

An Account of the Colonial Experience of the Western Somalis*

Ismail Wais

Like all African peoples who were colonized during the "Scramble for Africa," the Western Somalis resisted. Their resistance was — and is — amongst the fiercest, just as their colonial experience has been — and remains — probably the most brutal on the African continent. The pattern of resistance has been consistent but cyclic. There has been considerable discussion in this journal and elsewhere of primary resistance. The purpose of this article is to describe and contribute to the examination of the liberation struggle in more recent years.

When the fighting of the early nineteen-sixties cooled down, the Ethiopian colonial regime employed hard oppressive methods in an attempt to finally crush the resistance struggle of the Somali people. Their intent was to bring the Somalis under the secure control of the central regime in Addis Ababa, the imperial capital city.

The first step was the dispatch of tens of thousands of soldiers to Western Somalia. New military bases were established in various parts of the area. All the road junctions were put under military patrol. The free movement of the people was severely limited. Direct and natural communications were forbidden. The nomads and farmers whose livelihood depended on the markets of the various towns and villages were not allowed to enter them. The military declared an emergency

over the whole area which gave them the opportunity to take quite barbaric measures in order to intensify their colonial hold over the area.

The Ethiopian soldiers thus became the highest authority in the area and they were exempted from sanction for any crimes. They could take whatever measures they felt necessary to bring the land and people under the subjugation and domination of the colonial central regime of Addis Ababa. They frequently indulged in naked and savage military action against the civilian population. Most Ethiopian soldiers are from poor families, and join the army just to assure their daily life. They are mostly from backward rural areas of Shoa, Gojam, Begemder and Tigre. It was new for most of them to be in an area where trade and commerce flourished. Soon they started to use the situation and to rob the people in the hope of becoming rich quickly at the expense of the native population. The situation was exacerbated as individual soldiers competed for more wealth. This pattern of exploitation inevitably led to murders and massacre.

For the officers too, the opportunity to come to Western Somalia was a golden chance. There they also had unlimited possibilities. They were allowed to give full vent to their feelings of aggression against the Somali civilian population. They had been taught to despise most Muslims and in particular to hate Somalis. They massacred masses of innocent people. Through brutal actions they could easily get promoted to higher ranks. Even the simple soldiers received quick promotions and higher awards for military crimes which they committed against the people. Such cruelty forced hundreds of Somalis to quit their homes as early as the sixties to become refugees in Somalia and Djibouti, then still called French Somaliland. The terrible refugee "problem" of today had begun.

A new chapter in colonial administration was meantime initiated. The spearhead was the establishment of a police station in the villages and several police-posts in each town and city. Just like the soldiers, these police and their officers were recruited from traditional Ethiopia. Thus the military forces operated around the settlements, villages, towns and cities seeking to keep overall control while the police were supposed to control the inside of the settlements. The function of the police

*This paper is developed from the second section of a paper presented by the writer at the First International Congress of Somali Studies, Mogadishu, 6-13 July 1980.

was to clear a way — even at this late time in Africa — for the effective penetration of a colonial administration, which had still not been fully established. In this duty, the police were no less brutal than the military. As a foreign force, they felt they had to demonstrate their power over the civil population and this they did indeed in inhuman, brutal and suppressive ways. The fact that they could hardly communicate with the people doubtless made it simpler for them to be merciless. Nor were they less corrupt than the armed forces. They tried ruthlessly to get rich at the expense of the poor.

Until 1965 the military authorities continued to impose a curfew in most towns of Western Somalia. This curfew lasted longer in Dire Dawa than elsewhere. In that town, which is the center of trade and commerce for a wide area, the people suffered extremely under the combined brutal forces of the military, the police and a special "killer squad." What the Somali people of Dire Dawa will never forget is how the curfew was enforced. Every night after 11 P.M. the streets of Dire Dawa belonged not only to the combined army and police force, but also to the special killer squad. Should somebody dare to leave a house for whatever reason, it was most likely that he or she would never reach their goal. In blunt words everybody found on the streets after 11 P.M. was first robbed and then killed.

Three groups of the society suffered excessively; first were the poor and possessionless who had no shelter. They used to sleep outside and hence became the very first victims of the "Qoor-Goo" or "executioners" as they were termed. The second were the nomads who knew no people in the town, but who came there to sell a sheep, goat or animal-product like butter, milk or hides in order to buy millet, sugar, salt or clothes, etc. They too had to spend the nights outside and they too were often discovered the following day to have been robbed and killed. The third were Moslems who had to go early in the morning to the Mosque. After would-be worshippers were too often killed on the way, most avoided going to the Mosque and were obliged to pray at home. The aim of the killer squad was undoubtedly to terrorize and intimidate the Somali people. The curfew was not lifted in

Dire Dawa at any time and "Qoor-Goo" killings continued until the end of the sixties.

Amharaization

Militarism and the introduction of Ethiopian police in the colonized areas was intended to clear the way for serious attempts at the Amharaization of Western Somalia. This Amharaization policy had several aspects. After 1965, the colonial regime in Addis Ababa seemed intent on disrupting the healthy economy of the region, with a view doubtless to reconstructing it in their own interests and under their complete control. They proceeded as follows. Industrial workers were dismissed. Countless Somali workers of the Franco-Ethiopian railway company were sacked without any plausible reasons being given. The places were filled by unqualified workers from Shewa and other Amhara regions. This pattern was then extended to other industries especially the Dire Dawa cement factory. The colonial regime sought to exploit the resources of the region in multiple ways; firstly through the employment of workless Amhara at the cost of the Somali workers; secondly through the resultant transfer of income and capital from the hands of the Somalis to the hands of the Amhara; and thirdly through the shift in investment of capital accumulated in Western Somalia to the Amhara headquarters. Likewise the issue of travel documents and passports was made harder for Somali traders and merchants. This led to most of the traders operating between Djibouti and Dire Dawa giving up their profession. Throughout Western Somalia the number of unemployed grew rapidly and in consequence young people left their homes in large numbers.

Nomads too and even farmers were dispersed and persecuted. At the end of the 1964 fighting, the colonial regime in Addis started introducing farmers in the area, from the Amhara regions of the central high plateau. These farmers were promised large plots of 'unpopulated' lands. They had indeed to pay no money for the fertile lands they were 'awarded' and they even enjoyed a period free from taxes. The colonial regime authorized the army and police force to make land available to farmers by chasing the Somali nomads from their time-hallowed pastures. The methods used varied.

A Vicious Cycle

Military and police convoys indiscriminately shot down way. This had happened earlier. Amhara columns had tried to do this 10 years previously, but nearly all the victims of this gruesome massacre, mostly women, children and old people, of one such terror was to force the people to evacuate no less than 400,000 people in turn compelled by this massacre and struggle. A like pattern of massacre was very serious: in the period between 1972 and 1973 alone 892 people were killed, thousands, especially children, were forced to move to the towns. The number of displaced people in Dire Dawa alone reached 100,000.

The economic life of the region was disrupted for the first time. Rooted urban populations were uprooted and uncowed in spirit, mostly poor in respect of their cattle and sheep are still alive but their whole possession of nomads from large pastoral areas. The importance for a transhumance pattern of the movements is of great importance in terms of cattle, sheep and goats.

The Ethiopian occupation of Western Somalia, early as 1962, an economic and social disaster. The colonial government, the army and the police, the Amhara settlers under strict government control interpreted this injunction into rural areas and to be part of their duty to turn sheep. On occasions the Amhara would head from herds not in their possession. These were brought to the market by public auction for the Amhara. On occasions, were sold to other nationalities as a "gift" from the government. This represented a

A Vicious Colonialism

Military and police convoys, sent into such areas, indiscriminately shot down all that crossed their way. This had happened ever since the first Abyssinian columns had tried to penetrate the Ogaden 10 years previously, but never on such a scale. The victims of this gruesome human hunting were mostly women, children and aged people. The aim of one such terror was to force Somali nomads to evacuate no less than 400 sq km. The Somalis were in turn compelled by this brutal behavior to react and struggle. A like pattern was carried out intensively throughout the seventies. The consequences were very serious: in the period April 1971 to May 1972 alone 892 people were massacred and thousands, especially children and women, were forced to move to the towns or flee abroad. In 1969 the number of displaced children and women in Dire Dawa alone reached over 7000.

The economic life of the nomads in the rural areas was disrupted for the same purposes that uprooted urban populations. Though rich in culture and uncowed in spirit, the Somali people are mostly poor in respect of material wealth. Hence their cattle and sheep are not only the guarantee of life but their whole possession. The chasing away of nomads from large pastoral areas and the limitation of the movements which are of fundamental importance for a transhumant pastoral society predictably and inevitably caused severe losses in terms of cattle, sheep and human life.

The Ethiopian occupation forces had begun, as early as 1962, an economic war of a special kind. The colonial government ordered their armed forces and the police, to bring the Somali pastoralists under strict government 'control'. They in turn interpreted this injunction as authority to move into rural areas and machine-gun every living thing. The occupation forces clearly understood it to be part of their duty to machine-gun cattle and sheep. On occasions they confiscated thousands of head from herds not infrequently killing the owners. These were brought to Addis Ababa and sold by public auction for the Government's account or, on occasions, were offered to other nearby nationalities as a "gift" from the colonial government. This represented an aspect of an overall and

well-known imperial strategy on the part of the occupying forces, because at this same period they were engaged in armed struggles both with the Oromos and the Afars. Through such presents they may well have calculated that they could win the support of one or the other nationality but their main aim was to create enmity between those nationalities and the Somalis.

In the period April 1971 to May 1972 the following herds from areas adjacent to the railway were machine-gunned or confiscated: 112,647 Cows; 3,582 Camels; 77,895 Sheep; and 216 Donkeys. The figures are taken from a letter of complaint written by the Somali chiefs of the region to the then Ethiopian parliament in 1964 (Ethiopian calendar year — 1972 Gregorian Calendar). There were similar losses in all the other regions. These military moves against the people and their possessions also forced thousands to move to the nearest urban area and even to cross the border into Somalia or the Republic of Djibouti.

Nor did the wells and water places escape attention. The locations were ambushed and they were frequently poisoned. One of the worst actions of the Addis Ababa colonial regime in fighting the Western Somalis and other pastoral peoples (in north western Eritrea for example) is the systematic poisoning of wells and water places on which the life of the nomads and their herds depends. Countless nomads, together with their herds, perished by this cruel act.

The expulsion of Somalis from the few industries; the chasing of nomads away from large pastoral areas; the hindering of movement elsewhere and the machine-gunning of people and the confiscation of cattle and sheep made it most difficult for the rural and urban population to cooperate and help one another. Ethiopian policy was considered deliberately socially disruptive, since cooperation, solidarity and help one for another are necessary guiding principles for the Somali people and an important foundation of their customary life. Famine, hunger, misery and total catastrophe was the result. While the situation deteriorated almost daily, the Ethiopian colonial regime — ever the master of cynical "public-relations" — largely succeeded in covering up the real happenings and deceiving an otherwise preoccupied outside world.

Economic disaster in the whole of Western Somalia nevertheless ensued.

It should be stressed that famine, hunger and human misery had been the consequence of natural drought. It is also the result of economic destruction in Western Somalia inflicted by the colonial regime. Famine reached its height at the end of the sixties, during a lull in the people's armed struggle, and continued unabated in every sense into the seventies. The people most severely affected were the nomads. The young and the able fled from their land and their accustomed way of life into an uncertain future in the towns. Life there did not offer the needed help and social guarantees. It was inevitable that many left their home country for Djibouti and Somalia, there to seek political understanding and economic and social help.

Disruption, Pillage and Worse

Statistics of the peoples and cattle uprooted, as cited by the Issa Somali chiefs in their letter of complaint to the colonial authorities, were as shown in Table 1. This table firmly suggests that the destruction of villages was — as it still is — a very important part of the colonial power's Amharaization plans. However some villages were destroyed in order to pave the way for the building of more military bases. The village of Aisha, some 60 km from the frontier of today's Djibouti (and less than 60 km from the newly independent Somali Democratic Republic) was destroyed for this reason on Wednesday, 12 August, 1960. About 500 people lost their lives and thousands fled into Somalia. An important commercial and trade center was lost to be replaced by a military base, which it has remained ever since.

The Suppression of Human and Political Rights

In Western Somalia, and other regions where Somalis lived, political organizations — clubs, leagues and parties — had grown effective, influential and politically strong in the forties and fifties. They expressed and carried forward the political consciousness of the Somali people and their will to liberate their territory from all forms of colonial domination.

In Northern Somaliland and in the U.N. Trust territory of Somalia, these movements eventually led to successful political achievement notably independence from colonial domination — for on June 26, 1960 Somaliland, and on July 1, Somalia became independent and united as one nation. Elsewhere, for a time in Djibouti and the N.F.D., and ever since in Western Somalia increased suppression of Somali masses on the part of the colonial regime was to follow.

The people of Western Somalia ever since the Ethiopians took over in the mid 1950's have continued to be deprived of their rights to organize themselves and to build political parties, let alone determine their destiny and shape their own future. In fact as subject peoples they have been systematically excluded from involvement in their own country's political life. All existing political ideas, experiences, clubs and organizations have been ruthlessly crushed, except during the brief period of liberation 1977-78.

Through the years the colonial regime has fought against all forms of Somali traditional organization and leadership. The primary goal has always been to force on the people colonial forms of decision-making, political representation and leadership. This they could only achieve through thoroughly oppressive policies. They in turn have resulted in heroic resistance on the part of the Somali people which in the main has kept the Ethiopian colonial administration isolated in a few northern towns; among them Djibouti, Dire Dawa and Harar. In these few towns, however, the local people have been kept from participating in the administration and the governance of their area. Without any exception representatives of all kinds have been nominated by the Addis Ababa regime. They have all been drawn from the Ethiopian power structure and in turn have been supported by alien police and military — all recruited from the highland core of Ethiopia.

In consequence every attempt to expand the colonial forms of administration has been obliged everywhere to face the very active resistance of the Somali population. Hence over vast areas, Somali peoples successfully kept their independence within a territory elsewhere incorrectly considered as an Ethiopian colonial possession. This reality

Place
Hameis-Maro
Hickea
Hola-Bora
Gota
A'Asbuli
Koma
May'a-ayty
Da'awi
A'asa'eyla
Goroya-hela
Metati
A'asbuli
Koma
A'asbuli
Koma
Hameisa
Maro
Garaba
Hameisa, Bidaro
Liralu
Warabaley
A'adu Inkafelu
Hola-bora
A'ambo
A'ambo
Goroya-hela
Goroya-hela
Biradu
Metati
Meidalalici
Koma Hameis
Goroyo-hela
Ronti
Hola-bora Korti
A'adu Bidaro
Tolea
Inkafulu
Tolea
Karaba Robdaya
Medidalalici
Meidalalici
Kumbi Hameis
Affa'adu
Kaha maro
Inda'adu

Table 1

Place	Date	People	Cows	Camels	Sheep	Donkeys
Hameis-Maro	3.4.1971	38	1,327	271	3,631	39
Hickea	27.4.1971	103	5,871	160	2,525	—
Hola-Bora	8.5.1971					
Gota	8.5.1971					
A'Asbuli	8.5.1971	27	328	70	1,309	—
Koma	8.5.1971					
Thya'ayty	12.5.1971					
Da'awi	26.5.1971	73	3,713	368	5,343	113
A'asa'eyla	26.5.1971		755	—	—	—
Goroya-hela	27.5.1971					
Metati	27.5.1971					
A'Asbuli	26.6.1971	9	685	176	—	—
Koma	28.6.1971	21	435	—	1,617	—
A'Asbuli	28.6.1971					
Koma	28.6.1971	14	1,573	—	—	—
Hameisa	28.6.1971					
Maro	28.6.1971	16	1,670	—	4,911	—
Garaba	30.6.1971					
		301	16,357	1,045	19,336	152
Hameisa, Bidaro	3.7.1971	13	1,318	—	1,795	—
Liralu	7.7.1971	43	3,663	92	4,173	—
Warabaley	7.7.1971					
A'adu Inkafelu	9.7.1971	26	4,829	128	6,573	—
Hola-bora	16.7.1971	3	1,713	—	—	—
A'ambo	18.7.1971	17	233	—	2,721	—
A'ambo	19.7.1971	16	2,574	—	1,271	—
Goroya-hela	21.7.1971	9	—	79	352	—
Goroya-hela	23.7.1971	17	—	79	2,719	—
Biradu	23.7.1971					
Metati	27.7.1971					
		144	15,836	378	19,605	—
Meidalalici	6.8.1971	24	2,137	—	—	—
Koma Hameis						
Goroyo-hela						
Ronti	7.8.1971	11	6,682	—	—	—
Hola-bora Korti	9.8.1971	21	1,073	—	—	—
A'adu Bidaro						
Tolea	17.8.1971	43	6,175	—	—	—
Inkafulu	21.8.1971	33	3,972	—	5,673	—
Tolea	23.8.1971					
Karaba Robdaya						
Medidalalici	26.8.1971	6	2,163	—	—	—
Meidalalici						
Kumbi Hameis	27.8.1971	9	1,075	—	—	—
Affa'adu						
Kaha maro	29.8.1971	21	14,639	—	960	—
Inda'adu	30.8.1971	5	420	—	—	—
		173	38,336	—	6,633	—

Table 1 (cont'd)

Place	Date	People	Cows	Camels	Sheep	Donkeys
Inda'alu Tolea						
Inkafulu	1.9.1971	21	2,511	—	1,264	—
Hameis Meidalalici Kombi	3.9.1971	41	4,973	442	2,155	—
Tolea Gota						
Hola'bora	4.9.1971	10	2,342	—	3,823	—
Tolea	5.9.1971	9	9,710	112	—	—
		81	19,536	554	7,242	—
Maro Kaha	27.10.1971					
Affa'adu	30.10.1971	69	12,372	911	6,749	—
A'ambo Inkafulu	4.11.1971	27	1,957	45	2,218	—
		96	14,329	956	8,967	—
Iiralu	11.5.1964	9	1,131	—	—	—
Curitala	15.5.1964	22	675	—	2,216	—
Garba'ad Fucii	23.5.1964	33	1,893	471	5,252	32
Hola'bora Gota	28.5.1964	11	3,265	—	—	—
		75	6,964	471	7,468	32
Ma'ays Curitala						
Earer	11.7.1964	21	732	50	5,571	32
A'degan Finjo	19.7.1964	—	—	—	1,430	—
Hurso	23.7.1964	1	200	100	300	—
Gota	23.7.1964	—	157	—	43*	—
		22	1,089	150	7,344	32
Gota	5.9.1964	1	200	31	1,300	—
TOTAL		892	112,647	3,582	77,895	216

*Camels and sheep together

has always been a painful thorn in the side of the succession of shaky Ethiopian colonial administrations. Their response has been desperate — countless vain wars against the Somali people.

Indeed, wars — on the one hand Ethiopian colonial and punitive campaigns and on the other Somali liberation struggles — have ever since the colonialization of the Horn of Africa become part and parcel of the daily life of the people and the region.

Moreover, the vicious colonial wars conducted by the Ethiopian empire-state, as the Shoan Amhara struggle to retain their colonial conquests made during the scramble for Africa and continue to subject other nationalities, have come to deter-

mine the relation of the Horn of Africa to other geographical regions. Such wars have laid the foundation for the critical role of the Horn areas in international relations. It is the resulting situation that made it possible for imperialist powers — new and old — to involve themselves in the internal affairs of the countries of North Eastern Africa.

Conclusion — Western Somalis and the Future

It has been clearly demonstrated that the people of Western Somalia are subjected to political suppression, economic exploitation and social degradation. From the colonial point of view these policies have been and are still aimed to break the will of

Sheep

1,264

2,155

3,823

7,242

6,749

2,218

8,967

2,216

5,252

7,468

5,571

1,430

300

43*

7,344

1,300

7,895

the Somali people, to assimilate or displace them and in the long run to turn the colonized areas into integral parts of "Ethiopia proper." Even so, these same colonial policies have made the Somalis even more aware of their identity; their political consciousness has strengthened their will to survive all the colonial evils. The Somali people have been driven to understand their main problems, to recognize their number one enemy and her allies and on the other hand their very few friends. In short it has permitted them to locate "where the shoe pinches." This makes it essential to gather their own forces; to organize themselves and systematically to fight the enemy.

The colonial policy of Ethiopia has always been a provocation against the Somali people, forcing them to leave their homes and country. The depopulating of Western Somalia and the pushing of the Somali people, one by one, eastward, has to be seen as a manifestation of colonialism whereby the land is desired but the people are undesired. Such policies today are of course condemned to ultimate failure. Meantime, however, colonialism and foreign domination in Western Somalia is in clear violation of the fundamental rights of the Somali people. The people of Western Somalia and elsewhere have therefore no choice but to continue fighting until colonialism is put to an end.

of Africa to other ~~gen~~
have laid the foun-
the Horn areas in in-
the resulting situation
ocialist powers — new
lives in the internal
th Eastern Africa.

Colonialism and the Future

ed that the people of
to political suppres-
and social degrada-
f view these policies
to break the will of