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Somali Region in Ethiopia: Historical Developments during the Period 1884-1995



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Abstract

The history of Somali Region is scattered in the vast history of Somalia and Ethiopia. But this article explicitly examines the historical developments of the region from the colonial period to the recent past around 1995, and how the region gained the diverging ethnic and national identities, Somali and Ethiopian at the same time. The paper also aims at presenting the historical developments of Somali Region in short, and traditional narrative perspective.

Key words: Somali Region, Ogaden, Hawd, Somalia, Ethiopia, British Colonies.

1. Introduction

Today's Somali Region in Ethiopia was simply the Western Somali territory and/or Ogaden & Hawd of the then times, traditionally located in the approximate area of southeastern Ethiopia, bounded on the north by British Somaliland and on the east by Italian Somaliland. Through conquests and colonization, it has gained its present shape and geopolitics.¹

Most studies available on the region mainly examine the political aura of the region and the 1977-78 war between Ethiopia and Somali. There are other studies scattered in the histories of Somalia and Ethiopia. For example, Abdi Samatar's *Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy: the Somali Test* (Samatar, 2008) *is* an informative study of the region's political history, and it covers only the period after 1991. Other works include Hagmann's studies on the political aura of the region. Markakis's sketchy paper on Somali in Ethiopia (1996) and his other paper on the ethnic Somalis in new political order of Ethiopia (1994) are other studies worth mentioning too. However, none of these studies attempted to spotlight the history of the region and how the double Ethiopian and Somali identity have been shaped all the way to the colonial period, in a short and precise manner.

This essay summarizes the historical developments of Somali Region in Ethiopia, from the colonial period to the recent past; and examines how the history shaped the double Ethiopian and Somali identity.

2. Developments in 1884-1960

Somali people inhabit in the Horn of Africa where various Sultanates and city states were established in the medieval Islamic and the precolonial periods. Adal Sultanate was one of those Sultanates located in the heart of Zeila, the North Western part of Somali settled territories.

Evidently, there is no clear evidence showing the inclusion of Somali inhabited territory into Ethiopia before the expansion of Emperor Menelik II to South and South East in the late 19th century.² There are some historical records indicating that historically Ethiopia had an access to the port of Zeila, but the case of Ogaden was not included in historic Ethiopia (Asefa Fisha, 2013).

In 1884, the scramble for Africa took place, and European colonies agreed to divide and colonize Africa. A vast land of Somalia fell under three main colonial administrations, namely British, French and Italian administrations. British protectorate of Somaliland was established in 1884 through a number of Anglo-Somali Treaties of Protection (Sh. Abdirahman, 1990). In the same way, Italians made their direct claims of Italian Somalia and its coast in 1889. Then in 1891 Italian and British colonial powers reached an agreement on their colonial spheres of influence in the East Africa (Mainly Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eretria). In 1889 Italy and Ethiopia signed the treaty of Wuchale but interpreted in different manners. On May 5, 1894, Italy, acting as the protector of Ethiopia, as per their interpretation of treaty of Wuchale, demarcated the boundary between Ethiopia (under Italian colonial administration) and British Somaliland as follows:

The boundary of the spheres of influence of Great Britain and of Italy in the regions of the Gulf of Aden shall be constituted by a line which, starting from Gildessa [Jeldesa] and running toward the 8th degree of north latitude, skirts the north-east frontier of the territories of the Girrhi, Bertiti, and Rer Ali Tribes, leaving to the right the villages of Gildessa, Darmi, Gig giga [Jijiga], and Milmil. On reaching the 8th degree of the north latitude the line follows that parallel as far as its intersection with the 48th degree of longitude east of Greenwich (BIR, 1978).

By ignoring the 1894 treaty between Italy and Britain, where Gadabursi tribe's land lied under British protectorate, Menelik attempted and entered into Somali territory in 1896 by building some grass huts at Alola, a spring located in the southeast of Biyo Kabobe. In addition, Menelik also hoisted his flag at Alola and mentioned that Gadabursi and Issa tribe's territories (What is now from Shiniile, Jigjiga to Awbare) belong to Abyssinia (Somali Peninsula, 1962).

In 1896, after the defeat of Italians at the battle of Adwa⁴, Addis Ababa peace treaty took place between Italy and Ethiopia to resolve the misinterpretation of Wuchale treaty and negotiate the boundaries of Ethiopia and Italy in the Eastern Africa. In this treaty, Italy was no more acting as a protector of Ethiopia, and Ethiopia in search of its independent sphere of influence similar to that of British, French and Italian colonial administrations joined the partition of Horn of Africa (Mukhtar, 2003). Emperor Menelik proposed the boundary of Ethiopia by extending to the Western Somali territories of Ogaden and submitted it to Italy on June 24, 1896, and one year later, Italy approved its boundaries, though informally by only telegraphing without any signed document accompanying it.

In the same year, 1897, Ethiopia, continuing its expansion territories of the South and South East where Somali people settled, reached an agreement with the British colonial administration to demarcate the border between Ethiopia and the British Somaliland, which excluded most of the Hawd in Ethiopia. In this Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty in 1897, British ceded Somali territory to the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik in

exchange for his help in the fight against Somali clans (D. Laitin, S. Samatar, 1987).

However, this treaty occurred only between Ethiopia and the British administration and Somali people were not consulted and informed. Moreover, the treaty violated the previous protection agreements between the British colonial administration and the Somali clans. In fact, this was one of the main reasons that Somali's denied the validity of the treaty. By 1891, boundaries that Emperor designed, which included Ogaden and some of the Hawd, was accepted by other colonial administrations. In 1906 Italy, France and Britain legally recognize Ethiopia's sovereignty and settle disputes about the territorial borders (BIR, 1978). Unfortunately, Somali people were not even aware of the Abyssinian expansion to their territories since they had protection agreements with Britain in 1884 and in 1886.

In 1907, Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement demarcated their boundary with the British East African Protectorate (Kenya). This agreement places Italian Somaliland in a triangular point where Dewa and Genale rivers meet. A year later, Ethiopia and Italy also agreed to create new Ethiopian-Italian Somaliland boundary between Dolo and Webi Shabelle in 1908 (BIR, 1978 P, 4).

The second Ethio-Italian war begun in December 1934 at Walwaal. This is the beginning of the Italian conquest and occupation of Ethiopia. The incident started at Walwaal, located in Dollo Zone of the Somali settled territory of Ethiopia and ended up with the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa. Italy proclaimed an Italian colonial empire in the Horn of Africa that includes Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia in 1936. As a result, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellasie escaped to England for exile. Consequently, Italy had control over Ethiopia, Somali territories of the South, British Somaliland to Hawd and Ogaden (Today's Somali

region of Ethiopia) (Mukhtar, 2003; Sh. Abdirahman, 1993). This is how Italy promoted and initiated the idea of "Grande Somalia" (Greater Somalia), which included all Somali settled territories. By September 1940, Benito Mussolini claimed that he has created "Greater Somalia" inside his Italian Empire (Mukhtar, 2003).

In 1941, British administration reestablished its colonial administration and extended it to Italian Somaliland, Hawd and Ogaden; also, helped the king of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie to come back to Ethiopia, after years of exile, as its ruler. Hawd and Ogaden remained under British Military Administration (BMA) until 1944 when Ethiopia through the agreement with Britain reasserted its sovereignty in the Reserved Area. (Farah Mohamed, 1978; Mukhtar, 2003).

In May 1943, Somali Youth Club (SYC) (later renamed SYL) was established by thirteen young Somali nationalists and operated its field offices in the whole Somali territories including Jigjiga and the NFD of Kenya. The nationalist movement spread throughout Somali settled territories. In 1946, the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, proposed to the Allied Council of Foreign Ministers a plan to place the Somali-inhabited territories under the British Military Administration. Unfortunately, "Bevin Plan" was rejected and USSR, USA, and France blatantly stood against that plan. (Farah Mohamed, 1978).

Evidence showed that in the Anglo-Ethiopian treaty of 1897, Britain did not sufficiently explain about the cession of Somali territory to Ethiopia nor did she recognize Ethiopian rights to Somali territory. British colonial administration also reached protection agreement, not to handover them to Ethiopia, with the local elders of Ogaden and Hawd. Nevertheless, half a century later, Britain arrived with a new and different interpretation of the position and purported to recognize the

sovereignty of Ethiopia over Somali territory to which she had a previous title (Somali Peninsula, 1962).

In 1948, British colonial administration withdrew from Ogaden and, to the dismay of Somalis, implemented the hidden agenda of handing over Ogaden as well as part of Reserved Area to Ethiopia, with no consent and awareness of all Somali people. Since then 'Somali Region of Ethiopia' has become a part of Ethiopia. It was misery to all Somalis as they protested against the handover causing the death of 25 demonstrators at Jigjiga alone. It was this time that the flag of SYL was removed from Jigjiga though SYL did not give up and continue to organize protests. (Farah Mohamed, 1978, p 138).

In 1955, in line with the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement, the BMA withdrew from the Hawd and the Reserved Area, and Ethiopia took over the administration of these territories. From that time on wards, Ogaden and Hawd have been a part of the Ethiopian administered territory, with no consent of Somali people. In March 1955 the National United Front (NUF) attempted to regain the Hawd and the Reserved Area and to get its independence with the Somaliland British Protectorate. This resulted in endless chaos and violent conflicts (Mohamed Omar, 2001).

In 1958 the UN Trusteeship Council appointed an arbitration tribunal to decide upon the disputed territories between Ethiopia and Somalia before the termination of the trusteeship period. However, all these efforts ended in vain. This was followed by Somalia's independence in 1960 and Somalia did not recognize Anglo-Ethiopian delimitation of 1897 and provided no legal recognition of Ethiopian borders. The border question, to this date, remains unresolved and there are no clear demarcations between the borders of the two states (BIR, 1978; Mukhtar, 2003).

In 1948 and 1954 discontent led to incessant attempts to liberate and reunite the ceded region with the other Somali territories in "Great Somalia". Somalia plainly denied and rejected to find any room to accommodate and recognize the validity of the political boundaries drawn at the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897 and the relevance of treaties defining Somali-Ethiopian borders.

Somalia denied the Anglo Ethiopian treaty of 1897 for three specific reasons: the first being the fact that this agreement turns a blind eye to the protection agreements that British colonials made with the Somali people; secondly Somali people of everywhere had, by any means, no idea and were not informed of the existence of such treaties; and lastly, such treaties violated self-determination principle.

3. Developments in 1960-1995

After Somalia gained its independence in 1960, Somalia's successive governments waged a campaign which mainly focused diplomatic means on regaining what they called "lost territory" and raised the issue on regional and international platforms like United Nations and Organization of Islamic countries. Liberating the remaining Somali territories from the both white and black colonial powers remained one of Somalia's main missions to be accomplished. Consecutive Somali governments attempted to incorporate the remaining Somali territories into "The Somali Republic", and to realize the dream of Greater Somalia, as the five pointed star in the flag stand for.

The denial of the border between Ethiopia and Somali by the newly born Somali Republic and its growing diplomatic and military relations with the world, as well as the status quo of the region and its people, frightened Ethiopia. The hostilities grew steadily, and there were some clashes between Somali pastoralists and Ethiopian police forces in the

region. The incidents changed into a low-level war between the Ethiopian and Somali armed forces and spread along the border. In February 1964, fierce fighting broke out along the Ethio-Somali border. Shortly after, the hostilities came to an end. In fact Sudan, representing Organization of African Unity, took the responsibility to mediate between the two nations. Ministers from both sides met in Khartoum and agreed cease fire with 15km military withdrawal from both sides (Mukhtar, 2003; Farah Mohamed, 1978)

In 1966 the Ethiopian regime stalled martial law in the Somali Region and the neighboring Oromo region, and this was accompanied by gruesome tactics that were applied to punish herders to force them to renounce their support for the fighters. Many of these were ranging from confiscating their property, arbitrary arrests, to controlling water points and destroying their livestock (HRW, 2008).

The first organized liberation movement in the Somali territory under Ethiopian jurisdiction, came into existence a few years after Somalia gained its independence in 1960. The Somali Republic's Constitution sanctioned liberation of Somali territories in Ethiopia, Kenya, and French Somaliland. This essentially embedded these liberation movements in inter-state relations and, more centrally, in Somali regime politics. The liberation movement in Somali Ethiopia reached its zenith in 1977–78.

In 1970s Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF)⁶ was established and began recruiting aggrieved inhabitants of the region. Somalia helped local militias like WSLF, SALF (Somali Abo Liberation Front) and OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) to weaken Ethiopian forces in the region structurally and to destabilize the country as well (B. Yihun, 2014; Markakis, 1996).

In 1977, a large scale war was waged by Somalia in order to regain Ogaden from Ethiopia. Somali National Army crossed the border into Ethiopia and carried out military operations in Degahbour, Kebridehar, Warder and Godey (Yihun, 2014) taking control of Jijiga and large pockets of western region in the first two weeks of the war. WSLF fought against Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Somalis supported the war despite their strong control by Ethiopia (Abdi Samatar, 2008). The Somali success did not last long and Ethiopia pleaded to its allies to stop the ongoing onslaught at the hand of its sworn enemy. The USSR and Cuba, formerly Somalia's ally, sided with Ethiopia and South Yemen rushed for help. Consequently, Somalia was pushed back and forced to retreat from the areas they occupied, and this led to the weakening of Somali Government, both militarily and politically, inside and outside the country. In the ensuing years, this defeat tremendously contributed to the downfall of the central government. In March 1978, Siyad Barre recalled his army from Ethiopia.

Africa Watch (the precursor to Human Rights Watch's Africa Division) analyzed Ethiopian counter-insurgency operations in that time and found that they followed a four-pronged approach:

- forced displacement of much of the civilian population into shelters and protected villages;
- military offensives against people and economic assets outside the shelters;
- sponsoring of insurgent groups against the WSLF and Somali government; and
- attempts to promote the repatriation of refugees.

In December 1979, a new Ethiopian military offensive, this time including Soviet advisors and Cuban troops, was more specifically directed against the population's means of survival, including poisoning

and bombing waterholes and machine gunning herds of cattle. Militarily, the counter-insurgency operations succeeded in significantly weakening the insurgents or driving them across the border into Somalia (HRW, 2008).

Soon after the 1977 war massive influx of refugees started from the region, with hundred thousand of people crossed to neighboring Somalia, where they lived in refugee camps in the succeeding years (Hagman & Kalif 2008).

During the interim period, 1978–91, the liberation movement lost its autonomy because the Somali military regime used the liberation movement for its own purposes, as many movement leaders became henchmen of the new order. Those who disagreed with the tactics of the regime were forced to flee the country; the unlucky individuals rotted in jail. This treatment caused the movement to lose its grassroots identity and become a sycophant of the military rulers. The collapse of the state and the subsequent fragmentation of Somali society into warlord territories, along with the rise of sectarian politics, had dire effects on Somali Ethiopian politics. Although Somalis contributed significantly to the weakening of the Mengistu regime, the liberation movement was politically and militarily a spent force in 1991 (Abdi Samatar, 2008).

Many Somali Ethiopians who had moved to Somalia since the early 1960s returned to Ethiopia after May 1991. Some of these were senior military leaders and political entrepreneurs and came back to the region and stepped into politics and become parts of the new polity formed by Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)⁷ (Abdi Samatar, 2008).

In mid 1990s, a new constitution of Ethiopia was drawn up which marked a new beginning for the Somali Region, in line with the other regions of Ethiopia.⁸

In May 1995 a new legislative body, the Council of People's Representatives, was elected with the majority of seats going to the EPRDF. In August the Constituent Assembly officially transferred power to the new legislature, and the country was renamed the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. A new constitution came into force in August 1995 providing ethnic based federalism for the first time in the country's history. The new constitution provides self-determination and nine ethnically based regions (Asnake K., 2009), where the Somali Regional State is one among the nine regional states provided by 1995 constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to put forth a glimpse of the history of the Somali Region in Ethiopia all the way from the colonial era to the present, in a traditional narrative model. The article described that the formation of Somali Region in Ethiopia goes back to the colonial legacy of Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement of 1897 while the Somali Government denies it.

In the first section, the essay overrules the recent distorted claims that Ogaden local elders preferred Emperor Haile Selassie to British colonies. The paper finds no valid claim to this argument and sheds light on how Britain ceded the region, secretly, to Ethiopia in 1897 and handed Ogaden and Hawd in 1948 and 1954 respectively. The rest of the essay examines the situation of the region from the 1960 up to 1995.

The paper does not examine the very recent historical developments in the region (1995 and afterwards). Thus there is a need for further research to be conducted on the current historical developments, cultural changes (amalgamation) and political shifts that have taken place in the region during the past decade.

Notes

- ¹ Ogaden, and Hawd and Western Somali Territory are terminologies used by different people and entities for different political positions and purposes. It defines whole or pat of the territory that falls in the eastern part of Ethiopia and is settled by ethnic Somalis.
- ² Emperor Menelik II, born Sahle Mariam (1844 –1913), was Negus [means king] of Shewa (1866–89), then Emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913), in 1889 became Emperor Menelik II.
- ³ Treaty of Wuchale was a treaty signed by King Menelik with Italy on 2 May 1889 (corresponding to 25 Miazia 1881 of Ethiopian Calendar). The treaty is signed in the Town of Wuchale (also spelled Uccialle or Uccialli) in Amhara Region, Ethiopia.
- ⁴ The battle of Adwa took place in March 1896 between Ethiopian Empire and Kingdom of Italy at a place located within the close vicinity of Adwa, Tigray Region. The cause of the battle resulted from the interpretation of the treaty of Wuchale (1889). The Amharic and Italian translation of the document conveyed different meanings.
- ⁵ Haile Selassie I (1892 –1975), born Tafari Makonnen Woldemikael, was an Ethiopian Emperor from 1930 to 1974. He was the Regent of Ethiopia from 1916 to 1930 while Zewditu (1876 –1930), the daughter of Menelik II, was the Empress of Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie I was in exile from 1936 until he was reinstated in 1941.

- ⁶ Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was a guerrilla organization based in Ethiopia seeking to free the Somali Region in Ethiopia or Western Somalia and unite it with Somalia.
- ⁷ Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) commonly known as "Ehadig" is the ruling political coalition in Ethiopia, initially formed by TPLF (Tigray people's liberation front) and EPDM (Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement) combined in to one in early 1989, later on others joined. For more details refer to Sarah Vaughan (2003) "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia", (University of Edinburgh: Ph.D. Thesis, 2003); Abdi Ismail Samatar (2008) "Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy; The Somali Test".
- ⁸ The constitution of 1995 is the fourth constitution of Ethiopia, there were three earlier previous constitutions of Ethiopia in 1931, 1955 and 1987.

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