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April 10, 2024

Shaping Somali Society: The Impact of the Somali Civil War on Religious Adherence and
Identity

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Religion

2024

Abstract

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By Marwah Ismail

This thesis explores the dramatic transformation of Somali culture from being influenced by socialist, liberal, and Western ideals to a state marked by extremism in less than four decades. It delves into Somalia's pre-colonial religious diversity, the impact of colonial rule, the aspirations and upheavals of the post-colonial period, and the eventual rise of extremism. Through historical analysis combined with personal narratives from individuals directly affected by these changes, this study highlights the complex interplay of historical, religious, and sociopolitical factors contributing to this rapid cultural shift.

This examination begins with Somalia's rich pre-colonial religious landscape, highlighting the synthesis of traditional beliefs, Islam, and Judeo-Christian influences. It then transitions to the post-colonial era, focusing on the interaction between religion, culture, and modernization under socialism. This thesis further explores the devastating impact of the Somali Civil War, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of Somalis amidst the conflict. Finally, it addresses the rise of extremism, particularly the influence of Al-Shabaab, mapping the radical ideological shift in Somali society.

Personal stories from those who lived through these periods enrich the thesis, providing depth and insight into how these sweeping changes affected individuals and communities. This approach not only showcases the complex journey of Somali culture over four tumultuous decades but also sheds light on the enduring spirit and resilience of its people. Through this blend of historical analysis and lived experiences, this thesis offers an in-depth understanding of Somalia's profound cultural transformation.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. James Hoesterey. His unwavering patience, guidance, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this journey. Additionally, I am deeply thankful to my committee members, Dr. Christine Ristaino and Dr. Sam Cherribi, for their incredible support and flexibility throughout this project. Furthermore, I'd like to thank my Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry mentor, Grayden McCashen, for his extensive feedback, efforts, and mentorship to ensure the success of this thesis. I am incredibly grateful for you all.

I also wish to thank and express my profound appreciation to my wonderful mother, whose tireless efforts have ensured that the voices of our community and culture are represented in this work. Moreover, I am immensely grateful to the individuals who shared their vulnerable life stories with me for the oral history interviews. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your courage and for letting me capture your truth. Through this thesis, your stories and legacies will live on forever.

Dalla Sabbia Alle Stelle
Marwah (Mari) Ismail
June 2023

*My blood is from the East,
from the Great Horn on the coast.
I am made from sand and ivory.
Golden and warm.
I am from the land of the Great Lakes,
the water as free and fresh as I hope to be.*

*I'm from a long line of women
who don't take 'no' for an answer.
I am the first in my family
for many things I am proud of.*

*Under the stars, I pray
for guidance and success,
for strength to carry my legacy,
and to be the woman I was destined to be.*

From the Sand to the Stars
Marwah (Mari) Ismail
Giugno 2023

*Il mio sangue viene dall'est
dal Grande Corno sulla costa.
Sono fatta di sabbia e di avorio.
Dorato e caldo.
Vengo dalla terra dei Grandi Laghi,
l'acqua libera e fresca come spero di essere.*

*Vengo da una lunga stirpe di donne
che non accettano 'no' come risposta.
Sono la prima della mia famiglia per molte
cose di cui sono orgogliosa.*

*Sotto le stelle, prego
di avere guida e successo,
di avere la forza di portare avanti la mia
eredità,
e di essere la donna che ero destinata di
essere.*

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Introduction

Whenever I visit Somalia, I wear floor-length skirts and long-sleeved dresses with a jilbab¹ when outdoors rather than my usual t-shirt and shorts, despite temperatures reaching over 90°F. The local customs for women today differ drastically from those in the United States. Intrigued by elderly family members' stories of coeducational classrooms and women's unrestricted attire in Somalia, I contemplated the cultural shifts that occurred over time and the divergence in cultural expectations between my generation and my foremothers.

In this study, I am exploring this cultural evolution. The Somali Civil War, characterized by sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and diaspora, has been the catalyst of cultural adoption and integration of Sharia Law among Somalis. This conflict led to a complex adaptation of religious practices and beliefs during and after the war, enforcing religious strictness and contributing to the current state of Somali cultural identity.

In this thesis, I undertake a journey through Somalia's complex history, starting from its pre-colonial religious diversity to the profound impact of colonialism and the tumultuous post-colonial era, which is intricately woven to explore the dramatic shift in the country's cultural landscape. Each chapter delves into different facets of Somali society, religion, and politics, providing a comprehensive overview of how these elements have influenced and been transformed by historical events and ideologies.

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I take a deeper dive into the post-colonial era, the Somali Civil War, and the influence of extremism, respectively. These chapters are uniquely connected through the inclusion of three oral histories from individuals interviewed, each reflecting on their experiences and perspectives related to the themes and arguments presented in their respective

¹ A jilbab is a type of garment often worn by Muslim women, designed to cover the body except for the face, hands, and feet.

chapters. These personal narratives enrich the thesis by providing lived experiences that illustrate the impact of the historical and socio-political analysis discussed.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by exploring Somalia's religious history, highlighting the coexistence of traditional Somali religions, such as Waaqism, with the advent of Islam in Somalia and the influences of Judeo-Christian traditions prior to and during colonialism. This chapter serves as a foundation for understanding the diverse religious influences that have shaped Somali society and how colonialism introduced new dynamics into this religious landscape.

Chapter 2 focuses on the period between the 1960s and the onset of the civil war, examining how religion and culture interacted with the forces of modernization and socialism. The oral history included here offers insights into the lived experience of a Somali woman during this transformative era, bridging the gap between the broader historical narrative and individual experiences.

Chapter 3 addresses the devastating impact of the Somali Civil War on religious culture and societal structures. Through the personal story of a Somali Navy Seaman turned medical interpreter and small business owner in the United States, this chapter highlights the resilience and adaptability of Somalis in the face of conflict and displacement.

Chapter 4 delves into the rise of extremism in Somalia, with a focus on Al-Shabaab and its implications for Somali society. The oral history in this chapter provides a personal perspective on the challenges and changes brought about by the rise of extremist ideologies, further illustrating the thesis's overarching question of how Somalia's culture shifted so drastically in less than 40 years.

This thesis not only offers a comprehensive analysis of Somalia's historical and cultural evolution but also humanizes the narrative through the inclusion of oral histories. These personal accounts add depth to the exploration of how Somalia transitioned from a nation influenced by socialist, liberal, and Western ideologies to one grappling with extremism, all within a span of less than four decades, highlighting the complex interplay between history, culture, and individual experiences.

Chapter I: Religious History of Pre-Colonial and Colonial Somalia

In the late 19th century, prior to the influence of British, Italian, and French colonial powers, Somalia contained a rich mixture of religious beliefs and practices, encompassing traditional Somali religions such as Waaqism and the emergence of Islam alongside Judeo-Christian influences. However, during the colonial period, significant shifts occurred in the religious culture and societal structure of Somali people. This chapter explores the historical evolution of these pre-colonial religious traditions, shedding light on their influence on Somali culture and society prior to colonialism. Furthermore, this chapter delves into the history of colonization in Somalia and its profound impacts on religious culture during the colonialization period and during Ethiopian and Kenyan occupation, examining the interplay between colonial policies and indigenous religious practices, including the spread of Islam, the Judeo-Christian influence, and the resilience of traditional beliefs.

Traditional Somali Religions and Practices

Central to pre-Islamic Somali spirituality was Waaqism, a monotheistic belief system that worshipped Waaq, the sky god. This indigenous religion emphasized harmony with the environment and community, guiding moral and social norms within Somali clans. Even today, Waaqism influences modern-day Somali culture, especially through language. In Mohamed Haji Mukhtar's *Historical Dictionary of Somalia New Edition*, Mukhtar explains that “Waaq is also used in clan names such as Jidwaaq (the path of God) ... The Somali expression for abundance and plenty is barwaaqo, an ancient word that appears to be a compound of bar meaning 'place' or 'property' and Waaq 'God'; thus, barwaaqo is 'the place or property of God,’”² With Barwaaqo

² Mukhtar, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia New Edition*, 2003, p. 259

being a common Somali name for daughters, this is one of the many examples of Waaqism's influence that can be seen within Somali culture today.

Judeo-Christian Influences in Pre-Colonial Somalia

Though Islam became dominant, evidence suggests the presence of Judeo-Christian influences prior to the widespread adoption of Islam. Through Ben Aram's work, *Somalia's Judeo-Christian Heritage: A Preliminary Survey*, the historical intertwining of Judeo-Christian influences within Somalia is shown through a variety of written records, archaeological discoveries, and cultural remnants. Ancient texts, such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and Arab historical accounts from the 10th to 12th centuries, detail Somalia's early interactions with civilizations bearing Judeo-Christian traditions, notably stating Seylac (Zeila) as a Christian city in Somalia prior to its Islamic dominance. European explorers and Somali archaeologists have unearthed ruins and artifacts suggestive of Christian worship, including church-like structures and crosses, underscoring a tangible Christian presence. Moreover, Somali clan genealogies and cultural practices hint at deep-rooted Judeo-Christian legacies; several clans are believed to have Jewish origins and cultural symbols, for example, the cross are used in protective rites and oath-taking. Additionally, the preservation of Biblical names uncommon in the Muslim world, such as Isxaaq (Isaac) and Makahiil (Michael), further attests to the historical influence of Judeo-Christianity in the region. These multifaceted sources reveal the diverse religious landscape of Somalia's past, highlighting the role of Judeo-Christian traditions prior to the establishment of Islam.³

The Emergence of Islam in Somalia

³ Aram, *Somalia's Judeo-Christian Heritage: A Preliminary Survey*, 2003, p. 3

Tracing Islam's historical journey in Somalia reveals an engaging story of faith intertwined with the socio-political landscape, particularly during the colonial era. As Islam was embraced in Somalia well before the colonial period, it soon became not just a religion but a defining element of Somali identity and resistance. European colonial rule provoked a sense of religious nationalism among Somalis, who used Islam as a marker of identity and resistance against foreign domination.

Many Somalis claim that their ancestors were converted to Islam before the Hijra to Medina, Islam's first capital city. All Somalis are Sunni and follow the Shafi'i school of thought ... Muslim (Arab, Persian, and Indian) migrants and merchants ... established refugee ports along the southern Banadir shores that later traded intensively with the Arabian peninsula ... The tariqa⁴ effectively Islamized the whole region and played a crucial role in the fight against colonialism and in fostering nationalist sentiment.⁵

This historical narrative highlights the deep roots of Islam in Somali society and its role in uniting Somalis against colonial imposition. The tariqa's role in spreading Islam and fostering a sense of community and resistance highlights the emergence of religious nationalism. This period laid the groundwork for the later importance of Islam in Somali nationalist movements and the post-colonial state, illustrating the enduring influence of Islam as a cornerstone of Somali identity and resistance against foreign control.

The pre-colonial religious history of Somalia is characterized by a rich mixture and influence of various beliefs and practices. From the indigenous religion of Waaqism to the subtle influences of Judeo-Christian traditions and the profound impact of Islam, these varied religious

⁴ Orders

⁵ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 119 -129

expressions have collectively shaped the Somali cultural and spiritual identity. This historical context provides a crucial foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the Somali Civil War's impact on the cultural adoption and integration of Sharia Law among Somalis, as detailed in the subsequent sections of the paper.

The Colonial Powers and Their Influence

The colonization of Somalia by European powers, which began in the late 19th century and ended in the mid-20th century, significantly transformed the religious culture and societal structure of the Somali people. Italy's colonization efforts in southern Somalia and Britain's administration in the north each had unique impacts on the religious dynamics within the region, notably influencing the spread of Islam and the re-introduction of Christianity. Against these colonial efforts, the influence of Islam grew, in part, as a unifying force against colonial rule. This growth was facilitated through the use of language and customs, reinforcing Islam's role within Somali society. An interesting facet of this period was the linguistic aspect of official contact with the outside world. Prior to and during colonization, Somalia's official contact with the outside world was predominantly conducted in Arabic, a testament to the historical and cultural connections between Somalia and the Arab world. This tradition meant that "... all colonial agreements between Somalis and foreigners had an Arabic text beside the colonial language, be it Italian, English, or French."⁶ This bilingual or sometimes trilingual documentation reflects the complex interplay between colonial powers and the Somali people, highlighting the importance of language as both a tool of administration and a symbol of sovereignty and identity.

⁶ Mukhtar, *Arabic Sources on Somalia*, 1987, p. 151



Vintage stamps celebrating Somalia's fruit exports in Arabic
Source: [Tumblr](#)

Italian Somaliland

Italy's influence into the Horn of Africa in the late 19th century culminated in the establishment of control over parts of southern Somalia, an area later designated as Italian Somaliland. This colonial venture began in the 1880s, with Italy securing treaties with local Somali sultans and leaders that allowed them to gain a foothold in the region. By the early 20th century, Italian influence had significantly expanded, characterized by both infrastructural development and administrative consolidation.

The imposition of colonial rule in Italian Somaliland was not just an economic or political enterprise but also carried with it cultural and religious dimensions. Italy, like other colonial powers, sought to assert its culture and religion, which, in the context of predominantly Muslim Somali territories, translated into attempts at Christianization. These efforts were met with varied responses from the Somali population, ranging from passive resistance to active

opposition. The resilience and spread of Islam during this period can be attributed to several factors, including the role of Sufi orders, which were instrumental in mobilizing resistance against colonial rule and in reinforcing Islamic identity among Somalis.

Somali resistance to Italian rule and attempts at conversion was epitomized by figures such as Sheikh Hassan Barsane, who led a prolonged resistance against Italian forces, and the Dervish movement led by Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, which fought against both British and Italian forces in defense of Somali autonomy and Islamic faith. These movements, deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and practices, underscored the failure of conversion attempts and highlighted the central role of Islam in Somali resistance to colonialism.

Furthermore, the Italian administration in southern Somalia implemented policies that, while aimed at consolidating control, often indirectly facilitated the spread of Islam. For instance, the colonial infrastructure projects, such as the construction of railways and roads, such as the Mogadishu-Villabruzzi Railway, inadvertently improved mobility for local Muslim scholars and traders, thereby aiding the spread of Islamic teachings and practices. Additionally, the Italian policy of indirect rule, which involved co-opting Somali clan leaders and religious figures into the colonial administration, sometimes strengthened the social standing of these leaders, enabling them to further propagate Islam. Eventually, Italian Somaliland gained independence and merged with British Somaliland to form the Somali Republic on July 1, 1960.

British Somaliland

The British established their protectorate over the northern part of Somalia, later known as British Somaliland, in 1884, marking the beginning of a distinct colonial administration strategy in the region. Unlike the Italian approach in the south, which involved direct administration and extensive infrastructure development, the British opted for a policy of indirect

rule. This method of governance involved leveraging existing local structures, particularly relying on the authority of sultans and other traditional leaders to administer the territory. This strategy was not only cost-effective, given the limited economic prospects the British saw in the arid northern territories, but also minimized resistance by co-opting existing power structures.

The British respect for Islamic traditions under the indirect rule system was partly pragmatic. Recognizing the deep-rooted influence of Islam in Somali society, the British saw utility in allowing Islamic practices and education to continue with minimal interference. This approach was markedly different from other colonial powers in the region, which sometimes sought to supplement local traditions with their own. In British Somaliland, traditional Islamic schools, continued to operate alongside the secular Western educational systems introduced by the British. This coexistence, however, was not without tension, as the Western educational model promoted values and practices that were sometimes at odds with Islamic traditions.

Despite this hands-off approach, the British protectorate was not devoid of development efforts. The British did invest in infrastructure projects, but these were primarily aimed at facilitating military and administrative control rather than promoting economic development. The establishment of ports and the improvement of roads served the strategic interests of the British Empire, particularly in relation to the Suez Canal and their broader imperial interests in the region.

British Somaliland gained independence on June 26, 1960, shortly before the unification with Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. The legacy of British rule in northern Somalia is complex. While the indirect rule approach allowed for a greater continuation of Islamic and traditional practices, it also left a legacy of underdevelopment, particularly in comparison to the Italian-administered south. Furthermore, the British reliance on clan structures

in governance entrenched clan identities, which have continued to play a significant role in Somali politics and society. The contrast between the British approach in the north and the Italian approach in the south has had lasting effects on the development trajectories of these regions and on the dynamics of post-independence Somalia.

French Somaliland

France's establishment of a protectorate in the region now known as Djibouti in 1883 marked the beginning of French colonial presence in the Horn of Africa. This territory, initially called French Somaliland, bordered British Somaliland and was strategically positioned by the Red Sea, making it a valuable asset for France's colonial empire because of its proximity to key maritime routes. The French approach to colonialism in this area was multifaceted, focusing on establishing a strong administrative and military presence while also attempting to spread French culture and influence.

Unlike the British's indirect rule and hands-off approach in their protectorate, the French administration in Djibouti sought more direct influence over the local population's cultural and educational life. While efforts to spread Christianity did take place, mirroring attempts by Italian colonial forces, these efforts faced the same challenges and were largely unsuccessful due to the strong Islamic faith of the local Somali and Afar populations.

The French impact was more significant in the realm of language and education. The French language was introduced and promoted through the establishment of schools and administrative offices, aiming to create a Francophone elite that could serve in the colonial administration. This introduction of the French language as a medium of education and governance led to the gradual adoption of French legal and administrative systems, which

distinguished French Somaliland from its neighbors by embedding French cultural elements into the fabric of local society.

Strategically, French Somaliland played a crucial role as a military base and supply point for France. The French maintained a significant military presence in the territory, which served as a key outpost for projecting French power in the region and protecting maritime routes. This military significance of Djibouti under French rule was a defining characteristic that set it apart from the approaches of the British and Italians in their respective Somali territories.

Djibouti's path to independence on June 27, 1977, was relatively peaceful compared to the experiences of other African nations. The transition reflected a gradual shift rather than a sudden change, with France maintaining a strong influence in the country post-independence, particularly in military and economic affairs, leading to colonial independence occurring almost 20 years later than the other Somali regions. The legacy of French colonial rule in Djibouti is evident today in its continued use of the French language, the legal system, and the enduring cultural ties to France, distinguishing it from the former British and Italian territories in Somalia.

Ethiopian and Kenyan Occupation

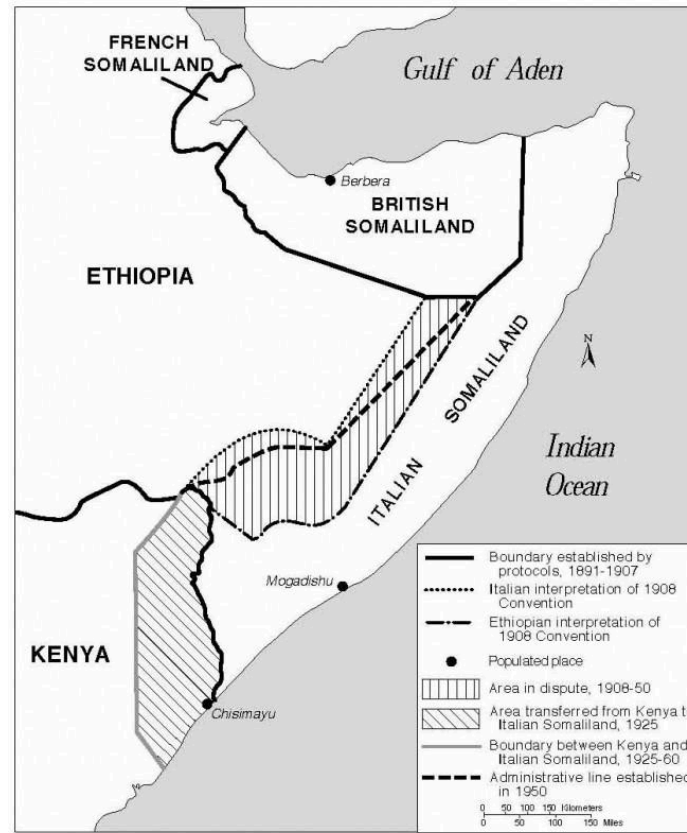
Ethiopia's engagement with Somali regions, especially in the Ogaden area, presents a complex history of intermittent control and cultural imposition that significantly predated and continued well after the European colonial era in Africa. Historically, the Ethiopian Empire sought to extend its influence over the predominantly Somali-inhabited Ogaden region, attempting at times to integrate it through the spread of Orthodox Christianity. This effort in a predominantly Muslim population ignited resistance and played a pivotal role in cementing a cohesive Somali Muslim identity, particularly as opposition to Christian Ethiopian dominance.

The point of Ethiopian control over the Ogaden region manifested prominently in the latter half of the 20th century, especially after Somalia attained independence from European colonial powers. Despite the formation of the Somali Republic, Ethiopia maintained its grip over the Ogaden, leading to heightened tensions and eventual conflict. The Ogaden War, which occurred from 1977 to 1978, embodied the struggle for control over this disputed territory. Sparked by Somali efforts to reclaim the region, the war resulted in a significant military intervention by Ethiopia, backed by Soviet support, which ultimately retained control over the Ogaden despite initial Somali advances. Ethiopia's assertion of authority in the Ogaden has persisted, marked by various degrees of conflict and negotiation. The region remains within Ethiopian borders to this day, albeit with ongoing issues related to identity, governance, and autonomy that reflect its complex history of contested control.

Similarly, the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, with its predominantly Somali population, experienced its own narrative of political struggle and identity affirmation. During the decolonization period, there was a strong sentiment among the local Somali population for unification with the Somali Republic, aiming to join their fellow Somalis in the newly independent country in the 1960s. This desire was expressed through the Shifta War (1963-1967), a guerrilla campaign against Kenyan forces, highlighting the community's aspiration to become part of Somalia. However, despite these efforts and the clear cultural and ethnic ties to Somalia, the region remained part of Kenya after British colonial rule ended.

The British approach to decolonization in the NFD was marked by a strategic decision to incorporate the district into the Kenyan state, influenced by geopolitical considerations during the Cold War era and the desire to maintain stability in the newly independent country. This

decision left a lasting impact on the region's Somali population, which continues to navigate the complexities of their identity within the Kenyan state.



Map of Somalia's colonization.

Source: [Penn State University](#)

Cultural and Religious Effects

As Islam's influence further grew as a response to colonial pressures, Sufism⁷, in particular, played a significant role during this period, with Sufi orders⁸ leading resistance movements against colonial forces and spreading Islamic education. The colonial period saw the construction of new mosques and religious schools, strengthening the community's Islamic

⁷ *Sufism* is a mystical Islamic belief system that seeks to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It emphasizes inner purification, meditation, and a deep, personal connection with the divine, often expressed through poetry, music, and dance.

⁸ *Sufi orders* are spiritual brotherhoods within Islam that follow specific mystical practices and teachings aimed at seeking closeness to God.

faith.⁹ Despite colonial pressures, the spread of Islam and Sufism continued to play significant roles. Sufi orders led resistance movements against colonial forces and spread Islamic education.

From 1899 to 1920, Abdille Hassan, popularly known as the Sayyid, waged a twenty-year anticolonial jihad¹⁰ against British, Ethiopian, and Italian military forces ... The Sayyid was a great poet in a nation of poets and he was able to convey his appeal to moral regeneration, his call to anticolonial struggles, and his vision of liberation in lines of exceptional poetry. He called his followers the Dervishes and his movement came to be known as the Dervish movement. It was motivated primarily by religious fanaticism and had as its ultimate objective the imposition of the Salihyah precepts and way of life upon the population. But to attain that objective political means were necessary.¹¹

The Sufi Orders that led resistance movements in Somalia, particularly during the colonial era, were deeply rooted in the Islamic and Sufi traditions of the region. The Dervish movement, led by Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan (the "Mad Mullah" to the British, but more respectfully known as "Sayyid" among Somalis), played a pivotal role in resisting colonial forces from Britain, Italy, and Ethiopia between 1899 and 1920. The Sayyid was a member of the Salihyah Sufi order, which was inspired and influenced by Sufi practices and beliefs, emphasizing religious piety, resistance against colonial oppression, and the spread of Islamic education.

The Salihyah order, to which the Sayyid belonged, is part of a broader context of Sufi resistance against colonialism in the Horn of Africa. This movement was not isolated; similar

⁹ Lewis, *Sufism in Somaliland: A Study in Tribal Islam*, 1955, p. 601

¹⁰ Jihad refers to various forms of striving or exertion in Islam, including spiritual struggle, personal improvement, and defense of the Muslim community. It's often associated with armed struggle but encompasses broader meanings.

¹¹ Adam, *Islam And Politics In Somalia*, 1995, p. 194

Sufi-led resistances were happening across the Muslim world, including in West Africa. In West Africa, for example, the Tijaniyah and Qadiriyyah Sufi orders played significant roles in resisting French colonial forces, highlighting a pattern of Sufi orders taking up leadership roles in anti-colonial movements across the Muslim world.

The inspiration for such movements in Somalia could well have been influenced by these broader Islamic resistance movements, suggesting a shared ideological and spiritual framework that transcended regional boundaries. Sufi orders, with their deep-rooted spiritual and community networks, were uniquely positioned to mobilize followers against colonial rule, driven by a combination of religious conviction, cultural preservation, and political liberation.

The Sayyid's ability to lead a prolonged resistance was also facilitated by his charismatic leadership, poetic prowess, and strategic military tactics, which resonated deeply with the Somali pastoralist way of life. His movement's spiritual underpinnings were characterized by the Sufi belief in striving on the path to God, which, in the context of colonial oppression, translated into a jihad against the colonial invaders. This approach was similar to the strategies used by Sufi leaders in West Africa, who also combined spiritual leadership with political and military action to resist colonial encroachments.

The legacy of these movements, both in Somalia and West Africa, highlights the powerful role that Sufi Islam played in shaping anti-colonial sentiments and actions. It underscores the interconnectedness of Islamic resistance across different regions, where shared religious beliefs and practices provided a foundation for opposing colonial domination and striving for autonomy and religious freedom.¹²

This chapter has traced the evolution of Somalia's religious landscape from its pre-colonial roots, through the transformative period of colonial rule, to the emergence of Islam

¹² Lewis, 1955, p. 601-610

as a dominant force in Somali identity and resistance. The indigenous religion of Waaqism, with its monotheistic worship of Waaq, and the influences of Judeo-Christian traditions represent the diverse religious fabric that characterized early Somali society. However, the role of colonialism catalyzed a significant shift toward Islam, which became intertwined with Somali nationalism and resistance against foreign domination. The role of Sufi orders, particularly the Salihyah order led by Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, emphasizes the pivotal contribution of Islamic and Sufi leaders in mobilizing anti-colonial movements and fostering a unifying sense of identity among Somalis.

Independence for Somalia came about as a result of a complex interplay of local resistance movements, international pressure, and the eventual withdrawal of colonial powers. The unification of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland in 1960 to form the Somali Republic was a landmark moment, marking the end of European colonial rule and the beginning of a new chapter in Somali history. The legacy of figures, such as Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, known for leading the Dervish movement against colonial forces, cannot be overstated. Their efforts not only changed the course of Somali history by resisting colonial domination, but also solidified the role of Islam and Sufism in shaping the nation's identity and political landscape. These developments have had lasting impacts on Somali society, shaping its religious and cultural landscape well into the post-colonial era.

Chapter II: Religion and Culture in Post-Colonial Somalia (1960s-1990s)

Post-colonial Somalia, spanning the 1960s to the onset of the civil war in the early 1990s, was a period of profound social, political, and cultural transformations. The era was marked by attempts to forge a national identity, navigate the legacies of colonialism, and engage with modernity while grappling with the influences of traditional Somali culture and Islam. This chapter explores the interplay between religion and culture in this dynamic period, focusing on social dynamics, attire, the arts, and the influence of socialism under Siad Barre.

Religion and Social Dynamics

Religion and social dynamics in Somalia have undergone profound transformations, with Islam serving as the foundation of societal norms, legal frameworks, and cultural practices throughout the nation's history. The post-colonial era, in particular, has seen the continued influence of Islam in shaping the fabric of Somali life, fostering community cohesion, and dictating personal identities. This period has been marked by significant discussions and debates surrounding the role of religion in modern society, the interplay between tradition and modernity, and the redefinition of gender roles within the confines of Islamic and traditional practices.

Notably, Somali women have emerged as pivotal agents in religious life, actively engaging in religious practices and navigating their roles within the boundaries set by traditional Islamic norms. The discourse around moral womanhood, illustrated through popular Somali songs, encapsulates the broader societal struggle with modernity and tradition. This dialogue extends into various facets of Somali life, including attire, the arts, and the push toward gender equality under socialist reforms.¹³

¹³ Kapteijns, *Discourse on Moral Womanhood in Somali Popular Songs*, 2009, 101

Attire as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

The adoption of traditional Islamic attire alongside Western-style garments reflects the complex cultural intersections within Somali society, balancing the principles of Islamic modesty with the influences of modernization. The rise of Somalia's socialist government, which is later explored in this thesis, and its push toward modernization and secularism encouraged a fusion that mirrored the nation's broader socio-cultural transitions. For instance, alongside the traditional khamis¹⁴ and macawiis,¹⁵ men began incorporating button-up shirts and trousers into their everyday wear, often blending them with a koofiyad¹⁶ to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage. This mix of attire allowed Somali men to navigate both traditional settings and modern urban environments with ease, embodying a hybrid identity that resonated with the nation's evolving aspirations.

Women, traditionally in the baati¹⁷ and hijab,¹⁸ began experimenting with their own fashion choices, introducing elements of Western attire such as blouses, long skirts, and even trousers under their baatis for a more contemporary look that still adhered to the principles of modesty prescribed by Islam. The incorporation of vibrant patterns and colors from Western fashion into traditional Somali clothing, such as intricate embroidery on baatis or stylishly tailored hijabs, further exemplified this blend. This sartorial evolution was particularly evident in urban centers, such as Mogadishu, where the influence of global fashion trends was more pronounced given the city's cosmopolitan nature.

¹⁴ Khamis: A traditional Somali garment resembling a long tunic or robe

¹⁵ Macawiis: A traditional Somali sarong-like skirt, wrapped around the waist

¹⁶ Koofiyad: A traditional Somali hat

¹⁷ Baati: A long, flowing dress worn by Somali women, made from light, often brightly colored or patterned fabric, designed for comfort and modesty

¹⁸ Hijab: A headscarf worn by many Muslim women, including those in Somali culture, covering the hair and neck to conform with modesty standards in Islam



This is a photo of Somali women taken between the 1970s and 1980s. The woman on the left is seen wearing a Dirac-like¹⁹ dress, while the woman on the right is wearing a Westernized, knee-length dress.

Source: [Twitter](#)



Photo of a Somali family in the 1980s wearing a mix of traditional Somali and Western attire.

Source: [Tumblr](#)

Attire in post-colonial Somalia reflected the complex interplay between traditional Islamic values and the socialist regime's modernizing aspirations. Women's roles and Islamic

¹⁹ Dirac: A traditional Somali dress, often made of light, sheer fabric, elegantly draped and typically adorned for formal occasions and celebrations.

dress became focal points of this interplay. The government's policies encouraged women's education and participation in the workforce, leading to a visible presence of women in public life.



Two Somali women standing in front of a car in Mogadishu at Afgoye Restaurant in the 1980s

Source: [Reddit](#)



Somali girls in their courses at The Lafaole Center for Craftsmanship

Source: [Video](#)



Two Somali women working at SOMALTEX in Balcaad, Somalia in the late 1980s. Textiles are produced at the SOMALTEX plant, which supplies virtually the entire domestic market and contributed to Somalia being a hub for textiles. SOMALITEX is considered among the best-equipped textile plant in Africa.

Source: [Tumblr](#)

The Arts and the Jazz Scene

The period between the 1960s and the 1990s in Somalia was not just a time of political and social upheaval, but also a vibrant era for Somali music and arts. This era saw the intertwining of modernity and tradition, where music and theater became pivotal in expressing and negotiating Somali identity and societal norms.



The Iftin Band playing live at the Uruba nightclub and hotel in Mogadishu back in the 1980s.

Source: [Video](#)

Before the outbreak of the civil war in the early 1990s, Somalia had a vibrant music scene, particularly in the capital, Mogadishu. During the 1970s and 1980s, the city was a hub for music and nightlife, featuring a blend of traditional Somali music with influences from around the world, including disco and jazz. This era was marked by the emergence of several bands and musicians who played a significant role in shaping the Somali music scene.

The influence of Western music genres, such as disco and jazz, was evident, with Somali musicians incorporating these styles into their own compositions, creating a unique sound that resonated with both local and international audiences. Nightclubs and discos in Mogadishu and other cities hosted live performances where people gathered to dance and enjoy music. This period is often remembered for its cultural openness and the flourishing of the arts in Somalia.

Key bands such as Iftin, Waaberi, and Dur-Dur Band, among others, were at the forefront of this musical revolution. They experimented with various musical styles, blending them with Somali scales and rhythms, and performed at local venues, including clubs and theaters. These bands and their music became symbols of the golden age of Somali music, celebrated for their innovation and the joy they brought to many during times of peace and prosperity.



The Waaberi theatre troupe in Mogadishu in the 1970s

Source: [The Guardian](#)

However, the onset of the civil war led to the decline of the music scene as violence and instability engulfed the country. Many musicians fled abroad, and the once-thriving clubs and cultural institutions were closed or destroyed by extremist factions that emerged, later explained in this thesis. Despite these challenges, the legacy of Somalia's disco and jazz era continues to live on through recordings and the memories of those who experienced it firsthand.

From October 1969 to January 1991, during the tenure of Barre's administration, efforts were made to enhance gender equality, fostering an environment conducive to the emergence of female talent. Notably, the late 1950s saw a shift from men portraying female roles in theatre to the 1970s, when the distinctiveness of female vocalists was celebrated, their voices described to be as sweet as “broken dates.”²⁰ This period marked a departure from the norm seen in neighboring countries, setting Somalia's music scene apart through the prominent presence of female singers.



Singer Hibo Nuura in the 1980s
Source: [Al Jazeera](#)

Prominent figures such as Faadumo Qaasim, Khadra Dahir, and Hibo Nuura emerged as more prolific than their male counterparts, underscoring the significant role women played in Somalia's music industry. Dahir, in particular, shared insights into the camaraderie and mutual

²⁰ Al Jazeera, *Uncovering Somalia's Forgotten Music of the 1970s*, 2017

support among women artists, which was pivotal to their success. She highlighted the contrast between Somalia and neighboring countries like Ethiopia and Sudan, where top female artists were rare or significantly less prevalent. According to Dahir, the contribution of women to the arts was not only acknowledged but celebrated, with female artists becoming symbols of national pride.²¹

This nurturing environment led to the development of a rich musical landscape characterized by a diverse array of bands and singers. Unique to Somalia, some of these bands were affiliated with national institutions such as the police, the army, and even the national penitentiary, reflecting the country's unique historical and cultural context.²²

Lidwein Kaptejins, in her 2009 work, *Discourse on Moral Womanhood in Somali Popular Songs, 1960-1990*, offers a profound exploration of how Somali popular songs served as a discursive site for these cultural negotiations. The songs from this period “opened with the establishment of the Somali national state and ended with its collapse. It focuses on these songs as a discursive site in which a particular dilemma of the new Somali state clearly comes into focus, namely the desire to be 'modern,' while at the same time turning to 'tradition' (i.e., a particular construction of Somali cultural authenticity and traditional religious morality) to mark and anchor a new Somali collective self-understanding and communal identity.”²³

The vibrant music scene, characterized by the coexistence of traditional and modern influences, served as a fertile ground for exploring and negotiating Somali identity, modernity, and tradition. It offered an alternative pathway to Westernization, one that was distinctly Somali and deeply infused with the country's Islamic heritage. This cultural phenomenon represented an

²¹ Al Jazeera, *Uncovering Somalia's Forgotten Music of the 1970s*, 2017

²² Al Jazeera, *Uncovering Somalia's Forgotten Music of the 1970s*, 2017

²³ Kaptejins, 2009, p. 101

extension of the anti-colonial spirit championed by Sufi leaders, as it provided a means for Somalis to assert their autonomy and identity in the post-colonial context.

Furthermore, Kapteijns highlights how these cultural expressions were part of a broader societal engagement with the challenges of state formation and collapse: “The discursive push-and-pull of 'modernity' and 'tradition' evident in the songs expresses itself specifically in debates about moral womanhood – that is to say, about what 'good' women should be like.”²⁴ The discussions within Somali popular songs, especially those focusing on moral womanhood and traditional religious values, illustrate a society actively wrestling with its own identity and the challenges of modernity, where the concept of moral womanhood becomes a key lens through which to examine and address the societal and spiritual dilemmas posed by modern life. These cultural negotiations reflect the broader educational ethos of Sufism, which values introspection, moral education, and the pursuit of knowledge as a means to navigate life's complexities. By engaging with these themes, Somali music and art contribute to a wide variety of cultural education that parallel the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Sufism. This dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, education and cultural expression, demonstrates how Somalis navigated the complexities of their identity and societal values during a time of profound change by embracing an approach that honors their rich Sufi heritage while engaging with the global currents of modernization. This delicate balance offers a unique lens through which to view the evolution of Somali society and its enduring commitment to integrating spiritual and cultural education in the face of external influences

Video Analysis:

Video document by Guardian Culture titled “Somali Night Fever: The Little-Known Story of Somalia's Disco Era” provides a compelling window into the Western-influenced,

²⁴ Kapteijns, 2009, p. 101

liberal cultural dynamics that flourished in post-colonial and pre-civil war Somalia, showcasing a period of openness and experimentation that deeply contrasts with the conservative image associated with the country today. Guardian Culture explores the vibrant history of Somalia's cultural scene and how its jazz and disco clubs were a testament to the country's rich and diverse social fabric before the Civil War. An interviewee in the documentary, Abulkadir Korea, reminisces about a time when fashion mirrored the lively spirit of the era, with women donning short skirts and men wearing flared trousers, a vivid representation of the era's style and freedom. The music and dance floors were inclusive spaces, where individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs, Muslims and Christians alike, could come together to celebrate love and companionship through dance (Korea, 0:56-1:27).

However, the onset of the civil war marked a stark transformation of Somalia's cultural landscape. In the early 1990s, when Barre's administration was overturned and taken over by clan-based extremist factions, many restrictions were imposed on the Somali population. Among these restrictions included music being played or broadcasted. These faction groups argued that music and other forms of entertainment were un-Islamic and a distraction from religious duties. This caused Korea to abandon his career as a performer in music venues to becoming an ice cream shop owner in Mogadishu's Taleh District. He even describes people being forced to "swallow a [music] memory card" if they were found with them or even killed for playing music. (Korea, 3:42-4:13). Korea's career transition symbolizes the silencing of music and the drastic shift in Somali daily life. The emergence of groups that not only prohibited music but posed severe threats to those who engaged with it, illustrates the depth of cultural suppression experienced. The act of forcing someone to swallow a memory card for merely possessing songs captures the extreme measures taken to eradicate music from Somali life.

In the documentary, singer Sahra Halgan's reflections also further highlight the destruction of cultural heritage, attributing the demise of theaters, music, and shows to the authoritarian rule of Siad Barre, who employed military might to dismantle these symbols of cultural expression (Halgan, 6:43-6:56). Together, these recollections paint a poignant picture of loss and resilience, of a time when Somalia's cultural vibrancy was a beacon of unity and expression, brutally interrupted by conflict and dictatorship.



Shareero Band landing in Abu Dhabi, UAE, through Somali Airlines in 1977 for their live concert. In this picture are Jerry, Antar Naji, Abshirow, A. Omar Ahmed Naji, Ali Naji, Said Abdalla, Omar Bongo, Kaltun, Fadumo Qasim and Khadija Qalanjo.

Source: Somali Museum of Minnesota via [Facebook](#)

The Influence of Socialism

Siad Barre's socialist regime in Somalia, from 1969 to 1990, initiated sweeping reforms to instill scientific socialism, emphasizing state control over the economy and promoting social equality. Key initiatives included the nationalization of private enterprises and the establishment of cooperative developments to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency and instill national consciousness. These efforts were encapsulated in slogans like “Work is honor” and “Work is duty.”²⁵

²⁵ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 65-66

The Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party (SRSP) was established in 1976, marking a formal commitment to scientific socialism. This party aimed to incorporate all societal sectors into the socialist fold, governed by a Central Committee and a politburo led by Barre. Despite the shift from military to supposed civilian rule, power remained concentrated within a secular military elite, revealing the regime's top-down governance approach.²⁶

Moreover, the Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO), founded under the SRSP in 1977, aimed to enhance women's roles in society, advocating for equality, healthcare, and cultural activities. This organization also campaigned against traditional practices like female circumcision, reflecting the regime's efforts to reshape societal norms.²⁷

These socialist reforms represented Barre's attempt to transform Somali society according to the principles of socialism, focusing on equality, national pride, and a move away from clan-based politics. However, these efforts also highlighted the challenges of implementing such ideals in the context of Somalia's deep-rooted cultural and Islamic religious traditions as argued in Mohamed Haji Mukhtar's 2003 publication, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia*.

In the 19th century, the two militant jihadist movements, the Salihiyya led by Sayid Mahamed Abdulle Hasan in the north and the Qadiriyya led by Sheikh Uways ibn Muhammad al-Barawi in the south, emerged. Mohamed Siad Barre's 'scientific socialism' disrupted and undermined the traditional and orthodox religious establishment. Thus the al-Ittihad al-Islami (Islamic Unity) and al-Islah al-Islami (Islamic Restoration and Reform) Islamic opposition groups emerged in the 1980s fighting to establish an Islamic state in Somalia.²⁸

²⁶ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 237

²⁷ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 240

²⁸ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 120

This excerpt directly illustrates the conflict between Barre's socialist reforms and Somalia's Islamic traditions, leading to the rise of opposition groups. It highlights the difficulty in implementing socialism in a society deeply rooted in Islamic values, emphasizing the clash between secular goals and religious traditions.

Women's Roles and Education

Under Barre's regime, women experienced a redefinition of their roles in society. Education and participation in the workforce were encouraged, leading to a visible presence of women in public life. However, these changes also sparked discussions within the Islamic framework about the appropriate roles and rights of women, revealing tensions between secular, socialist policies and traditional Islamic values. This reflection on the religious aspect of women's participation in public life highlights the intersection of Somali women's identities between the secular aims of the socialist government and the enduring pull of traditional Islamic practices. This dynamic interplay underlines the complexity of the societal transformation Somalia underwent during this period, particularly in terms of gender roles and religious practices.



A photograph of Asli Hassan Abade taken in the 1970s. Abade was the first female military pilot in Africa.
Source: Somali Armed Forces - Government of Somalia



Somali Police female cadets in the 1970s
Source: [Twitter](#)

The socialist experiment in Somalia faced significant challenges, both internally and externally. Opposition from within Somali society, insufficient commitment within the state apparatus, and pressures from Arab and Western countries, made the socialism-building efforts difficult and largely unsuccessful. The attempt to embed socialism faced obstacles from politicized clan identities, the presence of a large number of unemployed youth, and external influences, complicating the peace and state-building process.²⁹

The regime's policies led to a redefinition of women's roles in society, with an emphasis on education and workforce participation. This change brought women into the public sphere, but also sparked debate about women's roles within Islamic traditions. Despite these advancements, the overarching goal of gender equality encountered resistance from traditional Islamic values, underscoring the tension between secular, socialist policies and religious practices.

²⁹ Elmi & Barise, *The Somali Conflict: Root Causes, Obstacles, and Peace-Building Strategies*, 2006

The post-colonial period in Somalia was marked by a complex interplay of forces—colonial legacies, Islamic traditions, socialist policies, and the push for modernization—all of which left a lasting imprint on Somali culture and society. The era was characterized by a rich cultural production, evolving social norms, and significant political transformations, setting the stage for the challenges and conflicts that would emerge in the subsequent decades.

Oral History Interview: Sofiya Cawaale³⁰

In early November 2023, I had the privilege of engaging in an informal conversation with Sofiya Cawaale, who generously shared her life story. Her narrative not only encapsulates the value of personal and collective experiences but also stands as a relevant testament to the events and themes outlined in Chapter 2 of my study, focusing on the intersection of religion, culture, and social change in post-colonial Somalia.

Born in the early 1950s in British Somaliland during the colonial era, Sofiya and her family were member of the Isaaq tribe. Her family's relocation to Mogadishu when she was two years old marked the beginning of a life that would be shaped by the vibrancy and complexities of Somalia's capital. Growing up with six siblings, her education in Mogadishu, where she learned Italian, laid the groundwork for her eventual pursuit of a degree in Social Work at an all-girls boarding university in the city.

After graduation, Sofiya pursued a career within the Somali government's tax sector, a role that highlighted the post-colonial era's push toward modernization and state-building. However, Sofiya's life was not confined to the realm of government work. Her vibrant social life, characterized by evenings spent at jazz clubs, such as the Uruba Hotel, where she was a weekly attendee of Dur-Dur Band performances, reflects the cultural renaissance of post-colonial

³⁰ Name changed for privacy reasons at the request of interviewee

Somalia. This era of personal freedom and cultural exploration, where Sofiya indulged in cigarettes, alcohol, and the company of friends, mirrors the broader Somali societal engagement with Western influences. She eventually met her husband and they had a child in Mogadishu.

Sofiya's narrative also highlights the gender dynamics and social changes of that time. Her ability to navigate the public and private spheres, balancing her professional responsibilities with a rich social life, illustrates the evolving roles of Somali women during this period. The era's cultural openness allowed for a blending of Somali culture with the socialist regime's modernizing aspirations, a theme central to understanding the post-colonial Somali experience.

The outbreak of the Civil War, however, marked a turning point in Sofiya's life. Fleeing the ensuing chaos, Sofiya and her family were on the last operating Somali Airlines flight that carried government workers and officials who were fleeing Somalia. Initially headed to Germany, the flight had a layover in Italy, where Sofiya, leveraging her local connections, decided to disembark with her family. Over the next three years, they made Italy their home, struggling without official documentation, financial stability, or substantial support. Seeking a better future, they moved to the Netherlands, where they finally received the legal documentation they had been seeking. Here, Sofiya and her husband welcomed two more children into their lives.

In the Netherlands, Sofiya and her husband's work with a refugee agency reflects their continued commitment to social welfare and support for those navigating the refugee experience. Sofiya's journey from Somalia to Europe and finally to the United States after her husband's death embodies the diasporic Somali experience, marked by resilience, adaptation, and the ongoing connection to Somali culture and heritage.

Sofiya's life story, from her early days in Mogadishu to her current role in social work in the Southeast United States, offers a deeply personal lens through which to examine the themes of religion, culture, and social change in post-colonial Somalia. Her experiences highlight the interplay between tradition and modernity, the impact of political upheaval on personal and collective identities, and the enduring strength of Somali women navigating these transformations. Through Sofiya's narrative, we gain invaluable insights into the complexities of Somali society during a pivotal era of its history.

Chapter III: The Somali Civil War and Its Impact on Somali Religious Culture

The Somali Civil War, catalyzing a dramatic shift in the nation's religious landscape, highlights the intricate intersection between faith and conflict within a predominantly Muslim society. The collapse of Siad Barre's regime, which had previously promoted secularism and socialism, paved the way for religious ideologies to fill the political void. This period marked a departure from Somalia's traditionally moderate Islamic practices towards more radical interpretations that is still ongoing today.³¹

Historical Context and Causes of the Somali Civil War

Somalia, situated in the Horn of Africa, is characterized by a complex social structure rooted in tribes and clans, which are central to the country's social, political, and cultural identity. The society is predominantly patrilineal, with kinship and clan affiliations tracing back through male ancestors. The five principal Somali clans include the Darod, Hawiye, Dir, Rahanweyn (or Digil and Mirifle), and Isaaq. The Darod clan is found in the northeast, the far south of Somalia, and across borders into Ethiopia and Kenya. The Hawiye clan dominates the central and southern regions, including Mogadishu. The Dir clan, one of the oldest, spreads across northern Somalia, southern Djibouti, and Ethiopia's Somali region. The Rahanweyn, primarily in southwestern Somalia, and the Isaaq, predominantly in the northwest, complete the major clan groups. This intricate web of clans and sub-clans not only forms the backbone of Somali society but also profoundly influences governance, social dynamics, and economic activities, with clan loyalty often taking precedence over national identity.

The regime of Mohamed Siad Barre, who came to power in 1969 through a military coup, marks a pivotal chapter in Somalia's history. Initially, Barre's government undertook

³¹ Mudane, *The Somali Civil War: Root Cause, and Contributing Variables*, 2018

socialist reforms inspired by principles of modernization and national unity that aimed to transcend clan affiliations. Under Barre's leadership, Somalia experienced a period of rapid change, with ambitious infrastructure projects and social programs launched to propel the nation into a new era of development.

However, as time progressed, Barre's regime began to exhibit increasingly authoritarian tendencies. Despite its rhetoric of national unity, the government's policies often favored certain clans over others, exacerbating existing social and political divisions. In Gérard Prunier's 1995 text, *Somalia: Civil War, Intervention and Withdrawal (1990-1995)*, Prunier explains that there were attempts to suppress clan identities and centralize power in the hands of the ruling elite, specifically within the Marehan, Ogadeen, and Dolbahante tribes, all three of which are Darod sub-clans. This concentration of power within the Darod clan alienated large segments of the population, particularly those belonging to traditionally marginalized clans who felt sidelined by the regime's discriminatory practices.

[Siad's] regime, which in its 'socialist' heyday had prided itself on a unitary anti-clan ideological position, now began to systematically build a clan system of political patronage in order to strengthen itself ... The patronage system thus constituted was nicknamed MOD (short for Marehan-Ogadeen-Dolbahante), and soon MOD civil servants, superior officers, and businessmen began to occupy the upper ranks of Somali society.³²

³² Prunier, *Somalia: Civil War, Intervention and Withdrawal 1990 - 1995*, 1995, p. 14

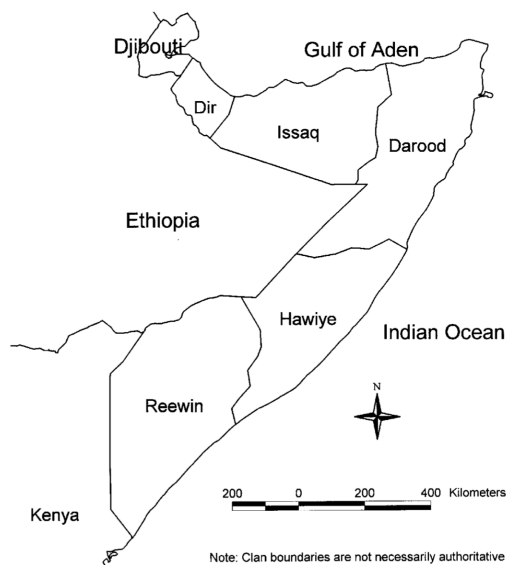


Figure 2. Major Clans and Their Historic Locations

Map showing the regional locations of the five large Somali family clans: the Dir, the Isaaq, the Darood, the Hawiye, and the Reewin/Rahanweyn.

Source: Mukhtar (2003)

The disapproval of Barre's government was paired with economic decline and rampant corruption, which further eroded public trust and confidence in the regime. The socialist economic policies implemented by Barre's administration failed to deliver the promised prosperity, leading to widespread poverty and economic inequality. Meanwhile, the regime's proneness for nepotism and cronyism spread resentment among the people, who perceived themselves as excluded from the benefits of state resources and opportunities.

The regime's external policies also contributed to its downfall. Barre's decision to engage in the Ogaden War with Ethiopia in 1977-1978 proved disastrous, both militarily and economically. The conflict, sparked by Somalia's territorial claims over the Ogaden region, strained the nation's resources and military capabilities. The failure to achieve victory in the war not only weakened Somalia's position on the international stage but also alienated potential

allies, including the Soviet Union, which had initially supported Barre's regime but later shifted its allegiance to Ethiopia.



Map of Ogaden Region

Source: [Britannica](#)

In the late stages of Siad Barre's regime in Somalia, tensions between the secular government and religious communities began to intensify significantly. The government, promoting a scientific socialist state, increasingly viewed the religiously inclined urban elite with suspicion, claiming that “elements of the educated religiously inclined urban elite had started to form an underground Islamic opposition movement.”³³ This growing distrust was a reflection of the regime's attempts to suppress any form of dissent or opposition, especially those rooted in religious beliefs. The situation escalated when the government proposed reforms to the family law, which were seen as antithetical to Islamic principles. These reforms included provisions for equal inheritance rights for women and restrictions on polygamy, sparking significant outrage among religious leaders. They perceived these proposed changes as “tangible evidence that the

³³ Adam, *Islam And Politics In Somalia*, 1995, p. 210

scientific socialist state wanted to undermine the basic laws and codes of an Islamic society.”³⁴ This incident not only highlighted the deepening rift between the secular ambitions of the state and the religious convictions of Somali society but also marked a turning point in the government's relationship with Islamic leaders, setting the stage for increased religious opposition.

The collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991 was driven by a combination of internal conflict and external pressures. The government's brutal crackdown on violence, coupled with its inability to address the grievances of various social groups, fueled widespread opposition. Armed resistance groups, drawing support from disaffected clans and external backers dissatisfied with Barre's rule, launched a concerted campaign to overthrow the government.

The Isaaq Genocide from 1987 to 1989 was a brutal campaign orchestrated by the regime of Siad Barre against the Isaaq clan in the northwestern regions of Somalia, particularly in Somaliland. Internationally recognized as genocide, this atrocity aimed to suppress the Somali National Movement (SNM) and involved widespread killings, bombings, and the deliberate destruction of cities and towns. The Somali National Movement (SNM) was a political and military organization established in April 1981 by members of the Isaaq clan in London, United Kingdom, with the primary aim of overthrowing the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre, who had been in power in Somalia since a coup d'état in 1969. The SNM's formation was driven by widespread dissatisfaction with Barre's oppressive and clan-favoritism policies, which marginalized and brutalized many, including the Isaaq clan. Estimates of the Isaaq Genocide death toll vary, but credible sources suggest that between 100,000 to 200,000 people were killed, with many more injured and hundreds of thousands displaced. The violence led to massive refugee flows, primarily into neighboring Ethiopia, and left deep scars on the region's social

³⁴ Adam, *Islam And Politics In Somalia*, 1995, p. 211

fabric. The Isaaq Genocide remains one of the darkest chapters in Somalia's history, embodying the extreme violence and clan-based persecution that characterized Siad Barre's regime, particularly during its later years.



A mass grave during the Isaaq Genocide. There is an estimated death toll between 100,000-200,000
Source: [Pulitzer Center](#)



In January 1991, fighters from the Somali National Movement triumphantly entered Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, following the overthrow of the Siad Barre dictatorship.
Source: [Guban Media](#)

By the late 1980s, Somalia was on the brink of civil war. The regime's loss of control over vast territories, along with the weakening of its support base, left it vulnerable to advancing rebel forces. In January 1991, the capital city of Mogadishu fell to coalition forces of the United Somali Congress, "The violent takeover of the capital was due to the fact that it had not been possible to negotiate any political solution during the dying days of the dictatorship."³⁵ This marked the end of Barre's rule but also the beginning of a new phase of conflict and instability.

The Start of the Somali Civil War

The collapse of the central government in 1991 plunged Somalia into chaos, creating a power vacuum that was quickly filled by competing warlords and militias. These factions, representing different clans and coalitions, fought for control over territory, resources, and influence, "Since the fall of the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in January 1991, the former Somali Democratic Republic has not been a state functioning under the common rule of law, but rather it has been a patchwork of regions and districts in different stages of lawlessness anarchy and chaos."³⁶ The absence of a unifying authority allowed violence to spiral out of control, with battles for territorial supremacy often descending into ethnic cleansing and atrocities against civilian populations.

Despite international efforts to intervene and restore stability, such as the United Nations Operation Restore Hope, the complexities of clan politics and the interests of various armed groups precluded peacekeeping efforts. The humanitarian crisis that ensued, characterized by famine, mass displacement, and widespread suffering, left deep scars on the Somali population and exacerbated the already dire situation.

³⁵ Prunier, *Somalia: Civil War, Intervention and Withdrawal 1990 - 1995*, 1995, p. 5

³⁶ Mukhtar, 2003, p. 01

Social, Political, and Economical Impact of the War

According to C. Lwanga-Ntale & Boniface O Owino in their 2020 work, *Understanding Vulnerability and Resilience in Somalia*, the war's profound social impact is characterized by widespread displacement and trauma, severely disrupting traditional social structures and community cohesion that continue to shape Somalia's trajectory to this day.³⁷ The conflict has resulted in the displacement of millions of Somalis, both internally and as refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. Families have been torn apart, with communities and social structures fragmented. The loss of life has been substantial, with estimates of hundreds of thousands killed directly by violence or indirectly through famine, disease, and other consequences of war. The trauma inflicted on survivors, including children who have grown up amidst conflict and violence, is immeasurable, with long-lasting psychological scars.



The Battle of Mogadishu, also known as the Black Hawk Down incident, occurred in 1993 in Somalia when US special forces attempted to capture warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid's lieutenants. The mission went awry, leading to a prolonged firefight and the deaths of 18 American soldiers and hundreds of Somali fighters. Photo shows Somali children playing around the wreckage of a U.S. helicopter in December 1993 Mogadishu.

Source: [NPR](#)

³⁷ C. Lwanga-Ntale & Boniface O Owino, *Understanding Vulnerability and Resilience in Somalia*, 2020

Politically, the Somali Civil War has led to the fragmentation of the state and the emergence of clan-based politics. With the collapse of central authority, Somalia descended into a state of anarchy, with various clan militias and warlords competing for power and control. The absence of effective governance has perpetuated cycles of violence and instability, undermining efforts to establish a functioning state and rule of law. The proliferation of armed groups, often aligned along clan lines, has further complicated the political landscape, leading to competing claims of legitimacy and authority.

The economic impact of the Somali Civil War has been equally devastating, with the conflict leading to the collapse of infrastructure, disruption of livelihoods, and widespread poverty. Basic services, such as healthcare, education, and sanitation, have been severely compromised, exacerbating the suffering of the population. The destruction of critical infrastructure, including roads, ports, and utilities, has hindered economic development and humanitarian assistance efforts. The economy has been further weakened by the loss of human capital as skilled professionals and entrepreneurs flee the violence and instability.

The social, political, and economic dimensions of the Somali Civil War are deeply interconnected, with each exacerbating and reinforcing the others. The breakdown of social cohesion and trust has fueled political fragmentation and violence, while economic devastation has perpetuated poverty and insecurity. These reinforcing dynamics have created a vicious cycle of conflict and underdevelopment, making it challenging to break the cycle of violence and rebuild a peaceful and stable Somalia.

Impact of War on Culture and Religion

The ongoing Somali Civil War has not only ravaged lives and infrastructure but has also left an unforgettable mark on the cultural and religious fabric of Somalia. Culture and religion

play central roles in Somali society, shaping identities, values, and social norms. The conflict has disrupted these dynamics, leading to changes in cultural practices, religious beliefs, and the overall social cohesion of Somali communities. The destruction of historical sites, libraries, and museums has resulted in the loss of irreplaceable artifacts and documents that tell the story of Somalia's past. Additionally, the displacement of populations and disruption of traditional lifestyles have weakened the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices from one generation to the next.

The mass displacement of Somalis, both internally and as refugees in neighboring countries and beyond, has had profound implications for cultural identity. Many Somalis have been forced to abandon their homes, communities, and way of life, leading to a sense of dislocation and loss. The experience of displacement has challenged traditional notions of identity rooted in place and kinship as Somalis struggle to maintain a sense of belonging in the face of uncertainty and upheaval. The Somali Civil War has fragmented social cohesion and solidarity, as communities have been torn apart by violence and division. Clan-based conflict and competition for resources have deepened existing tensions and strained communal bonds. The breakdown of trust and cooperation has made it difficult for Somalis to come together in pursuit of common goals, further corroding the social fabric of Somali society.

Religion holds a central place in Somali culture, with Islam serving as a unifying force among diverse communities. However, the Somali Civil War has led to the politicization of religion and the instrumentalization of religious identity for political ends. In the midst of a multiplicity of competing groups vying for power and causing all massive social, political, and economical destruction along the way, one group has been particularly notorious: Al-Shabaab.

Oral History Interview: Ahmed Yasiin³⁸

Back in November 2023, I was able to hear and learn about Ahmed Yasiin's story. Born in Somalia, his journey from being a Somali Navy Seaman to currently as a medical interpreter and small business owner in the United States encapsulates the profound impacts of the Somali Civil War on individual lives and the broader societal fabric. His narrative not only reflects the personal toll of conflict, but also the resilience and adaptability required to navigate the tumultuous waters of Somali history during the civil war and its current state.

Ahmed's story begins with his graduation from the Lafoole Center for Craftsmanship, followed by his service in the Somali Navy in the early 1980s, where he played a crucial role in overseeing Somalia's jurisdiction over the Indian Ocean. His commitment to national service took him to Russia for two years of training, equipping him with skills and experiences that would shape his career. However, upon returning to Somalia in the mid 1980s, Ahmed confronted a drastically altered societal landscape, marked by nepotism and clan discrimination under Siad Barre's regime. Despite his qualifications and naval experience, Ahmed's Isaaq tribe affiliation barred him from employment opportunities, reflecting the regime's divisive and preferential treatment of certain clans.

Undeterred, Ahmed pursued agriculture studies, aiming to secure employment in Somalia's agricultural sector, only to be thwarted again by systemic tribal discrimination. A glimmer of hope emerged in 1987 when Ahmed secured a fellowship in Italy for agriculture studies. Yet, this opportunity also highlighted the stark reality back home, as he returned in 1988 to a country on the brink of war, with the Isaaq Genocide escalating and widespread violence against his clan. In 1989, Ahmed was forced to leave Somalia due to the escalating violence and political instability. His departure became possible through the assistance of his sister's husband,

³⁸ Name changed for privacy reasons at the request of interviewee

a Marehan man with familial ties to Siad Barre. Her husband used his political connections to secure Ahmed a student visa to the United States, just before the outbreak of full-scale civil war.

In the United States, Ahmed's visa and college scholarship were revoked amidst the chaos of the Somali Civil War. Stranded without legal status, he lived in limbo until an opportunity arose to work as a translator for the US military intervention in Somalia, leveraging his naval background and language skills. This role not only provided him with a pathway to US citizenship, but also a direct view into the conflict's complexities, as he witnessed the strife of warlords, the fragmentation of society into clashing tribes, and the efforts of international intervention when he was in Mogadishu. Ahmed's experiences during this period exemplify the dire consequences of the civil war on Somalia's social and political order, as well as the international community's struggle to address the crisis.

Following the US military's withdrawal from Somalia, Ahmed returned to the United States, where he carved out a new life for himself. As a medical interpreter and a small business owner, he has contributed significantly to his Somali community, bridging cultural and linguistic gaps in the medical field and fostering economic growth through entrepreneurship. His brief involvement with city council work further indicates his commitment to civic engagement and community service in his adopted country.

Ahmed Yasiin's journey through the Somali Civil War and its aftermath provides us with a valuable personal perspective while highlighting the conflict's transformative impact on individuals and communities, both within Somalia and in the diaspora. His story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, the enduring importance of cultural and familial ties, and the potential for new beginnings even after profound loss and displacement. Through Ahmed's eyes, we gain insight into the Somali Civil War's deep scars on the nation's

religious and cultural landscape, the challenges of rebuilding a life in exile, and the significant contributions that diaspora members continue to make in their new homelands.

Chapter IV: Influence of Extremism in Somalia

History and Influence of Al-Shabaab and Relevant Extremist Factions

To grasp the emergence of Al-Shabaab, it's crucial to first explore the history of the Islamic Courts Union, which set the stage for its rise. Somalia's pre-civil war era, marked by the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, plunged the nation into decades of political turmoil. With no central government to enforce order, the vacuum of power was quickly filled by various clan-based militias and warlords fighting for control. This tumultuous period, characterized by widespread violence, lawlessness, and humanitarian crises, laid the groundwork for the factional battles that would eventually lead to the formation of Al-Shabaab.

The emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in the early 2000s marked a significant development in Somalia's political landscape. The ICU aimed to establish Sharia law and provide stability in areas under its control, garnering support from segments of the population frustrated with the chaos of warlord rule. However, the ICU's rise also heightened tensions with neighboring Ethiopia and the United States, both of which viewed the group with suspicion due to its Islamist ideology and alleged ties to terrorist organizations.

The Islamic Courts Union had its roots in the chaos and instability that followed the collapse of the Barre regime. With the central government's demise, Somalia descended into anarchy, characterized by clan-based warfare, warlordism, and the absence of effective governance. In the absence of a functioning state, various local authorities, including clan elders and religious leaders, sought to fill the power void. Amidst the chaos, the Islamic Courts emerged as a network of Sharia-based judicial systems operating in different parts of Somalia. Initially, they served as local arbitration bodies, resolving disputes and dispensing justice

according to Islamic law. Over time, some of these local courts merged into a more organized and centralized entity, leading to the formation of the Islamic Courts Union.

The ICU's primary objective was to establish a system of governance based on Islamic principles and Sharia law in Somalia. Its leaders sought to provide stability, security, and social services to the population, presenting themselves as a viable alternative to the warlord-dominated status quo. The ICU's ideology was influenced by various strands of Islamism, including Salafism³⁹ and Wahabism,⁴⁰ with an emphasis on social justice and opposition to foreign intervention.



In Mogadishu, Somalia, on July 15, 2006, Somalia's Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC) militia proudly displayed their flag outside Hotel Ramadan. This event marked the completion of Somali Islamists' takeover of the lawless capital, as fighters loyal to a defeated US-backed warlord alliance surrendered. The capture of Mogadishu's last secular district brought it under Muslim rule, amidst escalating tensions between the Supreme Islamic Council of Somalia (SICS) and the country's fragile transitional government.

Source: [GettyImages](#)

³⁹ *Salafism* is a conservative Sunni Islamic movement advocating for a return to the early practices of Islam, emphasizing strict adherence to the Quran, Hadith, and rejecting modern interpretations.

⁴⁰ *Wahhabism* is an ultra-conservative Sunni branch advocating for a literal interpretation of Islamic texts, strict adherence to Sharia, and rejecting practices considered innovations. It originated in the 18th century and is dominant in Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Courts Union gained popularity and support among segments of the Somali population. Its ability to provide swift and efficient justice, as well as its enforcement of law and order, earned it widespread distinction, particularly in the capital city, Mogadishu, and other parts of southern Somalia.⁴¹ The ICU gradually expanded its influence, establishing control over significant territory and key strategic locations. The rise of the Islamic Courts Union brought it into conflict with the warlords who had long dominated Somali politics. These warlords, who controlled various militias and factions, viewed the ICU as a growing threat to their power and personal interests. Tensions escalated into armed confrontations between the ICU and warlord-aligned forces, leading to a cycle of violence and instability.

Additionally, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), established in 2004 with the backing of the international community, opposed the ICU's ascendance, fearing its Islamist agenda would undermine the fragile peace process. The ICU's control over Mogadishu and other strategic areas posed a direct challenge to the authority of the TFG, worsening political tensions and rivalries. In December 2006, Ethiopia, concerned about the ICU's growing influence and alleged ties to Islamist extremist groups, launched a military intervention in Somalia. Ethiopian forces, supported by the TFG and backed by the United States, quickly routed the ICU and drove its leaders into hiding, and led to its eventual dissolution.

Although the Islamic Courts Union was short-lived, its legacy continues to influence Somali politics and society. Al-Shabaab traces its origins to the remnants of the Islamic Courts Union, following its defeat by Ethiopian forces in 2006. Initially, Al-Shabaab functioned as the armed wing of the ICU, primarily focused on resisting the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia.

⁴¹ Mudane, *The Somali Civil War: Root Cause, and Contributing Variables*, 2018

However, as the ICU's influence weakened, Al-Shabaab emerged as an independent jihadist movement with ambitions to establish an Islamic caliphate in Somalia.⁴²



Al-Shabaab Militants

Source: [Modern War Institute at West Point](#)

The ideology of Al-Shabaab is rooted in Salafism and Wahhabism, advocating for the imposition of strict Sharia law and the rejection of Western influence. The group's leadership, including figures, such as Ahmed Abdi Godane and Mukhtar Robow, played crucial roles in shaping its objectives and organizational structure. Al-Shabaab quickly established itself as a formidable force within Somalia, employing guerrilla tactics and suicide bombings to expand its territorial control. The group gained prominence for its ability to exploit clan divisions and capitalize on grievances against the Somali government and foreign intervention forces. One of Al-Shabaab's defining features is its imposition of Sharia law in areas under its control. This has led to widespread human rights abuses, including executions, amputations, and the suppression of basic freedoms. Additionally, Al-Shabaab's control of key economic resources, such as ports

⁴² Markovic, Fighting a losing battle? Countering terrorism financing in Nigeria and Somalia, 2021, p. 167 - 186

and taxation systems, has enabled it to fund its operations and maintain a degree of financial independence.⁴³

Religious Extremism Against Women

Religious extremism in Somalia is shaped by interpretations of Islam that enforce strict gender roles, uphold patriarchal dominance, and endorse the subjugation of women. Groups such as Al-Shabaab adopt an austere and radical form of Islam as a basis for the systemic marginalization and control of women. These radical interpretations mark a significant departure from traditional Somali practices, introducing harsh restrictions on women's participation in public life, their attire, and their societal roles. Women and girls in conflict zones often face heightened risk of gender-based violence, discrimination, and violations of their rights. Religious extremism aggravates these vulnerabilities, imposing strict gender norms, restricting freedoms, and subjecting women to various forms of abuse and oppression. Extremist ideology also shapes societal attitudes and perceptions of gender, reinforcing stereotypes and norms that limit women's autonomy and agency. Women are often portrayed as guardians of morality and purity, with their roles confined to domestic spheres and subordinate to male authority.

Specifically for women, Al-Shabaab imposed strict codes of conduct and behavior on women, dictating how they should dress, behave, and interact in public spaces. Women's access to education, employment, healthcare, and political participation was severely restricted, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence. Al-Shabaab enforced gender segregation, requiring women to adhere to strict dress codes, such as wearing full veils, and prohibiting interactions with unrelated men. Public spaces are policed to ensure compliance with these norms, with severe punishments for violators.

⁴³ Romaniuk, P., Durner, T., Nonninger, L., & Schwartz, M., What Drives Violent Extremism in East Africa and How Should Development Actors Respond? 2018, p.160 - 180



Somali women who have been internally displaced stand in a line, awaiting the distribution of relief food south of Mogadishu on September 5, 2011.

Source: [GZERO](#)

Women's freedom of movement was severely curtailed by Al-Shabaab, who imposed travel bans and checkpoints to monitor and control their movements. Education for girls was often restricted or banned altogether, denying them opportunities for personal development and empowerment. Similarly, women's participation in the workforce was limited, with many forced into domestic roles or informal, low-paying jobs.

Al-Shabaab perpetrated widespread sexual violence, including rape, forced marriages, and abduction of women and girls. Forced marriages were used as a form of control and punishment, with women subjected to domestic servitude and exploitation. Additionally, Al-Shabaab condoned and promoted the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) despite international condemnation and efforts to eradicate it. Women who defied Al-Shabaab's strict

moral codes faced severe punishments, including public floggings, stonings, and executions. Allegations of adultery, fornication, or other moral transgressions led to immediate and severe punishment, often carried out without any opportunity for a fair trial or legal process.

Despite confronting widespread oppression and violence, Somali women have showcased extraordinary resilience and ingenuity in dealing with conflict and hardship. They have adopted diverse strategies to safeguard themselves and their families, such as creating support networks, finding sanctuary in areas less affected by conflict, and actively campaigning for their rights. These efforts underline the remarkable strength and adaptability of Somali women in the face of relentless challenges, highlighting their capacity to persevere and strive for a better future amidst daunting conditions.

Women and girls exposed to violence, abuse, and displacement experience profound psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The lack of access to mental health services worsens their suffering, perpetuating cycles of trauma and distress. Conflict and extremism pose significant risks to women's reproductive health, with limited access to maternal healthcare services and contraceptives leading to high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. These women face increased risks of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, exacerbated by inadequate healthcare infrastructure and insecurity.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Abdullahi, A. M., Williamson, K., & Ahmed, M. Y., The Impact Of Patriarchal Culture On Somali Women's Participation In Politics. *Development Policy Review*, 2023



Internally displaced women convene at the Dolow health center in Somalia's southern Gedo region.
Source: [Al-Jazeera](#)

Kapteijns (2009) further explores the gendered ramifications of extremism, highlighting how the rise of groups like Al-Shabaab implemented gender inequalities and reinforced patriarchal norms. She provides dialogue from a Somali song titled “In the Old Days,” whose lyrics are a debate between a man and a woman about moral womanhood. As discussed earlier in the 1960s, Somali society was navigating a path toward modernity, challenging traditional values and embracing a more liberal interpretation of Islam. This period, characterized by its socialist leanings, offered Somali women a platform to advocate for their rights and participate more fully in public life. The song “In the Old Days” encapsulates this moment of cultural negotiation, where the female voice in the song argues for progress, education, and leadership roles for women, challenging traditional expectations and asserting a vision of gender equality supported by a more progressive interpretation of the Qur'an.

In the Old Days

Sung by Mohamed Jama Joof and Maryan Mursal

Words by unknown poet (late 1960s)

He: *In the old days it was custom that a girl perfumed her hair and braided it. She wrapped around her waist a wide cloth belt with fringes and an ornamental cord, and wore a white dress. But something has changed. Something weird with long horns they wear as hats on their heads and run all over the market. [Refrain :] You women have destroyed our culture. You have overstepped the religious law and destroyed our religion. Girls, won't you behave?*

She: *What was custom in the old days and a hundred years ago and what has been left behind, don't make us go back to that well-worn road, for we have turned away from it with effort. Now we expect to run and compete for the sun and the moon and to lead people. [Refrain:] First get some education and learn how to read and write. Don't try to turn back, you country hick, people who have woken up!*

He: *In the old days it would happen that a girl would not address you for one or two months, and the men who went out looking would not see her for days. But something has changed. In the evening a whole gang of them goes out, carrying fat purses, wandering about outside like robbers. [Refrain]*

She: *God calmed the waters of sea and river and made them flow together. Then he put in order the wide earth and the mountains and created his human beings each in a different way. You are a loser. No one is asking you to come along. [Refrain]*

He: *In the old days it was custom to pay as bride-wealth for a girl a whole herd of camels and the most exceptional horse, and a rifle on top of that. But something has changed. You are self-absorbed and ignore the advice of the family in which you were born. [Refrain]*

She: *Girls used to be exchanged for a herd of camels and short-legged goats. But the*

religion we learned and the Qur'an do not allow this. Today we have no need for those who deal in what they do not own and for this old-fashioned dividing up of women. [Refrain]⁴⁵

However, the onset of the Somali Civil War and the rise of groups like Al-Shabaab marked a dramatic shift in the discourse surrounding gender norms and moral womanhood in Somali society. Under Al-Shabaab, the liberal and socialist progress of the 1960s was violently upended, replaced with a strict interpretation of Islamic law that severely restricted women's rights and freedoms. Women found themselves subjected to harsh punishments for perceived moral transgressions, a stark contrast to the earlier era's debates on gender equality and women's roles in society. The extremist imposition of gender norms under Al-Shabaab not only erased the efforts made in previous decades, but also emphasized the fragility of those advancements in the face of radical ideologies.⁴⁶

This stark contrast between two distinct periods in Somalia's history, separated by only about 30 years, highlights the rapid and complex interplay of cultural norms, religious interpretations, and political ideologies in shaping gender roles and societal cultural norms. The dialogue from “In the Old Days” serves as a poignant reminder of a time when Somali women were actively engaging with and challenging the boundaries of traditional and religious expectations, seeking a place for themselves in a rapidly modernizing society. It showcases the ongoing struggle for gender equality within contexts marked by religious conservatism and patriarchal norms, emphasizing the importance of revisiting and reevaluating the discourses on moral womanhood and gender roles in Somali society.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Kaptejins, 2009, p. 113

⁴⁶ Kaptejins, 2009, p. 114

⁴⁷ Baadiyow, Somali Elite Political Culture: Conceptions, Structures, and Historical Evolution, 2020

Oral History Interview: Barni Ali⁴⁸

In late 2023, I had the privilege of conducting an informal interview with Barni Ali, who graciously shared the overview of her life story. Barni's journey from a student at the Lafoole Center for Craftsmanship to a survivor of multiple traumas at the hands of Al-Shabaab and her abusive husband, provides a deeply personal perspective to the thematic exploration of extremism's impact on Somalia, particularly its devastating effects on women, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Her story begins in Somaliland, where the shadow of the Isaaq genocide forced her family to flee, hiding their Isaaq identity to escape death. This initial displacement is a direct reflection of the chaotic period post-Siad Barre regime's fall in 1991, where clan affiliations could determine life or death, echoing the chapter's exploration of Somalia's descent into clan-based warfare and lawlessness. Barni's early life encapsulates the national crisis on a micro scale, illustrating how the political turmoil disrupted the lives of ordinary Somalis, forcing them into dangerous lies and desperate measures for survival.

To avoid detection and certain death, Barni and her female family members disguised their tribal affiliation, claiming to be from a Southern Somali tribe. This ruse was necessary because women, if caught lying about their tribe, were less likely to be killed than men. Consequently, her father had to take a different escape route to Ethiopia, highlighting the perilous nature of their journey.

Upon settling in Mogadishu, Barni resumed her education, entering high school. However, the semblance of stability was short-lived; the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 forced her to flee once more. This time, the cover story of belonging to a Southern tribe was no longer viable due to the war's focus on inner-tribe conflicts. The detailed knowledge required about clan

⁴⁸ Name changed for privacy reasons at the request of interviewee

and sub-clan affiliations to navigate this environment safely was beyond what her family had prepared for, increasing their vulnerability.

Tragedy struck during their escape, as some of Barni's siblings fell victim to stray bullets. An airstrike claimed the lives of her brothers and mother, a horrific event that Barni witnessed firsthand. She and a surviving sister found refuge with a family also fleeing the violence. This brief moment of compassion amidst chaos allowed Barni and her sister to settle in the countryside, where they lived with the host family who treated them well.

A semblance of order returned with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which managed to exert control over parts of Somalia, including where Barni resided. However, this period was brief; the Ethiopian intervention and the subsequent emergence of Al-Shabaab plunged the country, and Barni's life, into further turmoil.

Al-Shabaab's reach extended to the countryside, where Barni and other women were rounded up. Thirty-six women, including Barni and her sister, were forcibly married to Al-Shabaab fighters in a mass ceremony that disregarded Islamic practices for consent and marriage. The brutality that followed included rape, beatings, and enforced compliance with the group's strict interpretation of Islamic law. Women were also used as tools for the group's propaganda, including being forced into roles as suicide bombers. The instability of their lives under Al-Shabaab's control, marked by constant relocation and living with different families within the group, stripped them of any sense of security or normalcy.

Barni's abuse continued even after she had three children with her militant husband. As Al-Shabaab faced international pressure and began to go into hiding, her husband sent her to Nairobi under threats of death if she disobeyed him or attempted to escape his control. Even in Nairobi, the fear of her husband's surveillance and retribution loomed over her, forcing her to

continue wearing the niqab⁴⁹ and live in constant fear of being found out for any perceived misstep.

The emergence of Al-Shabaab marked the beginning of a horrifying chapter in Barni's life, directly correlating with the narrative of Chapter 4. Her forced marriage to an Al-Shabaab fighter, the systemic abuse, and the eventual flight to Nairobi with her children under the threat of death encapsulate the extreme gender-based violence and oppression facilitated by Al-Shabaab's radical interpretation of Sharia law. This personal account brings to life the chapter's discussion on the severe human rights abuses committed by the group, particularly against women, and the imposition of strict gender norms that curtailed women's freedoms and roles in society.

Barni's husband's manipulation extended to orchestrating their relocation to the United States under refugee status, a process during which Barni was coerced into silence about her husband's affiliations and threats. The family settled in a secluded area in the U.S., where Barni continued to endure abuse. Isolated and without the ability to drive or seek help, she lived under her husband's control, enduring further beatings and coercion. This period of her life was marked by extreme psychological distress, a testament to the enduring impact of the trauma she experienced.

The turning point came when Barni's son recorded evidence of his father's abuse and shared it with school authorities, leading to police intervention and the eventual imprisonment of her husband. Following his incarceration, Barni and her children escaped to start anew in a different town, where she found safety, remarried, and gained custody of her children. Despite these changes, the scars of her past experiences persist, leaving her in a state of constant vigilance and fear of retribution from her ex-husband.

⁴⁹ Full face veil

Incorporating Barni's narrative into the analysis of Chapter 4 enriches the discussion by providing a concrete, human example of the broader themes explored. Her experiences of fleeing the Isaaq genocide, surviving the civil war, enduring abuse under Al-Shabaab, and living in constant fear of retribution illuminate the profound effects of Somalia's political instability, extremist ideologies, and clan-based divisions on individual lives—especially on women, who bear the brunt of these crises. Barni's resilience and eventual pursuit of a new life, despite the scars of her past, reflect the enduring spirit of Somali women, offering a poignant counterpoint to the narratives of victimhood and illustrating the complex interplay of fear, survival, and hope that defines the Somali experience.

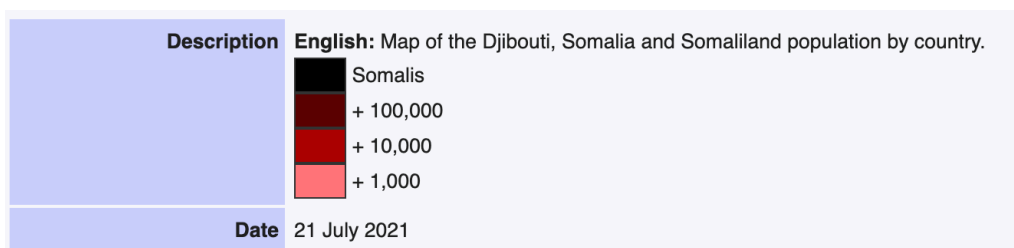
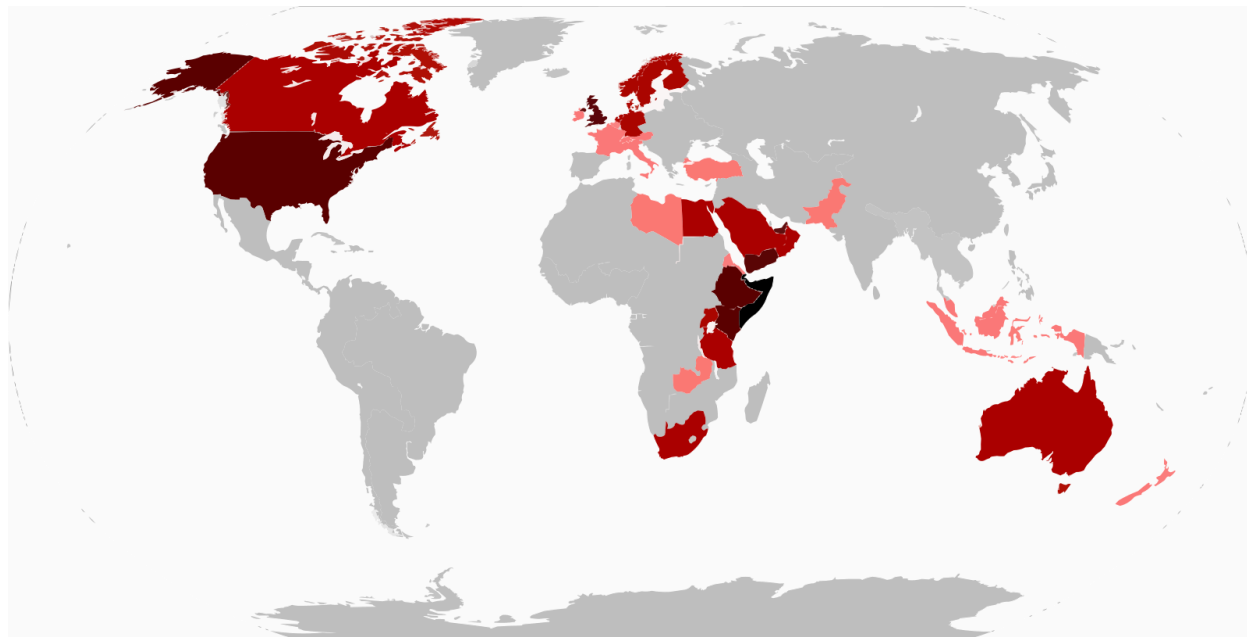
Chapter V: Somali Women's Role in Upholding Somali Culture After the Civil War

In the wake of the Somali Civil War, the Somali diaspora has emerged as a crucial guardian of Somali culture, bridging continents and generations. As Somalia grappled with the turmoil following President Siad Barre's regime collapse, many Somalis sought refuge abroad, creating vibrant communities across the globe. This chapter shifts its focus slightly from the domestic impacts of the Civil War and the subsequent rise of extremist groups within Somalia to the global stage, where Somali women in the diaspora have played a pivotal role in preserving and adapting their rich cultural heritage.

Estimates suggest that over two million Somalis have resettled worldwide, forming significant populations in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. These migrations have not only reshaped the demographics of host countries but have also ensured the survival and transmission of Somali culture through the tireless efforts of its people, especially women. Somali women have been at the forefront of cultural preservation, utilizing oral histories, traditional crafts, and cuisine to keep their heritage alive and relevant for younger generations growing up outside of Somalia.

This chapter will explore how Somali women across the diaspora have become cultural ambassadors, weaving together the past and present to foster a sense of identity and community among Somali people globally. Through an examination of written histories, we will gain insights into the resilience and adaptability of Somali culture, as well as the unique challenges and triumphs of maintaining cultural continuity in a foreign context. By understanding the role of Somali women in the diaspora, this thesis seeks to highlight the broader implications of migration, identity, and cultural preservation in the aftermath of conflict.

The Somali Diaspora



Map of Somali diaspora of those who were born in Greater Somalia and reside in areas of the world that they were not born in. The UN estimated that in 2015, approximately 2 million people from Somalia were living outside of the country's borders.

Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Somali Diaspora, emerging due to the consequences Somali Civil War, represents a significant and globally dispersed community. The disintegration of Somalia as a unified nation-state forced many Somali migrants to seek safer, more stable environments. Many were drawn to the West, enticed by the promise of a better life, which led to a substantial westward migration, positioning Somalis among the most populous diaspora communities globally. The Somali presence is notable across Europe, Australia, and North America, showcasing the diaspora's widespread reach. The United States, with Minnesota at the forefront, has welcomed

the largest concentration of Somali immigrants in the nation, facilitated by resettlement initiatives aimed at mitigating health disparities faced by this group.⁵⁰

Somali migration trends have been influenced by a myriad of factors, such as continuing political unrest, economic aspirations, and humanitarian crises, marking a history rich with the search for refuge and stability. A key aspect of this migration is the pivotal role of remittances, which have routinely surpassed the total of development and humanitarian assistance, emphasizing the vital economic connections sustained between the diaspora and Somalia.⁵¹

Furthermore, the diaspora's influence on Somalia transcends monetary support, encompassing political activism, investments, and contributions toward peace and state reconstruction. This engagement illustrates the complex and dynamic roles played by the Somali diaspora, particularly through women, marked by a combination of ambitions, challenges, and identities that traverse national boundaries.

Somali Women as Bearers of Culture and Agents of Change

Somali women have creatively adapted and redefined their cultural identities through the mediums of art, literature, and social media. This cultural evolution serves to counter extremist perspectives and foster a broader and more inclusive understanding of what it means to be Somali. Despite facing limitations set by extremist elements on artistic expression, these women have persevered in their artistic endeavors, often in secret. Their poetry and music have become vehicles for resistance against oppressive ideologies, advocating for peace, and showcasing the enduring spirit of the Somali people.

⁵⁰ Pavlish, C., Noor, S., & Brandt, J., Somali Immigrant Women and the American Health Care System: Discordant Beliefs, Divergent Expectations, and Silent Worries, 2010

⁵¹ Gundel, The Migration-Development Nexus: Somalia Case Study, 2002

In economic spheres, women's entrepreneurship in small businesses and cooperatives plays a vital role in cultural preservation. By maintaining traditional crafts and marketplaces, they ensure the survival of Somali cultural practices while supporting their communities under challenging conditions. Women have also taken the lead in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, defying traditional gender expectations and advocating for participatory governance. Their active engagement in political and leadership roles promotes a culture of peace and tolerance.

Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin

Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin is a prominent figure within the Somali art scene, known for her dedication to using art as a means for advocating for peace, addressing social issues, and fostering reconciliation in Somalia. Residing in Mogadishu, Muhsin has faced significant opposition in pursuing her passion for art because of the conservative nature of Somali society and the country's complex history of conflict and religious conservatism. Despite these challenges, her commitment to her craft and her community remains unwavering.

Muhsin's artwork captures contemporary life in Somalia, aiming to showcase the country in a positive light and build reconciliation. Her recognition as a significant artist is partly due to her unique position as one of the very few female artists in the Somali art scene, making her a national hero in the eyes of some. She began drawing at the age of eight, encouraged by her maternal uncle, a well-known artist, which led her to pursue a career in art despite the societal challenges and barriers she faced as a woman.⁵² Her boldness in addressing contentious social issues through her paintings invites both admiration and controversy. For instance, during an exhibition in the City University of Mogadishu, a male student's vocal objection to her work

⁵² Voa News, In Somalia, A Rare Female Artist Promotes Images of Peace, October 2021

prompted a wider discussion about the role of art in society. This incident highlights the tension between traditional views and the transformative power of art.



Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin and her work in Mogadishu, Somalia. Taken October 2022
Source: Associated Press/Farah Abdi Warsameh

Muhsin's artwork doesn't shy away from challenging topics; one piece she has created touchingly depicts a soldier amidst the ruins of Somalia's first parliament building, symbolizing ongoing political strife and delayed national elections. Another piece explores the unspoken sufferings of vulnerable young women, while a third painting recalls a time before the adoption of stricter dress codes, portraying a woman in attire once common but now rare in Somalia. Through these works, Muhsin not only captures the essence of Somalia's turbulent history and its impact on women, but also ignites conversations on reconciliation, rights, and the envisioning of a more inclusive future.⁵³



Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin and her work in Mogadishu, Somalia. Taken October 2022
Source: Associated Press/Farah Abdi Warsameh

⁵³ Voa News, In Somalia, A Rare Female Artist Promotes Images of Peace, October 2021

Educationally, Muhsin wanted to study fine arts but because of the lack of arts or creative schools in Mogadishu, she earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering as her second choice. She also works as a site engineer, which highlights her versatile talents and determination. Despite encountering skepticism about her choice of profession as a female artist and engineer, Muhsin has leveraged social media to connect with a broader audience, showcasing her art to people worldwide and using the platform to sell her artwork. This digital presence has enabled her to gain recognition and support far beyond Somalia's borders, attracting attention from global media outlets.⁵⁴

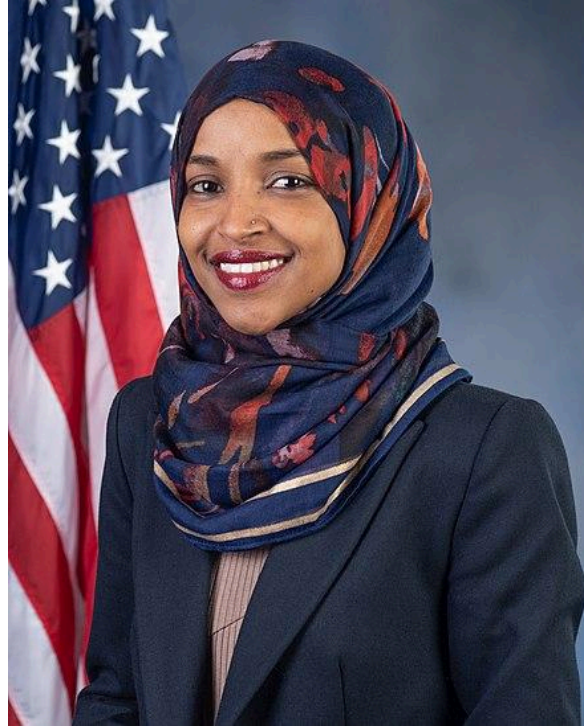
Muhsin's story is not only about her individual achievements but also about the broader role of art in Somali society. Her work, and the challenges she faces, shed light on the power of art to initiate dialogue, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to societal healing and reconstruction. Through her dedication, Muhsin is helping to change perceptions of Somalia, both domestically and internationally, proving art can be a powerful tool for social change and empowerment, particularly for women in traditionally male-dominated fields.

U.S. House of Representative Ilhan Omar

Ilhan Omar's reelection and ongoing service as the U.S. Representative for Minnesota's 5th Congressional District have marked a significant stride in enhancing Somali culture's visibility and influence both within Somalia and across the Somali Diaspora. Her historic election as the first Somali American in Congress and one of the first two Muslim women to serve not only reflects a breaking of cultural and gender barriers, but also highlights the Somali diaspora's growing political and social activism in the U.S.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ UNSOM, Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin: Using Art To Make A Difference, December 2023

⁵⁵ Voa News, Somali American Women Score Wins in US Midterm Elections, November 2022



Ilhan Omar's official portrait. Taken 2019
Source: U.S. House Office of Photography

Ilhan Omar's legislative work, including her support for the Inflation Reduction Act, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, the Homes for All Act, and comprehensive immigration reform, reflect a deep commitment not only to her constituents in Minnesota's 5th Congressional District, but also to the broader principles of justice, equality, and opportunity. These values are deeply ingrained in Somali cultural ethos and resonate with Omar's own life story, marked by her journey from a refugee to becoming the first Somali American and one of the first two Muslim women elected to the U.S. Congress.⁵⁶

Omar's refugee roots are a testament to the resilience and determination that have shaped her political and advocacy work. Her experiences, having fled the Somali Civil War, living in a Kenyan refugee camp for four years, and then resettling in the United States, provide her with a unique perspective on the challenges faced by immigrants, refugees, and underrepresented

⁵⁶ Omar, I. (n.d.). Issues. U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar

communities. This background fuels her commitment to policies that promote inclusivity and provide opportunities for all, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.



I spoke with Ilhan Omar for the first time during an internship experience I had on Capitol Hill. Taken July 2022
Source: Marwah Ismail

Omar's advocacy for the Somali diaspora and Somalia itself, including pressing the U.S. administration on its Somalia strategy and defending Somali sovereignty, further showcases her dedication to her heritage and the values instilled in her by her upbringing. Omar's work in Congress is a bridge between her Somali roots and her American identity, embodying the hope and opportunity the U.S. represents to refugees and immigrants from around the globe.

Edna Adan Ismail

Edna Adan Ismail is another wonderful Somali woman who stands out for her impactful work in healthcare and women's rights in Somaliland.⁵⁷ Her transformation of a former execution

⁵⁷ *Somaliland*, officially known as the Republic of Somaliland, is a self-declared sovereign state in the Horn of Africa. It shares borders with Djibouti to the northwest, Ethiopia to the south and west, Somalia to the east, and the Gulf of Aden to the north. The territory of modern-day Somaliland corresponds to the former British Somaliland Protectorate. Following the collapse of the central government of Somalia in 1991, Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia. Despite its lack of formal international recognition, Somaliland has maintained a stable government, held democratic elections, and established its own currency, legal system, and public institutions. The region's search for international recognition continues, as it seeks to legitimize its sovereign status on the global stage.

and waste site into the Edna Adan Maternity Hospital stands as a profound symbol of the shift from a culture disfigured by violence and oppression, particularly against women, to one that cherishes and prioritizes their health and rights. This act of reclaiming a place of death and despair to create a place of hope and life not only physically transforms the landscape, but also represents a cultural change.

The establishment of Edna Adan University further amplifies this transformation, illustrating a commitment to sustained change through education. By training over 4,000 health professionals, Ismail has ensured that the impact of her work extends beyond the walls of her hospital, permeating the health sector of Somaliland and beyond. This effort not only improves healthcare outcomes, but also cultivates a culture that respects knowledge, values health professionals, and highlights the importance of women's roles in society.



Edna Adan Ismail photographed at Edna Adan Hospital in Hargeisa, Somaliland, on August 2023.
Source: [The Wall Street Journal](#)

Ismail's vocal opposition to female genital mutilation (FGM) and her strategy of involving men in the discourse emphasizes her holistic approach to cultural transformation.

Through education and dialogue, she tackles deeply ingrained practices and beliefs, advocating for a cultural shift toward recognizing and respecting women's bodily autonomy and dignity. This has not only earned her international accolades, such as through the 2023 Templeton Prize⁵⁸ but has also positioned her as a pivotal figure in the movement for women's rights within Somali culture.

Edna Adan Ismail's work has thus served as a cornerstone in both preserving and shaping Somali culture — from one historically marred by conflict and gender-based violence to one that celebrates women's health, education, and empowerment. Her achievements resonate not just within Somalia and Somaliland, but also across the Somali diaspora, serving as a testament to the power of resilient and visionary leadership in driving societal change. Through her actions, Ismail has provided a tangible example of how healthcare and education can be leveraged as instruments of cultural transformation, advocating for women's rights and health in ways that honor the past while boldly reimagining the future.

Somali Women Peacebuilding Work

Somali women have significantly contributed to peacebuilding efforts and the transformation of Somali society, with organizations such as the Coalition for Grassroots Women Organizations (COGWO), the IIDA Women Development Organisation, and Women Pioneers for Peace and Life (HINNA) playing pivotal roles. These organizations have utilized both modern and traditional conflict resolution methods, positioning themselves as crucial civil society actors in Somalia's recovery and reconstruction efforts.

The IIDA Women's Development Organisation, established in 1991 by Somali women activists, has been instrumental in advancing the rights and welfare of Somali women and girls.

⁵⁸ Templeton Prize, Edna Adan Ismail Wants to Fix the World, May 2023

By focusing on combatting gender-based violence and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), offering training for economic independence, and working on improving healthcare facilities such as the De Martino Hospital in Mogadishu, IIDA has demonstrated a multifaceted approach to fostering peace and security. The organization's efforts are a testament to the power of local initiatives in addressing the deep-seated issues stemming from Somalia's civil war and ongoing instability.⁵⁹

Moreover, NGOs in Somalia, including IIDA, have adopted strategies of inclusion, negotiation, facilitation, and mediation to promote peace and social cohesion. For instance, Somali Peace Line and other organizations have focused on educating youth and communities about peace and conflict resolution, highlighting the significance of societal inclusion in peacebuilding processes. Such efforts underline the necessity of grassroots involvement and the empowerment of various social sectors, including women, to achieve sustainable peace and development in Somalia and the broader Somali diaspora.⁶⁰

These organizations' strategic positioning vis-a-vis groups like Al-Shabab, and their approach to Islam, underscore a delicate balance between advocating for women's rights and navigating the complex socio-political landscape of Somalia. By engaging in dialogue and building capacities within communities, these women-led initiatives work toward a vision of Somali society where peace, equality, and justice prevail, contributing significantly to the reshaping of Somali culture both within the country and in the diaspora.

Within the intricate social and cultural fabric of Somalia, women have historically been pivotal in nurturing and transmitting cultural values and practices. By engaging in storytelling, education, and artistic endeavors, they play a crucial role in maintaining the essence of Somali

⁵⁹ The Anti Tribalism Movement, How The IIDA is Improving the Lives of Somali Women, November 2017

⁶⁰ Social Watch, Somalia: The Role Of Ngos In The Peace Process, April 2010

traditions for succeeding generations. Their involvement in community activities and the strategic use of traditional crafts for economic betterment is instrumental in keeping cultural customs alive. The empowerment of women through education is a cornerstone for enhancing cultural endurance. Somali women's initiatives that provide educational opportunities, particularly in settings like refugee camps and less accessible regions, serve as a counteragent against radical influences while safeguarding cultural heritage and methodologies.

Daughters of Arraweelo Stories

The work *Daughters of Arraweelo: Stories of Somali Women* by Ayaan Adan it presents a mosaic of Somali women's lives, delineating their tenacity, insight, and unwavering resolve. These narratives, set against the background of diaspora and cultural preservation, illuminate the significant role women play in the perpetuation of Somali culture. Highlighted below are two stories from the collection that broaden the understanding of these themes:

Anisa Ali's story provides a compelling insight into her life and experiences. Being raised in Somalia and later moving to the United States, Anisa's journey is marked by the challenges of assimilation, the struggles of identity, and the impact of the Somali Civil War on her family.

Born in Mogadishu as her parents' first child, Anisa recounts the challenges her family faced living in a neighborhood where safety was compromised, affecting their daily life and basic needs such as accessing the marketplace for food. This escalating insecurity led her family to relocate to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, while her father moved to the United States, working tirelessly to eventually sponsor them for reunification. Anisa's recollections of her time in Addis Ababa are characterized by days spent at dugsi,⁶¹ highlighting the importance of religious and cultural education even in displacement.

⁶¹ Somali weekend classes focusing on teaching students to memorize and recite the Quran, along with basic literacy and religious education.

In the United States, Anisa's father worked as a taxi driver, a common profession for many Somali immigrants, while her mother, who once took care of their household in Somalia, transitioned into home care work once they moved to the U.S. This shift in their roles highlights the economic and social adjustments immigrant families often make. Anisa, as the eldest child, held a significant portion of this adjustment burden. She was pushed into the role of a translator and a mediator between her family and the outside world, a responsibility many first-generation immigrant children, including myself, can relate to. This role extended beyond mere language translation to include navigating complex systems such as healthcare and education on behalf of her family. Moreover, the expectation to excel academically and set a positive example for her siblings added to the pressure, showcasing the high expectations often placed on the eldest children in Somali families.

Her story also touches on the silent struggles of preserving Somali cultural identity in a new and often divergent cultural landscape. The longing for home and the pain of displacement were woven into the fabric of their daily lives, yet openly discussing these feelings was not always possible. The cultural preservation efforts were largely private and centered around the Somali language, food, and religious practices. However, the absence of a broader community connection, similar to what they had in Somalia or even Ethiopia, highlighted the isolation that can accompany migration.

Anisa's narrative is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Somali women and the broader immigrant experience. Her story, as part of *Daughters of Arraweelo*, does more than just share her personal experiences; it illuminates the collective journey of Somali women in the diaspora. It highlights the crucial role women play in maintaining cultural continuity, supporting their families through transitions, and building new lives in foreign lands while never losing

sight of where they came from. Through Anisa Ali, we gain insight into the courage it takes to face the unknown, the strength required to adapt, and the unwavering commitment to one's heritage amidst the tumult of migration and resettlement.

Another woman's story, which was recorded in *Daughters of Arraweelo*, is Qorsho Hassan. Qorsho Hassan is an educator, researcher, and community organizer who gained recognition for her work in the field of education. She served as a classroom teacher for 10 years before being named Minnesota's Teacher of the Year in 2020. Hassan is notably the first Somali American to receive this prestigious honor.

Hassan's life journey began in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was born into the first generation of the Somali diaspora. Named after her paternal grandmother, Qorsho's early years were influenced by the legacy of the Somali Civil War, which moved her family from Somalia to Toronto, Canada, in search of safety and stability. Her narrative weaves through various cities in North America, each move underscoring her family's quest for a place that felt like home.

Qorsho's reflections on her upbringing, particularly her sister's influential role in her life and her mother's resilience as a single parent shine a light on the strength and adaptability of Somali women. Through her family's journey, Qorsho developed a profound appreciation for the importance of education, community support, and the preservation of Somali culture amid the challenges of diaspora life.

Qorsho Hassan, along with her colleague Becca Buck, is a co-author of *The Rhythm of Somalia*. This book is a rich assortment of Somali songs, chants, and games contributed by students and parents at Gideon Pond Elementary School. It offers an immersive journey into the traditional rhythms that pulse at the heart of Somali culture.

The Rhythm of Somalia serves as a bridge, connecting the different generations and varied cultures within Somalia while highlighting the importance of preserving and sharing cultural heritage within educational spaces. Its creation is a testament to the power of community collaboration and the vital role educators like Hassan and Buck play in bringing cultural diversity to the forefront of education. This book is an essential resource for educators, students, and anyone interested in exploring the rich musical traditions of Somalia and the profound stories they tell.



Qorsho Hassan and Becca Buck hold up their newly published book, *The Rhythm of Somalia*, on November 2023.
Source: [Sahan Journal](#)

My younger sisters, Safa and Mudan Ismail, were students at Gideon Pond Elementary when Hassan and Buck were writing *The Rhythm of Somalia*. My sisters were a part of this collaboration and shared a family game called “Aray Buul” that my mother passed down to us from her childhood. Having our family's traditions and practices preserved and shared through *The Rhythm of Somalia* allows our identity and culture to be better understood in our new communities as products of diaspora.

Aray Buul

Shared by Safa, Mudan, and Family



Safa (left), age ten, and Mudan (right), age eight, are sisters residing in the south metro area of Minnesota with their mother, stepfather, and two older siblings. They both shared the game *Aray Buul*, a variant of *Ciyaar Bilow* and *Alay Sa Boom* that their mother, Muna, learned during her childhood in North Somalia. Muna moved to the United States when she was twenty years old.

Muna explained that the words in the game do have literal translations, but the words are just used for assigning players and none are better than the other. This game includes words from the Reer Waqooyi dialect, which is used in northern Somalia. The words *aray buul* can be compared to “and hit,” hence the reason the players put their hands down. Muna has fond memories playing this game growing up. The children in the neighborhood would take their afternoon naps and then everyone would come out to play this game, along with many others. This game was popular because it gave the children an excuse to “play fight.” This game is one of many that Muna has taught her children, though this is Safa’s favorite.

The family plays this game every time they are with family and friends, especially when their grandparents come to visit from Somaliland. The last time their grandparents were able to visit, they stayed for a few months and were also able to celebrate Eid together early. To celebrate Eid last year, their family went to the mosque to pray, went to the Mall of America, ate at a restaurant, and then went home and played games together. Their mother

SONGS, GAMES, AND CONTEXT • ARAY BUUL

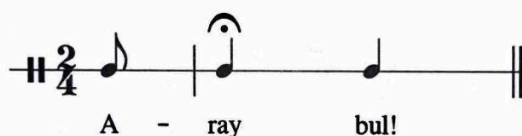
enjoys making traditional Somali food throughout the year when they come together with family and friends, including *sambuus*, *bur* (fried dough), rice, and chicken.

The girls speak both English and Somali at home, though they learned English first and Somali later when they were three or four years old. Safa says she is still picking up on certain pronunciations of Somali words, as there are sounds that are not found in English. They both attend *dugsi* on Saturdays and Sundays, where Safa says they “learn about their religion and to do good things.”

Outside of school, Safa is very athletic. She plays on a girls’ traveling basketball team and used to be in dance class. She also enjoys playing with her sister and brothers and going to her cousin’s house on weekends. Mudan likes to play games, such as hide-and-seek, with her friends outside of school. Mudan enjoys school and that she gets to learn a lot of different things, including her two favorites, physical education and music class.

Safa’s final piece of advice: “Try to learn new games and have fun with your family.”

Aray Buul



Game Directions

- Find a group of four or five players.
- Assign one leader and have the rest of the players assign themselves *oola*, *dista*, *fingar*, *kabtan*, or *kaari*.
- All players say, “Aray buul!” and put down any number of fingers on the “buul!” The leader will then “count” all of the fingers by “counting” each finger in the following order: *oola*, *dista*, *fingar*, *kabtan*, *kaari*.
- Whichever word is said on the final finger that has been counted is then at risk of being eliminated from the game and becomes The Slapper. All other players must put their palms together and hold them out to The Slapper. The Slapper has to try to slap each player’s hands before they take them away. If The Slapper does not slap anyone, they are then eliminated. If The Slapper hits all of the other players’ hands, the game continues.
- The game continues until there is only one player remaining.

Text and Translation

Somali	English
Aray buull <i>Ah-RAY bool!</i>	And hit!
Oola <i>OH-lah</i>	One
Dista <i>DISS-tuh</i>	Second
Fingar <i>FIN-gher</i>	Finger
Kabtan <i>KUP-tin</i>	Captain
Kaari <i>KAH-ree</i>	Co-captain

Cultural Consideration

This popular game and its variants can be found in Somalia, Kenya, and from the Oromo people in Ethiopia. This game is a variant of these other games found in this resource: *Alay Sa Boom*, *Ciyaar Bilow*, and *Kow, Labo, Saddex*.

Optional Ideas

Have an activity ready to go for students who have been eliminated from the game to keep engagement high, such as using egg shakers to shake and create tension during the slapping part of the game or using an unpitched percussion instrument to play while the counting of fingers is occurring.

Supplemental Online Resources

- *Aray Buul* Video Demonstration: Safa, Mudan, and family teach and play the game.
- *Aray Buul* Video Pronunciation

Qorsho Hassan's story, from her roots in New Orleans to her community contributions across North America, exemplifies the significance of education and community involvement in cultural preservation and the shaping of future generations. Her efforts to establish educational initiatives for girls and women exemplify how Somali women are leading the charge in cultural preservation and empowerment. Qorsho's work, rooted in her own experiences of displacement and identity formation, aims to provide spaces where Somali heritage is celebrated and future generations can flourish. Her story is a testament to the power of education as a tool for empowerment and a source of hope for preserving the rich dynamic of Somali culture across continents.

Through Anisa and Qorsho's stories, *Daughters of Arraweelo* showcases the diverse experiences of Somali women, their struggles, achievements, and the enduring spirit of resilience that defines their lives in the diaspora. Their narratives, along with those of other women in the book, underscore the importance of storytelling in preserving culture, sharing wisdom, and fostering a sense of community among Somali women across generations. Their stories not only celebrate Somali women's unique contributions to societal and cultural spheres but also resonate with universal experiences of adversity, resilience, and the quest for identity and belonging.

Daughters of Arraweelo is a powerful tribute to Somali women's enduring spirit, their cultural stewardship, and their influential role as catalysts for change.

In this chapter, we have explored the resilience and adaptability of the Somali diaspora and the significant role of Somali women in preserving cultural identity and fostering change. Through storytelling, education, and artistic expression, Somali women have been paramount in keeping traditional practices alive and challenging extremist ideologies.

The Somali diaspora, dispersed globally, has maintained strong economic and cultural ties to Somalia, contributing to its political and social reconstruction. Women in the diaspora have redefined their cultural identities, using art and literature to combat extremism and advocate for peace. Figures like Sana Ashraf Sharif Muhsin in the arts and Ilhan Omar in politics exemplify the growing influence and leadership roles of Somali women. Additionally, Edna Aden Ismail's work in healthcare and against female genital mutilation (FGM) highlights the critical role of Somali women in improving health outcomes and advocating for women's rights.

Furthermore, Somali women have played key roles in peacebuilding and economic empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and participating actively in political and educational processes. Their efforts have been crucial in promoting a culture of peace and tolerance, showcasing their indispensable role in both preserving Somali culture and acting as agents of change. This chapter reaffirms the enduring spirit and transformative impact these women have in the preservation and transformation of Somali culture in their communities and beyond.

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