their terms, but only the Somalis could conceive it, implement it and transfer it to other situations in their country, as they have been doing. If that process has worked for “Somaliland” and for ‘Puntland’, for that matter, it shall work for the whole nation. It only just requires the right leadership to implement the outcomes of the last Conference. And who knows? The leadership of the new Federal Transitional Government may become just that. Pray with me that it does.

The delay in adopting the process by the so-called southern regions can be easily explained, if the Professor wishes to look harder. One would note that the Somali civil war hit hardest on major population centers, which had formed on the borders between major clan territories. Originally sprouting into business centers for the barter of goods between clans, these places transformed into the hub for civil society in the process of social transformation from a nomadic socioeconomic system into a quasi-urban one. All the major towns and cities fit into this category. Upon the collapse of government in 1991, these population centers have become major bones of contention between the clan-based militia competing for power and political control in all parts of the country—because of their political, militarily strategic, and economic significance.

In the south, in Mogadishu, the Capital, for instance, which would naturally signify the ultimate power in its political significance for the competing national political groupings, the contention has been highest and the violence has been the maximum—because it is also a seaport as well as being an international airport. Kismayo easily falls only second to Mogadishu in its importance in that respect. Galkayo and Baidoa have also suffered the same fate, for similar reasons, although less so by a shade or two. In the North, Hargeisa, Burao and Erigavo, even Brerbera, fit into this category, all of which had their share of the war at some point or the other. One must concurrently note that it has so much remained one country that even the political contention within “Somaliland” has always been underpinned by the influences of that of Mogadishu, as a power Center, which could not be ignored; and remains so to the present.

In the end, though, and contrary to the prediction of the Professor, as he shares it with the world in his article—written well before the conclusion of the Nairobi Conference—everything went well in the Nairobi Conference. The process was concluded with success so far—but not without difficulty—bringing Abdullah Yusuf to the helm of the new political arrangement. That same Abdullah Yusuf, whom the Professor hoped had left the Conference for good, together with General Morgan, as he wrote in his article at that time, is now the President on the strength of the Nairobi Accords of October 2004. And now the preparations are underway for the new Federal Transitional Government to slowly move back to the Capital—Mogadishu. I hope that both the Professor and I live to see complete reconciliation in Somalia as a result of this development. And it is that same “spontaneous Somali democracy” that the Professor attributes only to the North, which has worked in the Nairobi Conference too, when the time was ripe. Hence, I must emphasize that the “gada” process is working here too.

All Somalis, everywhere, must thank God and the International community for the position the world took vis-à-vis the dismemberment of Somalia. Perhaps the Professor does not see it, but the North would have suffered worse, if the world made the slightest move in the direction of dismemberment. In fact my people in “Somaliland” could have avoided much of their fighting in the early years of the civil war if they had waited it out by de-emphasizing the fighting for the political control of the region between conflicting parties under the banner of “Somaliland”. In fact, and despite the ostensible calm in the region, the ashes conceal the amber. There is so much tension underneath that, if a single step is made towards the recognition of “Somaliland”, the region will fall apart.

Thanks to the IGAD countries, the OAU, the Arab League, the Countries of the Islamic Conference, the EU, and the United Nations for avoiding a greater calamity. Special thanks also go to the members of the Security Council of the United Nations—permanent and non-permanent alike—for their sustained effort to maintain the national unity and territorial integrity of the Somali Republic intact throughout the years when there has been no government in place. Let's hope that this support will continue until all is well for Somalia to stand on its feet again. As we all know, and contrary to the allegations by the Professor, the World has recognized and applauded the positive developments in the northern regions, without validating the demand for the secession, as the Professor brazenly calls for. The British Government must specially be congratulated for giving a deaf ear to the secession, so far—a policy that the Professor finds hard to swallow and complains about in his article in this post-colonial era of the former British Empire—of which he was a part in his younger days and the old policies of which he seemingly continues to promote, which is certainly true, at least, as per this article of his.

In the end, one wonders what is so “academic”, or, for that matter, rational, in the view of the Professor, as he claims, in the title of his paper? On the contrary, the article reeks of passionate love of a separate “Somaliland”—the former British Somaliland, that is—and an unconcealed hate towards southern Somalia, the former Italian Somaliland. Hate to the point that he writes the following about those he considers the southern politicians: “A century ago, the Ethiopian Emperor would have treated this people rather differently. They would have been invited to an imperial banquet and poisoned!” Does not the good

Professor understand that the Emperor would almost certainly do the same to the northern Somali leaders, if at all, given the history of the relations between the Amhara and the Somalis being what they are? In any case, modern Ethiopia must be applauded for the role it has played in searching for an answer to the Somalia question, while, in the meantime, supporting the positive developments in “Somaliland”.

In the meantime, both “the good guys and bad guys”, in the Professor's words, are ethnically and statutorily Somalis. The question is: why does “a long-term supporter of self-determination”, as the Professor claims, for the partitioned ethnic group, seek to separate the only two parts which merged into a modern state as of their independence in July 1, 1960? Fortunately, much as we, the majority of the Somali people, seek “reconfiguration”, in a manner that befits the restoration of our beloved state of Somalia, we hope and pray that it does not occur in such a way that each entity, in John Locke's words, “shifts for itself”. That “Somaliland” “shifts for itself” is what the Professor and his cohorts mean by “Somali reconfiguration”. They have had high hopes that the mere collapse of government in Somalia would have made it opportune for them to dismember it. Fortunately the World has not allowed that to happen; and continues its efforts to help the nation reconstitute its government—because the state of the Somali Republic remains intact and recognized by the majority of its people and the rest of the world.

No wonder the Professor attacked all those sisterly neighboring countries and other friendly nations elsewhere, by accusing them of—surprisingly—having a vested interest in seeking to maintain Somalia's national unity and territorial integrity. Thus, the Professor writes, “Djibouti has politico-economic interests in both north and south, Ethiopia worries about Islamic fundamentalism, and Kenya has serious Somali Refugees problems which are shared to varying extents by EC countries generally”. Well, well, well! We are glad that the opposite is not true. But then, the Professor does not provide what interest these countries might have in dismembering Somalia, nor does he provide an answer as to how would a separated Somalia help with their current problems with anarchic Somalia? The most surprising statement as yet, however, is when the Professor—as if forgetful of the fact that Somalia, including “Somaliland”, has a hundred-percent Muslim population—writes, “On a different frontier, Arab States tend to favor Somali clients who carry an Islamic banner.”

So much for Professor Lewis' “academic view...” Therefore, unable to discern any sound motivation or logic in the Professor's writing in this paper, given the perspective and style he has pursued, I recall the verses of Hadrawi about the late Haji Adan Afqallooc, God bless his soul, an older opponent in the “Siinley” poetry debate of the early seventies, wherein Hadrawi writes (with my rough translation across the line):

“Af-qalloocna muu sugin, “Afqallooc is also beside the point

Nin sagaashan jirayoo, A man of 90-years he is,

Hadal seegay weeyoo, Who has missed the point, and,

Tiisu ima sarayse Whose words do not, therefore, bite ...

“Sheekadu ha soocotoo, “Let the saga unfold itself, and,

Sida daad mahiigaan, Like the flood of torrential rain,

Dhulka haw sabbaysoo, Cover the land, where

Culimada salaxda ah, The knowledgeable righteous may

Senge ha ugu jooqte ...” Spread the news on horse-back ...”

In other words, let's ignore the nostalgic whims of the Professor and pray that the righteous World—those countries who have so far supported the Somali national unity and territorial integrity—will keep the good work I also wish to remind the good Professor of the proverb from his second language, “Cimri tegey ceeb laguma sagootiyo”, which, roughly translated means: “Do not make shame the farewell for a transient life” emphasizing one's old age. Indeed, it is a shame that the Professor would use his worldly acclaimed superior knowledge of the nation to dismember it. On a more positive note, Professor Lewis can still win the hearts and minds of many more millions of the Somali people if he would address the issue more benevolently and in the interest of the majority of the people of the Somali Republic—including the northern regions—which can best be achieved through negotiation toward peace and reconciliation.

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Mohamed Ibrahim warsama, a.k.a. ‘Abu Hadra’. Later transformed into “Hadrawi”. An intellectual, a scholar and a poet of the highest caliber

The late Haji Adan, of Erigavo, a well traveled Somali poet who is immensely respected for his poems and satires to seek and applaud Somali unity as well as fight corruption and mal administration in post-independence Somalia .