

# SAYYID MOHAMED ABDILLE HASSAN AND THE CURRENT CONFLICT IN THE HORN

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The current conflict in the Horn of Africa provides a clear example of the recklessness and insensitivity involved in the West's apportionment of Africa during the notorious European scramble for African colonies at the turn of the last century. The partitioning of the nomadic Somalis' historical grazing lands resulted not only in hardships for those who found themselves separated from their fellow kinsmen by artificial boundaries, but sowed the seeds of future conflict. It now appears as though history is about to repeat itself. Now, as then, Somalia is faced with the grave and very real prospect of further dismemberment. The cast is altered, but the theme is the same. The principal actors then were Great Britain, playing the leading role, with France, Italy, and Ethiopia playing supporting roles. Today the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Israel, to a lesser extent, replace Britain and her European allies. While Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia found willing accomplices in his imperial designs, the Somalis had to rely mainly on their own meagre resources. New Colonel Mengistu has marshalled another awesome alliance against the Somalis who are once again without significant allies. Now, as then, Ethiopia's appeal for international aid against her Somali foe seems to carry greater weight. But the Somalis were not subdued then and are not likely to be subdued now.

During the partition of the Somalilands at the turn of the century, the predominantly nomadic and technologically backward Somalis managed to retain a modicum of independence and national integrity largely as a result of the exceptional leadership of Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan. He not only rallied his fellow countrymen against a host of formidable enemies, but he intellectually defined his people's cause. He also gave the British, Ethiopians, and their European allies a good fight before famine, pestilence and superior firepower reduced his rebel army to the status of desperate fugitives in the mosquito-infested swamps of the Shabelle River. But he died undaunted, singing his defiance of imperial domination to the grave as the following poem attests:

*Dacwaddaa wax loo qoray intii diinta Nebi raac-  
day  
Waxna loo dan leeyahay ninkii dawladnimo  
haysta*

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*Waxna looga digayaa kufriga ad u debcaysaan e.  
Dirhankuu idiin qubahayaad dib u go'aysaan e  
Kolka hore dabkuu idin ka dhigin dumar sidiisiye*

*.....  
Kolka xiga dalku idin ku oran duunyo dhaafsada  
e  
Kolka xiga dushu idin ka rarir sida dameereed e.  
Kol hadaan dhulkii Adari iyo Iimey dacad  
dhaafay  
Maxaad igaga digaataan berruu Siin la soo  
degin e.<sup>1</sup>*

This message is for those who pursue the Prophet's faith  
It is a warning against those who possess governments,  
They who have designs on Somalis [who are themselves without government]  
Behold how the infidel lays traps for you as you become less wary!  
The coins he dispenses so freely now will prove your undoing.  
First he will disarm you as though you were mere women  
He will then deceive you and rob you of your lands  
And then burden you with onerous loads as though you were donkeys.  
Ah! But what is the use of this warning? I have been driven past Harar and Iimey  
And he will even be here before long with the speed of his diabolical telegraph.<sup>2</sup>

These were the last words of the man who fought the British, the Italians, and Ethiopians for nearly twenty-one years (1899-1920) in order to keep his people free of foreign domination. Inevitably, he lost the fight, though he left behind a legacy of nationalism and spirited resistance to colonial rule that would be an example to those who came after him.

Mohamed Abdille Hassan, poet and nationalist, was born near Kob Fardod, 170 miles southeast of Berbera in 1864. The son of Abdille Hassan of the Bah Ge'ri, an Ogaden clan, he was raised among his mother's people, the Dhulbahante, in the Nugaal region of northeastern Somalia. Young Mohamed mastered the *Koran* at age seven under his able

1. Text according to Abdulqaadir F. Bootaan, *Murti iyo Sheekooyin* (Mogadishu, 1973), p. 90.

2. My translation.

teacher, Sheikh Abdille Arussi.<sup>3</sup> It was probably during these formative years that Mohamed developed the traditional martial skills of horsemanship and javelin-throwing that would prove indispensable during the Dervish fight for freedom. At nineteen Mohamed left home to acquire more learning in far away places, journeying to the learning centers of Islam in Eastern Africa: Harar and Mogadishu. It is also believed that he traveled as far afield as the Sudanese Mahdist strongholds in Kordofan. He returned to Berbera in Northern Somalia around 1891. He would soon marry and preach in that town and its immediate environs until his departure on his second trip abroad, this time to the Middle East, three years later. It was during his visit to the holy city of Mecca that he met Sheikh Muhammad Salih, the leader of a puritanical sect that preached spiritual regeneration and a return to Muslim orthodoxy. Mohamed returned to Berbera in 1895 and began preaching his new beliefs immediately. Berbera's residents, however, proved unreceptive and the Sheikh was compelled to seek converts among his mother's people in the interior.<sup>4</sup>

According to popular tradition, Mohamed Abdille Hassan left Berbera because he ran afoul of the British who were already officially established in that strategic port. The story goes that upon his return from *el-Hejaz*, the youthful sheikh was walking along the beach when he encountered a Briton also out on a stroll. This Englishman somehow offended the young mullah who, as a consequence, assaulted him physically; thus committing an unpardonable sin against Somalia's new rulers. Following this dramatic confrontation, the British resident issued a warrant for the immediate arrest of this young firebrand who was fast gaining a reputation as a trouble-maker among Berbera's more sedate inhabitants. Mohamed easily eluded the British snare. This incident would prove a prelude to his proverbial elusiveness in the following decades.

For whatever reasons, the Sayyid, as he was to be known henceforth, left Berbera and found a more receptive audience in the Nugaal where he successfully preached his message. He acquired there a reputation as a peacemaker and poet, enhancing his fame among the Somalis. It was also during these years that he began collecting donations in livestock (mainly horses and camels) and weapons to support his contemplated campaign against colonial forces established along the coastal regions.<sup>5</sup> The battle was finally joined in 1899 when the Sayyid's Dervishes

engaged forces sympathetic to the British in skirmishes around the key settlements of Bur'o and Sheikh. For more than twenty years thereafter, the Sayyid and his followers kept the armies of two major colonial powers (Britain and Italy), as well as that of Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia, at bay. It was a long and arduous struggle with many ups and downs for both sides and with continually shifting alliances. All in all, the British and their allies mounted five major military expeditions with thousands of well-trained soldiers and employing relatively modern rifles and Maxim guns. In the Third Expedition, for instance, more than 10,000 Europeans (including a contingent of white South Africans, veterans of the British-Boer war), Asians, Somalis and Ethiopians were pitted against the Sayyid's followers. Supported by a naval blockade, the expeditionary forces massed on three fronts (Berbera/Bur'o, Harar/Jigjiga, Hobya/Galkayo) for what was hoped to be a final blow to the elusive Mullah and his rebel army. But coordinating and leading so many mutually antagonistic and disparate nationalities was not going to be easy. "Within the encampment," wrote Douglas Jardine, the official British historian, "there was a strange medley of men drawn from many different corners of the Empire: from the British Isles, from South Africa, from the frontier of India, from Kenya, from the Nile, from the uplands of Central Africa, Boers and Sikhs and Sudanese . . ." <sup>6</sup> Jardine forgot to include in his impressive list the Ethiopians who were massed at Jigjiga.

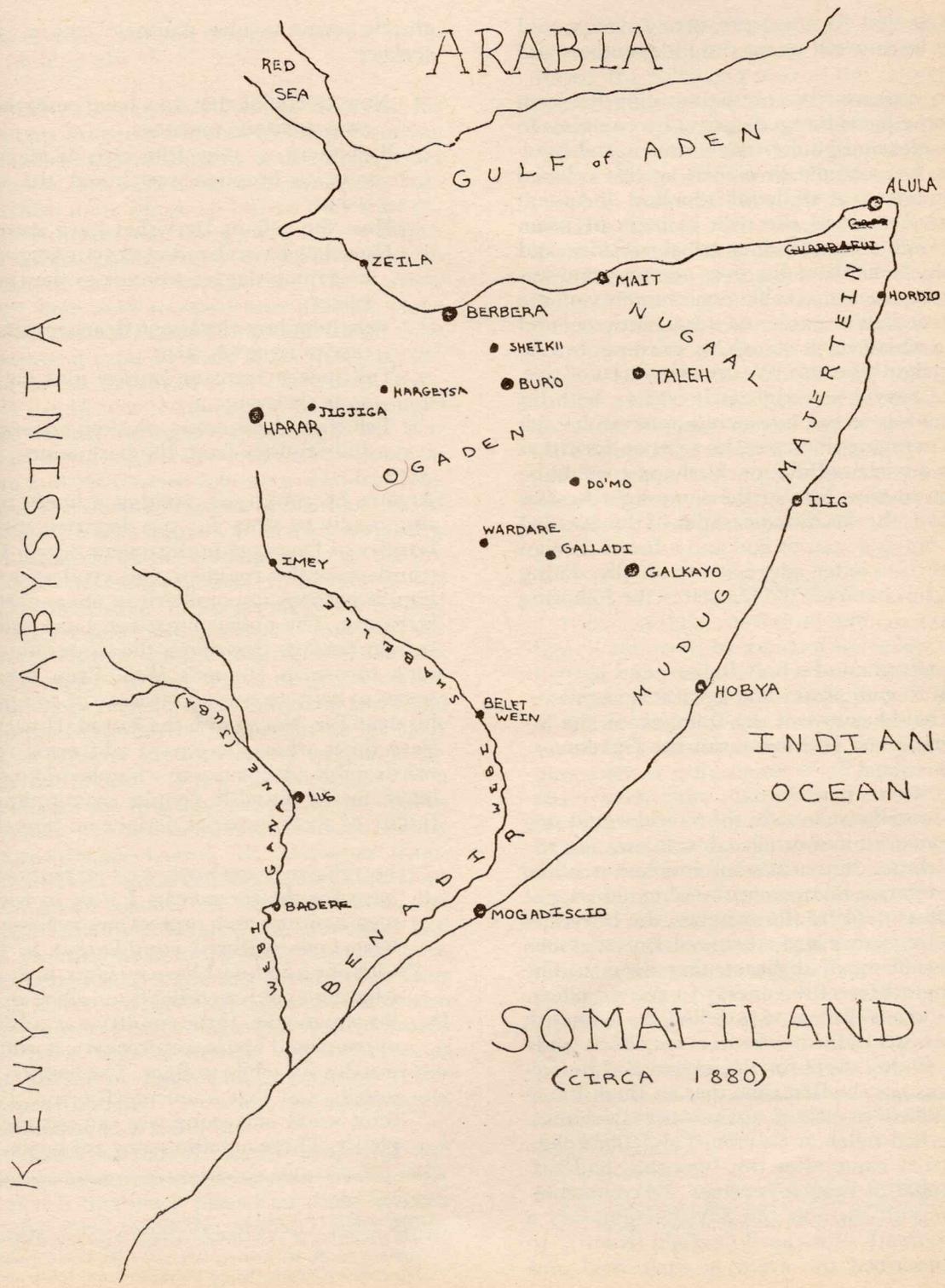
On 17 April 1903, a major battle was fought on Gumburo hill between Galladi and Wardare. Six days later a second battle was fought at Daratoleh on the Northern front. The British forces were routed on both occasions and one of the most expensive and most meticulously-planned colonial military expeditions in Africa came to an abrupt end. Though the shooting war subsided, the war of words continued unabated. After he was accused of availing himself of outside help, the Sayyid retaliated by pointing a finger at the British themselves who, in his own words, had joined with "Arabs, and Sudanese, and Kaffirs, and Perverts . . . and Indians . . . and French, and Russians, and Americans, and Italians

3. I. M. Lewis, *The Modern History of Somaliland* (New York: F. A. Praeger 1965), pp. 65-66.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

6. Douglas Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* (London, 1923), pp. 90-94.



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...” Adding that “if you were strong, you would have stood by yourself as we do, independent and free.”<sup>7</sup>

This was characteristic of the running battle of words that the Sayyid waged against his enemies. In sizzling epistles and in alternately caustic and cajoling poems, he not only inveighed against colonial domination but successfully rallied a host of contentious clansmen behind the twin banners of Islam and homeland. Transcending tribal loyalties and jealousies in Somaliland for over twenty years was one of the more remarkable achievements of the man. It is true that he exploited tribal sentiment and differences whenever it suited his purpose, but he did it to further his cause. We are convinced of this, because the Sayyid not only made war on both his maternal and paternal kinsmen whenever he felt they were betraying the cause, he went on record as disavowing any clan affiliation. Perhaps it would be appropriate to view him in the same light he saw himself, not as the charismatic leader of the dreaded *Daraawish* but as a man of god and a foe of foreign domination. In a letter addressed to an ally, dating from 1913, he characterized himself in the following manner:

I am a pilgrim and a holy fighter, and have no wish to gain power and greatness in this world, neither am I of the Dolbahante, the Warsangli, The Majertein, nor the Ogaden [Somali tribes].<sup>8</sup>

In his more combative moods, the Sayyid would sing a brilliant poem to immortalize a badly needed victory or celebrate the successful conclusion of an alliance or reiterate his uncompromising defiance of the imperialists. In 1913, for instance, the Dervishes won a decisive victory at the battle of Dul Madoobe after a long string of disheartening defeats. The commanding officer of the enemy forces, a particularly adventurous Briton, was felled by a dervish bullet at the onset of the battle, an event which made the victory doubly sweet for the Sayyid and his followers. It was not the first time that an Englishman had been killed in action against the Dervishes. Many more had fallen at Gumburo and Daratoleh. But the victory came after the Dervishes had suffered a number of notable reverses. To commemorate the Dervish victory, the Sayyid composed a poem, “The Death of Richard Corfield [Koofi],” in which he described the event in such vivid and

ghastly terms to give pause to future adventure-seekers:

Now Corfield! that you have embarked on  
your perilous journey;  
Tell them, if they [the already departed]  
care to question you about the upper  
world,  
How the valiant Dervishes have slain you;  
How they have abandoned your corpse with  
its gaping dagger-wounds to the carrion-  
eaters;  
Tell them how the hyena dragged your car-  
cass to its grisly den;  
Tell how it tore the muscle and fat from  
your skeleton;  
Tell them how crows plucked your sinews  
and tendons from the bare bone . . . <sup>9</sup>

And so he continued, reciting a litany of horrors supposedly in store for the departed infidel. The ferocity of language in this poem, which I can only translate in the roughest and crudest approximation, is perhaps unparalleled in the annals of world literature. The only comparison I can think of is a certain passage describing the desecration of Hector's corpse in Homer's *Iliad*. Even here Homer seems to betray a certain measure of compassion for his dead foe. Not so with the Sayyid. However, there were times when the Sayyid addressed reasonable words to his adversaries as when he indited an open letter to the English people, expounding on the futility of their imperial designs on Somaliland:

I say, listen to my words and mark them. We have fought for a year. I wish to rule my own country and protect my religion. We have both suffered considerably in battle with one another. I have no forts, no houses. I have no cultivated fields, no silver or gold for you to take. If the country was cultivated or contained houses or property, it would be worth your while to fight. The country is all jungle, and that is no use for you. If you want wood and stone you can get them in plenty. There are also many ant-heaps. The

7. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

9. My translation of a condensed version of the Sayyid's poem. For the full text see B. W. Andrzejewsky and I. M. Lewis, *Somali Poetry: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 73-75.

sun is very hot. All you can get from me is war, nothing else.<sup>10</sup>

The alternative, he explained, was for him and his men to 'eat up' his herds and start trekking from one end of Somalia's vast arid plains to the other, living off the land as they went along and continually harassing British units where and when they least expected it.<sup>11</sup> However, one thing going for the British was their glacial patience and unshakable faith in their ultimate military superiority. They wisely bided their time until an opportune moment came to deal with the 'Mad Mullah' once and for all. The awaited moment came in early 1920, following the conclusion of the European War. The British, making ample use of new technological breakthroughs in modern warfare during and following World War I, mounted a swift and well-coordinated assault on the Sayyid and his Dervish followers (who had long abandoned the demanding and precarious life of the guerrilla for the secure and settled ways of a typical Muslim commune, made possible by the impressive and near-impregnable fortifications the Sayyid had constructed for his people in the Nugaal Valley). None could have predicted then that the enemy would employ aerial bombardment to breach the Dervish defenses. But this is exactly what the British did. They staged a combined naval and aerial assault on the Dervishes' main positions in the early morning of January 21, with twelve warplanes involved in the attack.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the aeroplane, as a weapon, was for the first time used in Africa against Somali rebels. Nevertheless, even though nearly 4,000 expeditionary troops, 12 warplanes (iron-birds as the Sayyid would call them), and 3 warships went into action against the Dervish forces, the battle might still have favored the Dervishes had they not foolishly abandoned their fortified positions for open ground at the first aerial strike. They had ample stores and the 'Z' squadron of the British Air Force, however psychologically effective, would not have been "able to destroy the fortresses at Madisha, Jid Ali, or Taleh with its relatively feeble twenty-pound bombs."<sup>13</sup> At worst, the battle would have culminated in a stand-off.

Miraculously, the Sayyid escaped unscathed and made his way westward to the Ogaden. The British, furious at this final trick played on them by their elusive adversary, razed the Mullah's forts to the

ground with tons of imported dynamite. The Sayyid himself, a sick old man by now, died of influenza during the following year at the religious community of Iimey on the Shabelle (Leopard) River while vainly attempting to recoup his losses. With him, all visible signs of the Dervish fight for freedom disappeared. But the indomitable Sayyid lives on in his peoples' memory through his rousing poetry—which is forever recited and cherished and which, along with his lively correspondence, represents a significant body of anti-colonial ideological thought. Other African nationalists, such as the Mahdists and the Maji-Maji, strove against colonial domination, but none quite as clearly articulated the issues involved. In some ways, the Sayyid belonged to a revivalist religious tradition reaching back to the Sudanese Mahdist movement of the 1880's and to the even earlier reformist *jihads* in the western Sudan. In other, and more important, ways he was a twentieth century nationalist, a first-rate guerrilla tactician, and a great poet.

### Conclusion

Today, as then, the Sayyid remains a controversial figure, abhorred by many of his fellow countrymen for his excesses while revered by others for his exemplary courage and intelligence. It is a measure of that intelligence that the issues he addressed then are today's headlines because the Somalis, though possessed of a fierce sense of independence, have never been quite masters of their own fate. Their very sense of independence and love of freedom have made the development of native central authority nearly impossible until recent times, thus encouraging better organized and disciplined outsiders to intervene almost at will in matters Somali. This has occurred through the centuries and continues to threaten the very independence the Somalis so highly value. The current conflict in the Horn of Africa is a legacy of that contradiction in the Somali way of life, a contradiction that the Sayyid clearly perceived and vainly tried to reconcile.

10. Jardine, *Mad Mullah*, p. 122. Jardine's translation of the Sayyid's letter is condensed to save space.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-70.

13. Robert L. Hess, "The Poor Man of God—Muhammad Abdulla Hassan," in *Leadership in Eastern Africa: Six Biographies*, Norman R. Bennett, ed. (Boston: Boston University Press, 1968), p. 96.