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A LINGUISTIC OUTLINE OF EARLY SOMALI HISTORY

By

Mohamed Nuuh Ali

Historical writing on Somalia, both in the earlier colonial period and since independence in 1960, has been dominated by political concerns. Colonial historians directed their attention to historical processes of expansion, occupation, and conflict--processes which affected orderly administration and the stabilization of frontiers. Research directed to such ends was not without scholarly merit. Oral traditions and ethnographic information gathered by these early colonial historians have provided modern historians with many fruitful insights into Somali culture and society. However, most colonial researchers were not historians as such, and their work could not be expected to deal systematically with historical problems that lay manifestly beyond the scope of colonial administration and development.

Colonial historiography, preoccupied with frontiers of expansion, has produced a somewhat static image of early Somali history. The regional diversity of the Horn suggests that it is time to look at patterns of change over more expansive areas and to supplement migration studies with greater attention on social and economic history, ethno-genesis, and ecological adaptations.

Methodological developments in the reconstruction of histories of early cultures have enabled historians to investigate social, political and economic transformations in these cultures. The linguistic predominance of one community over another by virtue of an economic advantage has been demonstrated by Ehret [1979] with respect to the cattle culture and grain production of the Nilotes and Cushites as adopted by the Eastern Bantu. Ehret examined patterns of loanword occurrence in specific semantic domains, i.e., livestock raising and cultivation, and found that it was possible to reconstruct the nature of the interaction between two communities. This study seeks to apply this method in reconstructing the early history of the Eastern Horn. After compiling and collating dialect vocabularies of pastoral and agricultural Somali social and economic practices, we identify the patterns of word-retention and word-borrowing in economic and political domains, such as herding and age-grading. Dialect comparisons among the Somalis with respect to the vocabulary of these and other areas of culture may be expected to reveal common elements which are retentions of Cushitic features, as well as innovations which occur in the process of borrowing. Thus, an historical reconstruction employing linguistic tools in addition to other historical methods is strong

enough to improve upon previous descriptive/ethnographic works by analyzing the several strata present in the Somali lexicon from the perspective of the dichotomy between intrinsic and borrowed elements. Analysis of the dynamics of the social, political, and economic interactions between Somalis and others as revealed in the frequencies of loanwords in the various lexical domains investigated here yield an interpretation of Somali pre-colonial history, independent of the assertions found in oral tradition.

The preponderant trend of proto-Somali migration and expansion has been from south to north rather than the reverse. The proto-Somali community in its initial expansion, somewhere in the time span 400-800 A.D., interacted with the earlier cultivators and hunter-gatherers in the region, from which emerged the dominance of the Somali language. Under this blending situation the proto-Somali language diverged into two earlier dialects, Coastal-Northern and Riverine. From the modern geographical distribution of the proto-Coastal-Northern their homeland area might be between the Shebelle River and the Benadir Coast. Similarly the distribution of the Riverine dialects suggests the area between the Juba and Shebelle Rivers as the general region of origin of the proto-Somali community.

The first clearly written reference to the Somali speaking people is found in the writings of the 11th century al-Idrisi and thirteenth century ibn-Said. Here we learn that Marka, which consisted of more than fifty villages, was the capital of one of the Somali ethnic groups. Today this area is the home of those same groups, which suggests that the Marka region was occupied continuously by the same group for the last 800 years. The earliest written evidence, therefore, coincides with linguistic evidence in placing coastal Somali in the south in the 12th century.

The next reference to the Somali is contained in a song of King Yesaq of Abyssinia, who reigned from 1414 to 1429. In this song the name "Somali" is first recorded. This also suggests that Somalis were established far to the north.

A third early document containing reference of Somali groups is an Arabic chronicle dealing with the Jihad wars of Axmed Gurey against the Abyssinian empire. The Somali groups mentioned in the Futuh al-Habasha are generally those still inhabiting Northwestern Somalia. The implication of this work written between 1540 and 1550 is therefore that the composition of the Somali population of Northwest Somalia has not changed since then. Again this accords with the linguistic evidence placing the Northern Somali settlement before the fifteenth century. But what should be noted here is that up and until recently, the Arabs were not aware of the differences between the Ethiopic

and the Cushitic speaking peoples in Northeast Africa. The fragmentary general descriptions of the documents cannot tell us anything about the early history of the Somali speaking peoples, and they do not lead either to or away from hypotheses of major population movements. They only give an impression of stability in the Horn of Africa in both the way of life and the occupation of certain Somali communities.

For a more accurate reconstruction of this early period, there are essentially two academic disciplines at the disposal of the historian, namely: archeology and linguistics. In the absence of relevant archeological data, the ideal correlation of the two kinds of evidence must await future research. For the moment, we shall confine our investigation to linguistic evidence to examine development of the early history of the Horn. Through the use of the principles of historical linguistics, and especially of migration and dispersal theory as developed and used by Sapir [1916], Greenberg [1963], Fleming [1964], Bender [1971], Ehret [1974], Sasse [1975], and Heine [1976], it is possible to derive from linguistic data hypotheses as to the "genetic" relations among languages, centers of origin and dispersal, and directions of population movements.

For the purposes of this analysis, the following questions are pertinent: (a) Within a set of linguistic relationships, what are the associated population movements? (b) What are the main causes of these movements? (c) When did these movements take place? In this regard, it is important to identify the earlier population in the area.

Current hypotheses suggest that there were two earlier populations inhabiting the Horn prior to the proto-Somali. These early populations are said to have contained at least two culturally divergent groups: "the major segment consisted of cultivators living as sedentaries along the Juba and Shebelle Rivers and in fertile pockets between them" [Lewis 1960:216]. The second group was composed of hunter-gatherers and fishermen, in between or far off the riverine settlements. These two communities were utilizing different ecological niches, presumably co-existing in a symbiotic relationship. The riverine communities are often presumed to have been former Bantu. Our evidence about the early inhabitants of the Horn is inadequate. So far archeology and linguistics have no evidence of a pre-Somali settlement of Bantu. If there was no Bantu people, who preceded the Somali in the Horn? The question cannot yet be answered.

The actual causes of the proto-Somali expansion are not known. It has been suggested that it has something to do with the adoption of the camel, but it may well have been due to population pressures or other environmental factors.

But a linguistic indication exists as to the specific mechanism of the social and political organization of the proto-Somali expansion. The proto-Sam word **qoolo* means "tribe", a kin-defined grouping, in Somali, but in Rendille it refers to "age set." It is difficult to see how a kin group could change into an age set. It is not difficult to propose a history of age sets turning into kin groups. The proto-Somali could have been organized around age principles in which young men were initiated into an age set, and each stage of the age set could have had a different role in the government of the society, in carrying on activities such as warfare or whatever they might have responsibilities for. If age mates, as they came of age, formed age settlements, spreading out with their herds and their wives into new grazing areas, they would need some of the basis for social cohesion as their children grew up. They would have reason to take up the existing idiom of kinship and begin to consider themselves tribe groups. Age set settlements could have been the enabling institution that allowed the first expansions of the proto-Somali community, changing into "tribes" as the new units became too large and began to consist of too many generations of people.

Disagreements exist concerning the socio-economic structure of the proto-Somali speakers. Murdock maintains that their subsistence was based on arable agriculture supplemented by livestock and by commerce with the coastal towns. Harold Fleming suggests that they adopted their camel economy only later at roughly the same time as acquiring Islam. Heine with substantial linguistic evidence demonstrates that the proto-Somali economy contained pastoral elements, based on camel herding. But the problem with linguistic evidence on this point is that half the data must come from the Rendille, who are not cultivators today but camel herders. Heine's linguistic analysis doesn't explain the presence of proto-Somali cultivation and cattle vocabulary, which are available widely in both Coastal-Northern and Riverine dialects, as demonstrated below. Specialized proto-Somali vocabulary involving camels include the following items:

<i>qaalin</i>	'young female/male camel'
<i>kor</i>	'camel-bell'
<i>kurus</i>	'hump of a camel'
<i>awr</i>	'adult male camel'

The linguistic evidence for cattle herding are adequate to suggest that the proto-Somali were cattle herders as well.

These are:

<i>saŋ</i>	'cow'
<i>lo'</i>	'cattle'
<i>qaalin</i>	'young female/male cow'
<i>weyl</i>	'calf'

A significant cultivation vocabulary can be traced to the proto-Somali era, including such words as:

<i>got</i>	'to dig, to cultivate'
<i>masango</i>	'sorghum'
<i>mooye</i>	'mortar'
<i>kibis</i>	'bread'

The present linguistic evidence suggests that the descendant communities of proto-Sam began at a fairly early period to contain three components: (1) Rendille, predominantly camel herders; (2) Aweera, predominantly hunter-gatherers co-existing with the Somali herders; and (3) the proto-Somali who had a mixed agriculture with a notable component of livestock raising. Quite possibly some Somali were primarily mixed cultivators and others primarily stock-raisers even at this early point (c.500-1000 A.D.).

The arrival of the proto-Somali in the Horn resulted in an intensive interaction with earlier agricultural groups, from which emerged the dominance of the Somali language. In between or away from the riverine environment, it would seem that the hunter-gatherers were absorbed by the proto-Somali pastoralists since they were perhaps numerically fewer, and it was this component that has been later identified as Coastal-Northern.

The context of this interaction should be viewed as a situation in which three groups having three different life-styles were co-existing in a symbiotic relationship, utilizing different ecological niches. The Somali culture emerged from this blending situation in which all the three communities made linguistic contributions to the earlier populations.

During the third millenia B.C. the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa had begun to be involved in an international trade. Available evidence shows that the Egyptians were the first people to deal with the Horn. Some time before the third century B.C., south Arabian maritime states created for themselves extensive trade connections, which monopolized the trade of the Horn for centuries afterwards.

The writer of the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, writing around the first century A.D., reported a number of commercial towns he visited on the Somali coast, the most important of which were Avalites (suggested to be Zeylac by A. A. Xirsi), Malao (Berbera), Mundis (Xiis) and a number of other settlements southwards down the Indian Ocean coast. The present linguistic analysis is silent on the early inhabitants of those pre-Islamic coastal towns of the Periplus period and on the language spoken outside the towns.

During the later eras of the proto-Coastal-Northern expansion, the Arabs and Persians had begun to establish strongholds

along the shores of the Horn. From their interaction with the Coastal-Northern group a new culture and society emerged, in which Arab merchant capitalists and proselytisers appear to have entered into an emerging Somali ruling class. This culture was largely urban in outlook.

Islamic penetration was aided by the establishment of Islamic sultanates around such trading centers and urban areas. Among the earliest important coastal towns were Zeylac and Berbera, and as the trade contacts between the Arabian peninsula and the Horn intensified, we have the emergence of a series of other settlements appearing all along the coast, among them Muqdishu, Marka and Barawa.

Judging from some later examples of what happened to immigrants coming from across the Red Sea and from indications in written and oral records, we can expect that they established local marriage relations with the proto-Coastal-Northern groups. In establishing solid relations with the local population in the region, they acquired the necessary basis for securing their trading positions. The Coastal-Northern group also found it beneficial to make these trade relations. Then, over time, it would seem that those southwestern Asian immigrants began to parlay their economically focal positions. So by 1000 A.D., we begin to have small sultanates in Zeylac, Berbera and Muqdishu, leading to the development of ruling families. As a result, we find a member of a ruling family, partly descending from the coastal-Somali group and speaking a coastal dialect, ironically also claiming an Arab ancestry.

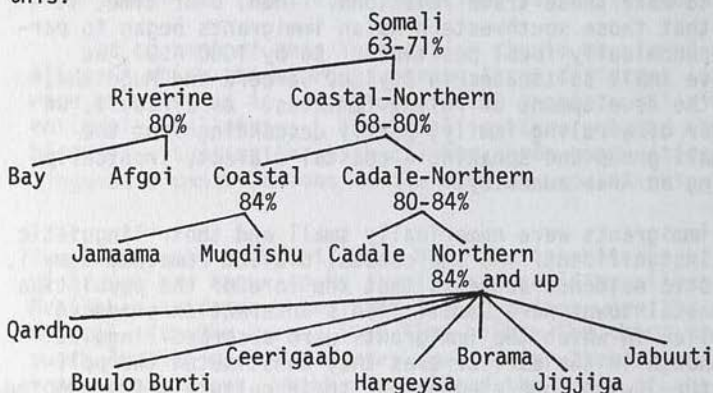
These immigrants were numerically small and their linguistic impact was insignificant. As the coastal dialect remained Somali, this linguistic evidence suggests that the core of the population in those coastal towns were Somali. This interaction produced a social milieu in which the immigrants were absorbed linguistically even though in the earlier eras they constituted the political structure, with some elements of their culture being adopted. By the twelfth century A.D., the whole of the northern coast had adopted Islam, as the Arab historian Yaqut claims, thereby laying the basis for the expansion of Islam into the interior of Somalia [Huntingford 1955:19].

The linguistic analysis of the Northern dialect reflects differentiation and convergence. It suggests a picture of a lot of movements and influences within the Northern dialect group, perhaps in a situation whereby some of those dialects were absorbing others. The differentiation of the Northern dialects fits the time depth of the existing oral traditions which indicate a north-south expansion. The initial phase of the early Somali history was marked by south-north migrations, but from the beginning of the tenth century, the direction of movement

was reversed as some of the Islamized communities from the northern dialect area moved southward, specifically into areas occupied by the Riverine dialect groups. Lewis suggests that an increasing immigration from Arabia might have been a contributing factor [Lewis 1960:220].

Summary of Dialect Differentiation

In the general process of dialect differentiation, the later first millenium saw a split of the proto-Coastal-Northern dialect into proto-Cadale-Northern and proto-Coastal divisions. Then in the succeeding stage of differentiation we have proto-Coastal splitting into two minor (i.e., historically more recent) dialects--Muqdishu and Jamaame (possibly also Zeylac, Berbera and Marka?), while the Northern dialect diverged early in the present millenium into Cadale and Northern. Then from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onward, the latter dialect split into a number of minor ones such as Buulo-Burti, Qardho, Ceerigaabo, Hargeysa, Borama, Jigjiga and Jabuuti, encompassing all of central, western and northern Somalia. In the meantime, the Riverine major dialect gave rise to two minor dialects, Afgoi and Bay. A graphic picture of this process looks like this:



As part of the expansion of the Northern Somali, the direction of Somali movement was reversed as some of the Islamized communities from the pastoral Northern dialect areas moved southward, specifically into areas occupied by earlier Somali dialects.

We have attempted here to outline the structure of the early Somali history. The tasks awaiting the student of the early history of the Somali people involve gathering more cultural and linguistic evidence, producing deeper and more detailed studies built on this evidence, and correlating archeological findings and studies with oral and written sources. The serious lack of data on the earlier languages and societies can then be rectified. This effort will give a correct picture of the par-

ticular eras and instances of contact between the proto-Somali and the earlier population in the region, and the later contacts with the Southwestern Asian immigrants.

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