

Towards a Proper Understanding of Somaliland's Success

Written by Jamal Abdi

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JAMAL ABDI, JAN 15 2025

On 17 December 2023, in a piece I published on *E-International Relations*, I argued that self-led peace and state-making in Somaliland, achieved through voluntary cooperation among communities that had fought on opposing sides of the Somali civil war, is irreconcilable with colonial interpretations and characterizations of Somali culture and society as pioneered by British anthropologist I.M. Lewis. This prompted Markus Hoehne, a German anthropologist whose work heavily relies on that of I.M. Lewis, to write an invective reply. Hoehne begins by, as is typical for neo-Lewisian researchers, distancing himself from the most radical elements of Lewis' scholarship. He concedes that Lewis simplistically reduced Somali society and culture to 'clan', wrongly attributed the root causes of the civil war to 'clan' and failed to acknowledge the upheavals in Somali society and culture caused by colonization.

Paradoxically, he then launches a passionate defense of Lewis' interpretations and characterizations of Somali culture and society. In doing so, he puts forth untenable and factually inaccurate claims. To refute my argument, Hoehne writes

"given that Isaaq are the demographic majority in Somaliland, and given that voters mainly support their patrilineal relatives since there are anyway no real ideological differences between the parties, Isaaq candidates always won, regardless of which party they belonged to. This marginalized non-Isaaq and facilitated what I would call the "Isaaqification" of Somaliland politics under the guise of multi-party politics".

To characterize Somaliland as a 'clan state' because Isaaq candidates always win elections, leading to the marginalization of non-Isaaq, is a factually inaccurate statement. That it is so should be readily apparent to anyone who has read the mainstream literature on Somaliland, which Hoehne himself cites, such as Mark Bradbury (2008), Michael Walls (2014), Marlen Renders (2012).

In April 2003, Dahir Riyale Kahin defeated Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Silanyo in Somaliland's first general election under the multi-party system, with a margin of 80 personal votes. Kahin hails from the Gadabursi community, which constitutes approximately 15 percent of the population in Somaliland and had, during the civil war, fought on the side of President Mohamed Ziad Barre. Silanyo hails from the Isaaq community, which constitutes approximately 70 percent of Somaliland's population. He was also the longest-serving chairman of the Somali National Movement (1984-1990), a predominately Isaaq-based resistance group that fought the dictatorship of Barre from 1982-1991. It took Somaliland a decade to elect a minority candidate to the highest office. In comparison, it took the United States over 200 years to elect the first mixed-race president. Barkhad Batuan is currently one of the most popular politicians in Somaliland. He hails from the Gabooye community, which makes up approximately 1-3 percent of the population. Yet, at the latest parliamentary elections he was elected with the highest number of personal votes. The tendency to overlook facts that contradict the clan-centric understanding of Somaliland's social and political affairs is common in Somaliland literature, itself overwhelmingly produced by Global-North scholars that rely on the works of I.M. Lewis. Arguably, this is the case because the mainstream literature on Somaliland is virtually devoid of any debate, which effectively engenders a generation of unchallenged research.

Hoehne further claims that my analysis is an "expression of the author's lack of analytical distance from the object of

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study". He concludes by writing

"worse even, Jamal Abdi tries to hide his own clannish lens behind a terminological façade referring to "centralized state", "democracy" and Lewis-bashing...Jamal Abdi ostensibly offers new insights by claiming a post-colonial stance while arguably perpetuating hidden colonial lenses based not only on clan (Somali: qabiil) but on clannism (Somali: qabiyalaad)".

Herein lies an implicit disqualification of Somali scholars from producing knowledge on their own society and culture, as they are, according to Hoehne, incapable of distancing themselves from the object of study and escape clannism. Conversely, we are asked to credit Western anthropologists for studying Somali society and culture in a neutral and objective way. This attitude indeed mimics a colonial logic, foregrounding the capacity and even the moral virtues of white anthropologists. This is not the first instance of Hoehne expressing dismissive views of Somalis' capacity to produce serious scholarship. He previously claimed that Somalis lack appreciation for scholarship, igniting a broader debate on power, privilege, authority, and knowledge production within Somali Studies.

Following a bloody and long civil war, Somalilanders not only created peace and forged a democratic state without external involvement in the political process, but they also achieved this through voluntary large-scale cooperation and consensus-based decision-making. Anyone who has seriously studied Somaliland's formative period (1991-2001) can hardly fail to notice the virtually ubiquitous pro-social behavior that enabled successful, self-led peace and state-making. The following examples are merely few among many: The non-Isaaq communities, who had largely supported Barre during the civil war, rather than adopting blood-letting strategies, intervened and mediated peace when intra-SNM conflicts erupted in 1992. When another conflict erupted in 1995, a group of Somaliland expatriates from Europe and North America voluntarily organized themselves, returned to Somaliland and played an important role in reestablishing peace. In 1993, the SNM voluntarily dissolved itself and handed over power to a civilian government. According to Hoehne (2011: 336), this is "unparalleled in African post-colonial history". What are the sources of the pro-social behavior that proved vital during Somaliland's formative period? A basic reading of the literature on cooperation and collective action reveals that successful cooperation, especially on a large scale, cannot be taken for granted. In fact, as Mancur Olson argued in his seminal book *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965), not even the existence of a harmony of interests is a sufficient condition for successful collective action. Any group seeking to achieve a collective goal must effectively address free riders, defectors, and spoilers. In other words, it must resolve the tensions between short-term individual interests and long-term collective interests that give rise to social dilemma situations. What enabled Somalilanders to effectively tackle and/or avert social dilemmas?

In his ethnographic study of Somaliland, *A Pastoral Democracy* (1961), I.M. Lewis contends that Somali society is highly egalitarian, devoid of formal coercive authority, and that clannism is the all-pervasive organizing force ordering socio-political relations. Lewis did not himself speak Somali and therefore depended on information recorded by the colonial administration and on what his translators told him. This effectively rendered him unable to access and profoundly grasp the intangible aspects of the culture and society he sought to understand. By focusing excessively on the kinship structure, he was oblivious to other factors that induced the pro-social behavior that was necessary to maintain social order in the absence of overarching coercive authority or even formal hierarchy. The kinship structure, an empty system of social categorization based on genealogical and moral proximity, does not independently induce either pro-social or anti-social behavior. The social control mechanisms typically used to maintain cooperation in egalitarian societies, were not required in traditional Somaliland society. This includes institutionalized practices of punishment of social transgressors, which, according to contemporary theories on collective action and cooperation, are a prerequisite to maintaining cooperation in egalitarian societies. Understanding governance in Somaliland requires a shift of focus from kinship to social rationality and to *xeer*, which are mutually constitutive and the main sources of pro-sociality in Somali(land) culture. The former underpins the latter, while the latter, in turn, fosters pro-social behavior. Rather than always seeking immediate private payoffs, a socially rational agent acts in pursuit of his or her objectives, both short and long term. Given that long-term individual interests are, in the 'real' world, often inextricably linked with the interests of the collective, the prevalence of socially rational behavior may significantly diminish the perceived benefits of defection or free riding, thereby fostering cooperation.

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Lewis and neo-Lewisian scholars, who dominate the production of knowledge on Somaliland, often discuss *xeer* as customary law, reducing it to tangible agreements or contracts. Reviewing Michael Walls' much-cited book on Somaliland's peace and state-making trajectory, titled *A Somali Nation-State*, Hoehne writes, "one obvious criticism...is that the text does not produce new insights in its extensive background section". I concur with Hoehne on this point. It can generally be said of the neo-Lewisian literature on Somaliland that it does not offer new insights into Somali culture beyond what is found in the scholarship of I.M. Lewis. The latter, due to his excessive focus on the genealogical structure, took for granted the capacity for sustained cooperation rather than explicitly identifying the sources of the pro-social behavior that enabled maintenance of social order in the absence of coercive authority.

To claim that groups meet, negotiate, reach consensus, and thus resolve or avert conflicts is merely an observation, not an explanation underpinned by sound analysis. *Xeer* is much more than tangible manifestations, e.g., inter-group contracts. It is a shared normative order, defining 'the rules of the game'. Practically, it serves the same function as a political system, i.e., a regime. It constrains and moderates behavior morally and normatively because its intangible underpinnings are based on the shared values and beliefs of a highly homogenous society. In my view, it is more insightful to say that *xeer* shapes the behavior of so-called traditional elders who may represent communities, rather than asserting that they administer *xeer*, making the latter inextricably linked to clan. Consisting of internalized norms, principles, and values, *xeer* also shapes even anonymous interpersonal relations in ways that clan cannot.

In a forthcoming peer-reviewed article, I argue that the function of *xeer* was significantly affected by colonization and that peace and state builders in post-1991 Somaliland benefitted from the remnants of the factors that have historically induced pro-social behavior. I do not suggest that non-Somalis have nothing to offer in terms of understanding Somali culture and society. In fact, I owe great debt to both Somali and non-Somali scholars such as Lee Cassanelli, Lidwien Kapteijns, Catherine Besteman and others whose invaluable work informs my research. The overarching point I seek to raise is that we must move beyond simplistic, reductionist, and one-dimensional colonial anthropological accounts to gain a more nuanced understanding of Somali culture. I understand that the scholarship of I. M. Lewis offers an easily accessible and seemingly comprehensive framework for understanding Somali culture, history, and society. Dismissing novel analytical approaches and stubbornly adhering to the Lewisian paradigm might, however, result in overly simplified analyses, which in turn, could lead to misguided policies.

About the author:

Jamal Abdi holds a MSc in European and International Relations from Linköping University. He is currently a PhD Candidate in Politics and International Relations at Keele University, UK. Drawing on extensive field work, his research focuses on peace and state building in Somaliland. He can be reached on X.