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‘Sisters; was this what we struggled for?’: The Gendered Rivalry in Power and Politics

By Mohamed Haji Ingiriis¹

Abstract

This article explores the role of Somali women in the twentieth-century history of modern Somalia. This includes exploring the role of women in the decolonisation and post-colonial movements and gender changes during the military dictatorship. The article examines women's social movements that made some significant changes in Somalia over the past seventy years, even though these have not paved the way for fruitful results. In demonstrating that the current attempts to position themselves in political circles by Somali women has its roots during the decolonisation and post-colonial successive Somali governments, the article argues that women failed to benefit from their feminist agenda as the notion of governmentality changed on the way—from democratisation to the dictatorial military regime.

Key Words: Somali Women, Social Movement, Political Power and Leadership.

Introduction

Many studies on women's agency in several parts of the world about events surrounding their political lives—sprung up after the critical intervention of pioneering scholars—have tended to assume that women's political involvement and activism emerged very late and after post-colonial governmentality in the case of Africa. Explorations have touched such themes as the absence of women's 'proper place' (Fallon 2008; Bauer and Britton 2006; Tripp 2001; Elmi et al. 2000; Nussbaum 2000; Geisler 2000). Cases of the 'natural role' of women overlooked still feature in literature (Sen 2014; Ingiriis and Hoehne 2013).

Tracing the contribution of Somali women to the nationalist movement of 1943-1960 offers a rare insight into how women had absorbed local politics earlier than many of their peers around the globe. It also provides a foundation for understanding the contemporary setting of women's movements. Somali women's movements can trace their origins to the 1940s, when several political movements were set up to advocate for Somali independence. Here, women played an important—even crucial—part in many grassroots-level associations and social movements which emerged during the epoch of colonialism up to the collapse of the military regime and post-'civil' war.

This article examines the role of women in the twentieth-century history of modern Somalia. This includes exploring the decolonisation and post-colonial movements and gender

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changes during the military dictatorship. The article traces gender social movements that made significant changes in Somalia over the past seventy years. Despite the fact that major changes have occurred in the urban centres during the era of colonialism, the social status and position of Somali women, especially those in the rural areas, lies in between struggle and survival. In the countryside, people still adhere to a traditional social structure where women's place in society is determined under the strict conventional wisdom that women belong to the sphere of domestic household work, while in the urban areas women's status has changed dramatically since the era of colonialism (Ingiriis 2011; Aidid 2010; Duale 1981).

Some studies on gender roles in Somalia seem to imply that the rule of the military regime was a golden era of women in Somalia (Bryden and Steiner 1998; Gardner and El Bushra 2004). Drawing from such premises, Forni (1980: 19-28) went even further as to use the term 'emancipation', considering this era as 'the discovery of woman'. These narratives tend to overlook the condition of women in terms of freedom of speech and freedom to form independent associations, a right they enjoyed under the successive post-colonial governments prior to the military rule. Similarly, analysts have failed to consider women living in rural areas, rather than focusing on urbanised women, who allied themselves to the regime, in part because the regime recruited women adherents who could put military men's interests before those of their fellow women's. The article argues otherwise and demonstrates how women were exploited during the regime to remain applauders—that is, people being used to make ululation for the regime.

The Culture of Patriarchy

In a society of male patriarchy assessed through socio-cultural lenses, men had ultimate power, while women were viewed as household guardians. Somali pastoral poetry is one source to witness how women had long been disempowered in this setting favouring male over female. However, within their local communities, women have played a significant role in politics and economy for many years, even if they were assigned principally to follow the traditional roles of wife and mother—a milieu in which 'their potential for individual and collective fulfilment was strictly confined' (Bryden and Steiner 1998: 67).

As Somali politics is based on clan, a major common impediment is how women could and can still play by the rules of the game by dealing with kinship identity. Somalis value clan connection founded on what scholars call 'total genealogy' (Cassanelli 2010: 53-66; Mansur 1995: 117-34; World Bank 2005: 1). The clan system, though it sounds cohesive, suppresses women, allowing men to be solid stakeholders in customary clan laws of *Xeer*, which has, intrinsically, a profound implication on the lives of women. The magnitude of *Xeer*—defined here as the contract between neighbouring clans, in the clan institution of justice is still in practice in many parts of the rural areas.

From a gender point of view, the *Xeer* fails to do justice to women. A case in point is its contradictory facet of the decomposition of women in treating them as a property. Bryden and Steiner (1998: 30), citing Enrico Cerulli, an authoritative Italian ethnographer of Somalia, observed in the southern Somalia during the early decades of the twentieth-century that women do not 'exist as independent legal person; she is always under the jurisdiction of others'. It was traditionally a common practice to observe women being used as a gift. As noted by Margherita Zuin, 'a girl from a family convicted of a crime is forced to marry a member of the aggrieved clan as compensation. In other cases involving rape, the claimant is obliged to marry the

perpetrator to keep her honour and the honour of the family intact' (Zuin 2008: 98; see also Gundel 2006).

Somali women have nonetheless never ceased to resist the traditional patriarchy and negotiating gender roles. Experts of Somali society and culture have recognised that 'like their menfolk, Somali women [...] find ways of making their influence felt' (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964: 24). One of these ways is using poetry. Oral communication through the exercise of poetry has a particularly significant place in Somali society. In general, Somali oral poetry is an excellent place to look for changes in history and events that shaped the Somalis. Somali poetry, in the words of an authority voice, 'is not only a cherished form of artistic expression and popular entertainment, it is also a major vehicle for social commentary on events of interest to the community' (Cassanelli 2011: 10).

Apart from raising their concerns and grievances through composing poems, many women employed counter-argumentative discourses to challenge men's hegemonic settings. They metaphorically lionise—and literally monumentalise—themselves in using *sheekaxariirooyin* (mythical tales), such as the stories of the mythical Queen Araweelo, a legendary phenomenal woman who was thought to have once ruled northern Somalia and Dhegdheer, another legendary autocratic woman held to have oppressed Somali men under her rule (e.g. Hanghe 1988; Hassan and Bowen 2007).

It is worthy of note that there are variations between northern and southern Somalia. Even though Andrzejewski and Lewis had been concerned mainly with poetry, basing their research exclusively on the northern Somalia where they observed women as 'extremely independent' (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964: 24), their assessment can be applied to many parts of southern Somalia, where—given their resilience especially during the warfare—women's independence has changed significantly, at least in some regards. However, Besteman (1995: 193) argues that, until the late 1980s, women's influence in the south was 'extremely limited' in matters pertaining to land ownership.

Yet the south had a long history of independence at least in matters of religion for women. Here, there existed a popular cult of women saints, though there is no specific indication of any historical date (Mukhtar 1995: 13). One such woman, who was also a prolific poet, was Dada Masiti, the only known female saint in Somali history (Kassim 1995: 34). Both Reese (2008) and Declich (2000), who conducted ethnographic research in Somalia and Kenya prior and after the outbreak of the war, have observed women's role in *jameecooyin* (religious rural communities). Of particular relevance is that some of the *jameecooyin* leaders in the 'urban setting' were women (Reese 2008: 121).

Women's Struggle for Somali Independence

Somali women's movements that campaigned for independence were the drivers of once overlooked social transformation that almost revolutionised society to develop common national feeling and unity, forcing both men and women to unite for the cause of colonial resistance. Women's pivotal role in the campaign against colonialism soon after the formation of the Somali Youth Club (SYC) in May 1943 meant that their activism inadvertently decreased the impression that women could only prove themselves to domestic work. The positions that women assumed years after the reformation of the SYC into Somali Youth League (SYL hereafter) in 1947

increased their chances for leading roles.² Even though the SYL provided them with the opportunity to organise themselves, women activists experienced indirect hindrances to acquiring political experience. Despite the fact that the SYL leaders were exclusively made up of men—given that none of its thirteen founders were female—women’s agency within the movement played a crucial role in the mobilisation and recruitment process to attract as many people as possible for the cause of political independence (UN-INSTRAW 2008). Indeed, SYL leaders were ‘very reluctant to share the decision-making process with women’ to the extent that the ‘reluctance’ itself helped women accelerate their efforts in achieving a recognition within the movement and the society at large (Alim 2008: 91).

It has claimed that the SYL leaders and other various movements—even though they depended on them—saw women as ‘supporters’, rather than partners. This argument, nonetheless, does not provide an intuitive reflection and image of how women in the ‘nationalist project’ saw and defined themselves. In contrast with the view of women as supporters rather than leaders, political memoirs produced by some of the women involved in the politics and poetics of nationalist movements saw that ‘women formed the backbone’ of the SYL and ‘took active part in the political struggle’ (Alim 2008: 88).³

A closer look at the SYL constitution in 1947 indicates the absence of terms like ‘gender’ and ‘women’ from any of its forty-six articles. Despite this fact, article five of the constitution declares uniting ‘all Somalis in general and youth in particular’ (Abuhakema and Carmichael 2010: 454). Of particular interest in this respect is that men and women seemed to be partners in the struggle for the anti-colonial front (not in the circles of power authority). Women activists within the SYL maintained putting up the fight for sovereignty as their main priority, brushing aside any demand of gender rights.

Women used different methods to make their importance felt. One such successful strategy was using their poetry (*buraambur*) as a weapon to unite both urban people (*reer beled*) and rural population (*reer baadiye*) in resisting colonialism. Constituting women’s equivalent to *gabay* (men’s favourite genre of poetry), the *buraambur* has been part of Somali cultural life and played a crucial, if not fundamental, ‘role in determining Somali society, educating society, conveying messages in political and social affairs and raising consciousness among the public’ (Jama 1994: 200). It is generally used to exhort the public to carry out or give up something of importance, to create common consciousness (either for the ‘nationalist project’ or for clan solidarity depending upon a particular context), to extol one’s clan lineage during wedding ceremonies and to eulogise when a person one respects dies.

The *buraanbur* also remains ‘the highest poetic form in women’s literature and has sub-categories which include the *hobeeyo* (lullaby), the *hoyaale* (work songs) and *sitaat* (religious songs)’ (Gardner and El Bushra 2004: xiv). As explained by Alim (2008: 112), ‘[w]hat makes the [*buraanbur*] especially appealing is that, accompanied by a drumbeat and clapping, one can dance to its rhythm. A good [*buraanbur*] should be well balanced and alliterative through all its lines’. The *buraanbur* embodied a strong resistance instrument to confront the military regime of the British Military Administration (BMA hereafter) which ruled the whole ‘Somalias’—all

² The SYL was the first political organisation formed to wage anti-colonial struggle to end the British and Italian colonial domination in Somalia. At the outset, it was a social youth club that advocated for the independence of ‘Italian Somaliland’ and establishing a basic ‘modern’ education. It reformed itself into a pan-Somali political party, thereby dominating the political spectrum from 1956 up to 1969. For a thorough observation and pioneering work about the SYL, see Abuhakema and Carmichael (2010: 450-466); Barnes (2007: 277-291); Touval (1963).

³ See also Aidid (2010: 118, footnote 118) who has conducted oral interviews with the surviving ‘women activists, members and affiliates’ of the now defunct SYL movement.

Somali territories except Djibouti, formerly French Somaliland, in the Horn of Africa from 1941 to 1950. When the British ceded a portion of Somali territory to Ethiopia in 1948 after a change of policy on the part of the British labour government, the Somali relationship with the British authorities deteriorated and nearly got out of hand. Some violent episodes and direct armed confrontations occurred in several towns in response to the British decision in ceding a portion of Somalia to Ethiopia and in handing over authority of southern Somalia to Italy.

Soon women's poetry found slight recognition within the masses and constructed respect and responsiveness within the SYL establishment. Ambaro Hussein, the wife of Yaasiin Haji Osman Sharmarke, who was one of the 13 founders of the SYL, composed a *buraambur* to support the SYL stance, as reported by Kapteijns and Boqor (2009:13) thus: 'We are the men who wear the logo of our party on our hearts and are not afraid of clan. Let all those who are good and want to join come to the Somali League (*Karaawilkan raga koorahay ku sitaan oon kalaan ka cabsanin baannu nahay. Kal wanaagsan iyo ninkii doonaayo, kaalaya Soomaaliya Leeg*)'. Without women's endorsement, it was apparent that the SYL could not have had any common ground to mobilise the public behind them in continuing their struggle. Women's political activism did not only consist of poetry and moral support; they also employed social welfare self-schemes to provide free food and drink for the weekly SYL gathering held every Sunday at Isku Raran village in Mogadishu during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Women also helped the movement in many other ways, one of which being to recruit new 'members of the organisation and collect funds, building great financial sacrifices among the people' (Kapteijns and Boqor 2009: 13-14; see also Ingiriis 2011; Jama 1991).

In January 1948, following a fact-finding mission by four power delegation from the United Nations (e.g. Cassanelli 1994: 143-55), the SYL leaders—with the cooperation of women activists—organised a public rally to show that the Somali public were vehemently opposed to the return of the Italian colonial rule to Somalia. Women composed the vast majority of people who came out for the support of the SYL's message of self-determination. A subsequent armed confrontation, popularly known by Somalis as *Soomaaliya Hanoolaato* (long live Somalia) between the SYL supporters and the Italian residents in Mogadishu, along with their loyal Somali adherents, saw the killing of a Somali woman called Hawa Osman Taako.⁴ The killing of Taako radicalised Mogadishu masses in the sense that some Italian residents were camped in the BMA compounds for fear of reprisals. The blame of the incident was shouldered on the BMA for the responsibility of the death of 52 Italians, because the Italians believed that the British was 'very reluctant' to see Italy returning 'to the African scene' (Ungari 2010: 165).

Taako's fate was embellished in Somali history to such an extent that it was repeatedly disseminated through oral Somali tradition and state radio broadcasts. She was made a female heroine through the propagation of the invented image that she had her baby boy on her back when she was 'martyred'.⁵ A monument intended to represent a 'Somali liberty' was later

⁴ For the controversy of Taako's killing and how southern Somalis reacted to it in prose and in poetry, see Eno (2008: 126-129).

⁵ *Hanoolaato* is described as one of the most fatal incidents in southern Somalia's colonial history, with 15 Somalis, including Taako, and 52 Italians losing their lives. Taako is still regarded as the first female freedom fighter in the modern history of Somali society. Ungari (2010) accepts principally that 52 Italians were killed, but claims that the Somali death count was 11. In contrast, Del Boca (quoted in Ungari 2010: 174, footnote 11) puts the Italian death toll at 54 and notes that the Somali side was 14. Nonetheless, it is regrettable that Mukhtar (1989: 91, ft 13) does not note the Somalis who died this incident in recording in footnote the death of the Italians. It is difficult to imagine that a distinguished Somali historian like Mukhtar would commit such an error.

erected by the military regime in honour of her role in struggle against colonialism.⁶ The monument aimed to represent not only the *Hanoolaato* ‘martyrs’, but the other freedom fighters who were seen as a symbol of Somali independence.

Taako’s monument in Mogadishu city centre stood for the Somali equivalent to American Statute of Liberty in Manhattan, New York. Action-driven incidents like that of Taako changed local perceptions of women as a weak force, but did not build up chances to gain access to decision-making spheres. During this incident, the politician Faduma Ahmed Alim, who was with her poet mother Hawa Jibril, vividly recalls the *Somaliness* euphoria and nationalistic fervour that had shaken Somali territories at the time.⁷ It is thus scarcely surprising that the struggle for common Somali solidarity diverted them to capitalise on the muscle they had presented in the frontlines. Given that the SYL leaders were still resistant to recognise women and offer leadership positions, the fact is that the main nationalist movement would not have been able to succeed without women on their side. Italy nonetheless returned to Somalia, which was put under UN trusteeship with a 10-year mandate in 1950 (Tripodi 1999: 359).

In 1952, the Somali Women’s Association, a women’s section within the SYL led by two women activists, Raha Ayaanle Guled and Halima Godane, was formed. It was a new gender development that a women’s movement—the first of its kind—was established in Somalia. The aim of the association, known as ‘Sisters’, was to create a space of belonging and mediating gathering exclusively for women activists.⁸ It took many years of active efforts for women to get recognition for their joint struggle with males in the SYL. In 1959, the first female member was accepted as a member of the Central Committee of the SYL movement. Raha Ayaanle Guled set the score in becoming the first female in Somali history to obtain an official access in decision-making circle predominated by men. During the SYL’s *Congress Extraordinaire* in May 1959, a proposal that Raha Ayaanle Guled be a member of the Central Committee of the SYL was agreed upon unanimously.

By 1954, southern Somalia witnessed the first democratic election for local municipalities. Not every citizen had the right to vote in this election. Only men—regardless of class and education—were permitted to vote. Two years later, in February 1956, the first general election was held. Though based on parliamentary democracy, women were not granted the right to vote in either of these elections. In October 1958, the second municipal election was arranged in the local clan council voting, which was the first to be held under direct Somali supervision.⁹ Unlike previous elections founded on universal male suffrage, women were permitted to vote by the administration known as *Governo Somalo*,¹⁰ headed by the first Somali Prime Minister

⁶ Ahmed (1996: 4) offers an interesting insight into military regime’s purpose in erecting a monument for Taako, contending convincingly that the monument was meant to operate as ‘a political rhetoric...with construction of the monument [by the signature of the dictator], Taako’s anti-colonialism lost its “multiaccentuality” and became a uniaccentual symbol, in that case the heroine becomes “superorganic” and the monument projects the wish fulfilment of a group within the nation’. For an uncritical fictionalised account on the monument, see Farah (1976). It is worthy of note that Farah was sympathetic to Siad Barre during this time, but he would later become a vocal critic of the military regime. For critique on Farah’s change of course, see Schraeder (2004: 165-68).

⁷ Telephone interview with Faduma Ahmed Alim ‘Ureeji’, 6 May 2011.

⁸ The ‘Sisters’ were characterised by wearing ‘a kind of uniform composed of a knee-length, white gown worn over a white, richly pleated, long skirt, and complemented by a soft, white cotton shawl with an embroidered hem...flat sandals’ (Alim 2008: 88-89).

⁹ For an account on how those elections were held and the role of clan in Somali political parties, see Castagno (1964: 512-559); Bayne (1965: 101-165).

¹⁰ *Governo della Somalia* denotes The Government of Somalia in Italian. This was the government under the UN auspices that ruled Somalia until independence (1956-1960). The Prime Minister, Abdullahi Iise, was the Secretary

Abdullahi Iise Mohamoud. Of all Somali territories under colonial occupation, southern Somalia, formerly *Somalia Italiana*, became the first territory that granted women suffrage (Castagno 1964: 535; Lewis 2002: 159). Such was the first epoch that Somali women achieved a crucial accomplishment in their struggle for gender rights. In contrast, women in British Somaliland would obtain the right to vote in 1961, when they cast their vote for the referendum on national constitution (Bayne 1965: 104; Lewis 2002: 178).

In the south, Halima Godane became the first woman to contest a public office during the municipal elections for local councils,¹¹ albeit she won no seat. The defeat of Godane was not just confined to her, but was also shared by many women who felt that, since they did not vote as a unified separate bloc as womanhood in the election, they paid the price. While there was no gender issue at the time, had women gathered in uniting their votes, they might most likely have achieved at least one seat. Some women interviewed in this study point out that the imminent jubilation of independence obscured the stress the importance of occupying a political position. With extreme enthusiasm for political independence, most Somalis had fixed their eyes on seeing a sovereign Somalia within two years.

Women Movements and Post-Independence

In July 1960, Somalia was born as a democratic African state. Officially known as the Somali Republic, Somalia was the combination of two entities: the Italian Somaliland in the south, which was the former Italian colony, and British Somaliland in the north, a British Protectorate. The former gained its independence on 1 July 1960 and the latter on 26 June 1960, merging on 1 July 1960 (Ingiriis 2012a).¹² Exercising the right to vote and to contest for public office in the newly independent state, several ‘modernised’ women sought active participation in politics to serve in government and the National Parliament committees. This was fostered in part by the post-independence authorities that adopted policies recognising people’s rights to mobilise themselves through movements, associations, organisations, petitions and political parties. In these policies, the government had to acknowledge, however, that gender rights strategies to improve women’s social status in society would not be its primary priorities (Aidid 2010; Alim 2008; Duale 1981).

As women were not provided with space for political power, the freedom to express their feelings and voice was enshrined as a basic right in the constitution of the new Republic, approved in a referendum in 1961. The post-colonial government contributed involuntarily to women’s transformational change by permitting them to be artists and to sing in theatres when some traditional intellectuals critical of the government’s lenience regarding what was considered to be the deterioration of societal tradition stood to defend social patriarchy. Male poets composed songs denouncing the so-called ‘modernisation process’, questioning women’s attempts to act like men.

General of the SYL movement and its Special Envoy to New York from 1949-50. Godane composed a poem informing the public that the Envoy had conveyed the message from the SYL to the world: ‘Our message reached as far away as Washington / Good is the situation of the Somali League [SYL] / Pray the Almighty [Allah] that the confusion ends’ (Alim 2008: 89).

¹¹ Telephone interview with Faduma Ahmed Alim ‘Ureeji’, 6 May 2011.

¹² The British Somaliland entity, currently known as ‘Somaliland’, which seeks international recognition had declared secession from Somalia on 18 May 1991. For discussion on how the two Somalias were amalgamated, see Bradbury (2008); Hansen with Bradbury (2007).

Oral tradition records a renowned Somali poet and cultural critic, Ali Sugule, composing a stirring song, '*Habloow maad is bar qabataan?*', meaning 'Oh, women why don't you conduct yourselves?' In the eyes of women activists, songs like these were aimed at resisting any positive transformation of women's place in society and reflected the discourse on proper moral womanhood that emerged after post-colony. In spite of such resistance, the most popular female singers emerged, household names such as Asha Abdow Suleyman 'Malaika', Faduma Abdullahi Kaahin 'Maandeeq',¹³ Faduma Abdullahi Ali 'Dalays', Faduma Kassim Hilowle, Habbon Abdullahi,¹⁴ Maryan Mursal Iise Bootaan, Sahra Ahmed Jama, Seynab Ige Mohamed, the late Halima Khalif Omar 'Magool' and the late Seynab Haji Ali Siigaale 'Bahsan'. Furthermore, many women were issued licences to ride motorbikes and drive cars, when other states in post-colonial Africa and Asia regarded it unacceptable for women to vote or drive a car. It was in this era that the first waves of female Somali university graduates returned to Somalia upon completing higher education—mostly social science degrees—from European and American universities.

Although it was a dramatic development from the perspective of women's status in Africa, Somali women felt neglected in the government apparatus, i.e. in leadership and other decision-making circles. This was not because women were unfavourable to the government, but possibly due to the infancy of the state which lacked administrative expertise on how to run modern government bureaucracy. The debate in public spaces of whether the struggle for Somali independence produced a better opportunity for women spread all over the urban areas, from mosques to marketplaces. Yet as was evident, the victory for political independence did not provide the public with their anticipated aspirations (Ingiriis 2010). A strong feeling existed among Somali feminists that their domestic roles as 'servants of the house' were reasserted as political power remained the domain of men after independence. However, they continued to speak out more actively about their desire to share leadership with men (Alim 2008). While women carried out initiatives to influence men in power, attempts to change women's position in the society as well as the desire to create a gender-inclusive modern society hardly bore fruit. Women were restricted in such a way that they would be regarded by some as bourgeois feminists.

Compared to many emerging African states which in post-colonial Africa introduced more repressive rule than colonialism itself, Somalia's post-colonial governmentality from 1960 to 1969 was crystallised a progressive period in terms of freedom of speech and individual liberty (Bayne 1965; Gassem 2002; Ingiriis 2010; Lewis 2002). By virtue of democratic institutions inherited from 10-year decolonisation epoch, people enjoyed a vibrant democracy and freedom of speech that allowed them to voice their grievances whenever they felt aggrieved. Local commentators critical of the government's policy regarding the administrative machinery reflected the public protest, voicing their concerns loud and clear. The late renowned Somali poet, Ahmed Ismail Diiriye 'Qaasim', composed a powerful poem conveying the public grumble toward the government: '*dambi kuma hadlaayee / ma arag dowladdaan rabay*' (Not a sinful remark what I am asserting, but the [value of] government for which I've been aspiring is missing).

¹³ Maandeeq is one of the most popular Somali female singers. Upon the formation of the Somali Republic, she chanted a song demanding equity and justice for women. For an account on Magool, regarded as the most renowned female singer in Somalia, see Orwin (2006: 15-27).

¹⁴ See Legum (1963: 519).

Most importantly, consideration was hardly given to highly-educated and returned female graduates like Faduma Ahmed Alim, the first Somali woman to complete a university degree in Italy in 1962.¹⁵ Many of her peers who followed in her footsteps were unable ‘to enter the civil service in spite of a policy of automatic ‘grade A’ government positions for anyone who had diplomas’ (Aidid 2010: 117). Faduma Alim’s mother Hawa Jibril chanted a *buraanbur* to remind women of how the government—regardless of their sacrifice to sovereignty—treated them by not offering any meaningful position of power.

Sisters, you sold your jewellery
Depriving yourselves
Enriching the struggle
Sisters, you stayed as one
United, even when your brothers [men]
Divided and deceived our nation
Sisters, we were forgotten
We did not taste the fruits of success
Even the lowest positions
Were not offered
And our degrees were cast aside as dirt
Sisters; was this what we struggled for? (Duale 1981: 30)¹⁶

The complaint appeared to have been heard in the inner circles as Faduma Alim was immediately appointed as the Director of Women’s section at Ministry of Education, in addition to becoming School Inspector.¹⁷ Even so, the paradoxical situation of gender relations at the time was synonymous with the Somali saying: *sidaan kuugu lisay, iiguma hambeyn* (as I milked the she-camel for you, you left none for me to drink). Discontented with the government’s reluctance to deal with gender concerns and lack of political space, a plethora of women’s associations were formed to advocate for women’s rights. By 1960, soon after days of independence, the first feminist movement—the Somali Women’s Association—was formed. Comprising primarily of middle-class women and the wives of political leaders, the organisation was ‘concerned with women’s welfare’ (Aidid 2010: 117; Duale 1981).

Women activists endured organising themselves and establishing movements anchored on the formulated concept of Somali feminism which was a broad category of all feminists holding both concepts of nationalism and feminism. In 1967, another feminist movement was declared by several middle class women who lived in the main towns, especially in Mogadishu. Following the same path, another similar association—the Somali Women’s Movement—was founded with the explicit aim ‘to unify and strengthen the collective energy of Somali women and educate the public on the basic and constitutionally guaranteed rights of complete equality of the sexes’ (Aidid 2010: 117). They saw a success in their agenda in the sense that their organisations were independent from government intervention and public funding. Dependency on financial support from the government could have restricted their ability to pursue their seemingly aggressive gender justice goal. Nevertheless, they failed to amalgamate all those

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Faduma Ahmed Alim ‘Ureeji’, 6 May 2011.

¹⁶ For a detailed version of this poem, see Gardner and El Bushra (2004: 175).

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Faduma Ahmed Alim ‘Ureeji’, 6 May 2011. Alim went on to assume important positions under the military regime (e.g. Vice Minister and Dean of the National University).

associations and organisations to form one bigger unity movement to pursue their project of sharing power with men.

Notwithstanding the energies exerted to reach their objectives, the formation of separate associations was a constrained achievement for urban women and their counterparts in rural Somalia. Owing to a lack of common ground ideals acceptable to both urbanised and rural women, these movements neither produced meaningful outcome nor transformed women's status. This was due in large part to a number of reasons. First, those who formed the associations were exclusively urbanised women and their movements were concentrated on a quest of occupying political positions rather than creating social transformation and empowerment for the general cause of women. Second, the urbanised women's movements had difficulties flourishing outside the main towns, given the irrevocable fact that most Somali women resided in rural areas. As a result, any interaction that might enable women to create a critical consciousness in rural areas was confined only within the main towns (Alim 2008; Ingiriis 2011). Even if the growing emergence and proliferation of different associations had created impressive change to the public in terms of political consciousness and social transformation in institutionalising movements of all sorts—from women's groups to labour associations, it did not further their cause in any way.

The eminent theorist Alexis de Tocqueville once stressed that associations of all types (viz. political, religious and other special interests) were part of different schools of democracy.¹⁸ The evidence gleaned from the formation of the Somali feminist organisations suggests that, if women's movements had received encouragement from the government, they might have succeeded in making a difference in their communities by way of creating social awareness and lobbying strategies to mobilise the public behind feminist causes. Indeed, women's associations had been in a better position to carry out social revolution consistent with democratisation of the society and with implementing good governance based on equal opportunities, as shared by the public through the principle of meritocracy.

It is evident that women activists influenced by the political behaviour of the day had come to suffer from internal competition for power that proved to be an encumbrance to community development. Rivalry within the highest echelons of the government, particularly during the last years of democratic rule, was clear at every level of the ruling party, as the national administration formed corruption and fraud under its authority and tutelage (Gassem 2002). Even though Somalia witnessed smooth democratic transfer of power from President Aden Abdulle Osman 'Aden Adde' to his successor President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke in June 1967—a rare peaceful move never seen before in an African state—the new administration (1967–69) further crippled the government apparatus for the use of individual interests and gains (Ingiriis 2010). As sixty-two parties participated in the parliamentary election of March 1969, this period became known to Somalis as *dimoqraadiyaddii dacayda furatay* (the decayed democracy that has gone mad). Observers of Somalia agree on the observation that the latest democratic election alienated the government, tarnished the public's trust and gave rise to military dictatorship in the making.¹⁹

¹⁸ Tocqueville's philosophy advocates, *inter alia*, social equality, ethnic and religious tolerance, popular participation in local affairs and freedom of association as well as the press which is always identified as vital components of any democratic system (Gellar 2005).

¹⁹ President Sharmarke was assassinated five days before Siad Barre's coup by a bodyguard from his own sub-clan in a covert plot presumed by observers to have been orchestrated by the army, with the guidance of beleaguered politicians. The head of the government, Prime Minister Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, was imprisoned in solitary confinement. The animosity of the public towards the former politicians was evident when the assassinated

However, one significant incident for gender development that has not been documented in the written literature on women in Somalia was women's active participation in the election. During the election of March 1969, Somalia saw the first female contender for the Somali National Parliament. Hawa Awale Abtidon, known as Hawa Yarey (Hawa the Little) contested a seat in El Bur constituency, inventing a new vigorous democratic campaign that was alien to Somali electoral process. In what seemed to be a distinct campaign, compared with other contestants, she organised the public on a community basis, hired a music band and took them to the contested constituency in order to attract more voters from the other candidates. Prior to the election, she paid a visit to India where she had met Indira Ghandi, then Indian Prime Minister. According to some who voted in favour of her, during this visit, she secured financial help from the Indian government to finance her campaign. Unfortunately, she did not win the much contested seat and this apparently dissuaded her from furthering her political ambitions, not to mention that a year later Somalia descended into a dictatorship.

This form of democratic structure and electoral process, alien institutional hierarchy that Somalia inherited from Weberian and Westphalian Europe, could be considered as a democracy without democrats in the western sense of the word. Lewis argued half a century ago that northern Somali pastoral-nomads live in a sort of proto-democracy he famously coined the 'pastoral democracy' (Lewis 1961).²⁰ Such a Lewisian-invention of democracy, nonetheless, never included women as decision-makers. Toward the late 1960s, Somali democracy became dysfunctional, corrupt and untrustworthy until it was ousted in October 1969 by a group of army officers led by Major General Mohamed Siad Barre, the Commandant of the Army. All political parties and other social associations were banned under the military regime following their 'bloodless coup.' Women's freedom of association—like that of other citizens—was ended here.

Women and Siad Barre's Military Rule

Upon the military's ascendancy to power and its subsequent official ideology of 'Scientific Socialism', some social and political changes occurred in Somalia. From the outset, Siad Barre gave women some space to organise themselves for the benefit of his regime compared to other dictatorial contexts in Africa. It is because of this that some Somali feminists described the dictator as the saviour of women. During his reign, a considerable number of women occupied senior public positions and became members of a handpicked pseudo-parliament. However, most women who came to hold positions of power and influence during the period of military rule were mainly related to top ranking military officers either by way of marriage, clan affiliation or clan allegiance, as Alim (2008) recalls.

The other major transformation was the development of women serving in local councils and playing sports. Indeed, opportunities for secondary and higher education were increased for women (Abdinoor 2007). The military regime offered them academic and military scholarships in overseas countries that came to be an important development, contributing to the women's participation in diverse professions until the collapse of the regime in 1991. Women also played a remarkable role in the army and became officers, although they were not promoted to senior or mid-level positions on par with their male counterparts. Women also served in the National

President was denied burial in a national cemetery in Mogadishu by a local clan that dominates the western periphery of the capital (Ingiriis 2010).

²⁰ Elsewhere, Lewis (1994), in his *Blood and Bone*, has showed that Somalis live in an 'ordered anarchy'. Though he does not refer to him, Lewis borrows the term from Evans-Pritchard (1940).

Security Service (NSS), the Somali equivalent of Gestapo, as well as in the secret police. In doing so, they assisted a totalitarian regime bent on oppressing the very society that yearned for regime change.

From the beginning, Siad Barre saw women as an attractive source of legitimising his authority and of consolidating his power to the level of absolute Gramscian hegemony.²¹ His intention can be summarised as threefold: First, he wanted to enhance his global reputation under the banner of gender equity; second, his aim was to use women as an instrument to mobilise the public for ground support and long-term legitimacy of his regime;²² third, he intended ‘to accelerate the replacement of customary and religious law[s] with secular legal practices’ (Bryden and Steiner 1998: 31). The latter objective was to pave the way for a society based on what he termed ‘Scientific Socialism’ which the public would later reinterpret as Siadist Socialism (Ingiriis 2012b).

To consolidate power within societal setting and, seemingly, to legitimise a regime that came to power through a non-democratic avenue, the regime ‘created and used’ the Somali Women’s Democratic Organisation (SWDO hereafter) for its own interests. According to one former influential member, members of the SWDO, who had monopoly over women’s affairs, were primarily appointed on the basis of clan loyalty to the regime and their organisational politics was heavily shaped by clan sectarianism.²³ It was in fact ‘flawed by being part of the controlling apparatus of Mohamed Siad Barre’s corrupt and highly-repressive regime’ (Gardner and El Bushra 2004: 178), with the office of the dictator taking direct control (Bryden and Steiner 1998: 38). Nurta Haji Hassan, who worked for the regime, recalled that women beating drums in praise of the ruling military men led many critics to brand those women as the ‘Devil’s forces’.²⁴ The point is that supporting the dictatorship further frustrated women’s long struggle for finding a political space for themselves. Nurta’s observation is mirrored by that of the former regime’s Vice Minister who also recounted thus:

Inept administration, nepotism and political repression became rampant. Many people were summarily arrested and imprisoned indefinitely. But when, in 1982, some loyal and prominent members of the government were arrested and treated in the same manner, without substantiated proof of guilt, people completely lost their faith in the regime. Somali women had filled the orientation centres day and night; and they had crowded the streets of the capital, towns and villages, under rain, dust and burning sun—either to hail some measure adopted by the regime; or to welcome members of the government and visiting foreign dignitaries, by clapping, singing, beating drums and shouting Jaalleyaalow! Soo Dhowaada

²¹ Not surprisingly, Lt Colonel Abdulkadir Haji Mohamed, the hardcore member of the dictatorial regime, went even further to claim that women proponents of the regime had ‘struggled against the malicious and corrupt regimes which oppressed our people for a period of nine years’ (see WSPOP 1975: 2, a document published by the military regime titled *Somali Women in Socialist Construction*). Here by asserting ‘malicious and corrupt regimes’, Abdulkadir Haji Mohamed alludes to successive governments of 1969–69, which most scholars of Somalia agree they were the ‘most democratic’ state in Africa at the time (e.g. Ingiriis 2010; Ingiriis 2013). In his book, *Four Ways of Politics: State and Nation in Italy, Somalia, Israel, and Iran*, Bayne (1965) compares Somali democracy of the 1960s with three other global democratic states: Iran, Israel and Italy.

²² For a discussion and observation on Siad Barre’s strategies to keep on power, see Dualeh (1994: 84–120); Lewis (2002: 248–261).

²³ Telephone interview with Nurta Haji Hassan, 6 May 2011. It is sad to note that Hassan passed away in Toronto a year after I conducted this interview.

²⁴ Ibid.

[Welcome comrades!]. Yet even they gradually stopped coming out. (Alim 2008: 96-97)

Probably to reward women for their unwavering support, the regime made matters unwittingly worse by promulgating a controversial decree of the Family Law of 1975, legalising equality of men and women (Baadiyow 2010: 137-160). The law contradicted both the Islamic and the customary laws of the Somali society. Surprisingly, the *Xeer*—though disempowering women—was not seen as so controversial as the Family Law.²⁵ As the law stipulated equality between men and women in some contentious social aspects—i.e. inheritance, marriage, divorce—the unilateral decision by the regime infuriated local Islamic sheikhs, who vehemently opposed it and appealed to the public to object to it. The military regime responded by sentencing to death a group of ten religious intellectuals in January 1975.

The execution of the ten clergymen by firing squad sent warning signals to the society in general and women in particular that the military regime's attempt was motivated by political aims rather than social transformation and gender justice. It appeared that the military regime intended to test its totalitarian power within societal reflection by attempting to forcefully apply a controversial law as they did in 1970, when they announced that Somalia had become a socialist state whereby state and society were to follow by the principles anchored on Siadist Socialism. Similarly, the military regime's rhetoric was not matched by the realism of a majority of Somali women (Baadiyow 2010; Bryden and Steiner 1998). It was prudent for many women to distance themselves from this law after the demise of the regime in 1991.

In 1978 when an unsuccessful *coup d'état* endangered the military regime (e.g. Faarax 1990; Ghalib 1995), it was women, along with his military police, who stood up in defence of the regime, mobilising the public through using the only radio station in the capital—Radio Mogadishu—to mobilise support for the regime. Several women urged the public to back up the military regime, accusing rivals of impairing 'Somali unity', while others physically took up arms and attempted to defend the regime from toppling. Siad Barre soon promised to reward women for their unequalled loyalty. Understandably, it was during this critical period that he appointed Faduma Alim as vice minister, one of the first female cabinet minister in Siad Barre's military regime. Faduma Alim was affiliated with the military regime by way of marriage and by maternal links; her husband, Ahmed Mohamud Farrah, was vice president under the military regime, while her mother Hawa Jibril was a distant cousin of Siad Barre. However, she was never appointed to a full ministerial position. Prior to her nomination, Faduma Omar Hashi, the chair of the SWDO, was the only female figure in the regime. Dissatisfied with the disequilibrium between women's loyalty, with support to the regime, with their marginal representation in the upper decision-making circles of the authority and with the military rulers whom women had considered as 'liberators', Hawa Jibril recorded the moment in a poem she raised such a concern:

Is it fair to have only two women
In our higher political offices?
Did women neglect or fail to understand their duties?
Are they not yet mature enough to comprehend them?
Do they not deserve higher positions and rewards?
Or are you too hasty, and having second thoughts?

²⁵ Ibid.

Are you not tormented by the injustices they suffer? (Alim 2008: 167)

Siad Barre's rhetoric, not to mention his 'interventionist' attitude to women's movements, did not reflect the reality that Somalia was going through. The country had already been on its way into a profound, all-encompassing crisis due to the legacy of dictatorial practices by his regime wherein chronic corruption and external support from western powers was the life machine that prolonged the rule (Brons 2001; Ingiriis 2012b). There existed an impression that some of the women groups applauded the military rule because of fear of either having their close kinsman lose a post or categorising the concerned females as reactionaries—a term that could have severe consequences for anyone to whom it was attributed.

It did not take long for women to change sides. For those who resisted the regime's oppression after 1977, when the regime was defeated in its war with Ethiopia, many were women. After being silenced, many women fled from the country and began to compose poems in exile. Few were those who remained and attempted to offer resistance. One of the most notable female singers, Saado Ali Warsame, was among those detained without trial for singing *kacaandiid* (anti-revolutionary) songs. Some of her colleagues such as Halima Khalif Magool, Faduma Abdullahi Maandeeq and Khadra Daher Ige, out of fear of reprisal from the regime, resorted to exile. By the same token, women who associated themselves with the opposition groups turned their most powerful weapon—the *buraanbur*—against the very regime for which they had acted earlier as guardians. Maryam Haji Hassan, a poetess and an opponent of the regime, recited a poem in which she explains how women suffered under the military dictatorship upon the aborted coup:

The committee [Barre's politburo] has let us down
They eliminated the strong and the intelligent.
They detain the young as they reach puberty
The process of avenging these wrongs must begin
We must support those preparing to fight. (Jama 1994: 192)²⁶

Buraanbur, such as Maryam's, constituted a last resort of resistance for women. However, where colonial and post-colonial governments tolerated the critical voices of women, the Siad Barre regime reacted to arrest as many women as it could. The freedom of associations once enjoyed by women became a thing of the past. If they had a right to raise their voice to express their grievance, women had now to join the armed resistance groups to make their presence felt. This was a path taken by singer Halima Magool and many others who fought against the regime of Siad Barre until they ensured their demise. Yet Siad Barre continued to count on women's support.

When, in January 1991, Siad Barre's forces under the banner of a clan retreated to Kismaayo, a strategic southern port, wishing to recapture the capital city of Mogadishu, they obtained backup support from some old women. The following incident is not only illustrative but instructive on how women lost their common ground lately and succumbed to clanist agenda in the clan wars. Halima Sofe, the most-well known among those female clan warriors, declared: 'The women of the Daarood have become like outcastes. You, men of ours, made us more

²⁶ The poem was released on a radio controlled by a Somali opposition based in Ethiopia in the early 1980s. The radio *Kulmis* (cohesion) was a propaganda instrument for opposition groups, while the Radio Mogadishu was its parallel to the military regime in this sense.

outcastes, do we then marry Midgaans [the so-called Somali outcasts]'.²⁷ She then recites a war poem, exhorting Daarood warriors to defeat the Hawiye fighters and restore the Daarood supremacy of the defunct Somali state. Halima Sofe claims that the Hawiye poetesses have sent her a war poem: '*Hawiye waa dowlad / Daaroodna waa duyuus / mugow daanfida ahaa oo duleedka yiil / ninkii Doonbira ku daray ayaa duligga lahaa / ee aaway sixiroolihiinnii Siyaad ahaa? Ee aaway saladii iyo ciidankii la saaran jiray? Miyaad ka samirteen sarihiinnii Xamar ku yiil?*' (the Hawiye is a state / Daarood is debauched / when he was nobody and languishing outside / the man who married him to Doonbira is responsible for the catastrophe / where is sorcerer Siyaad? Where are the power and the army you bragged? Have you given up your buildings sited in Mogadishu?)²⁸

Given the powerful clannish message of Halima Sofe, women's militia mobilisation was not a new phenomenon, for it was common in the history of violence in Somali society, particularly in the pre-colonial world, when some women used to incorporate their forms of resistance to and strategies for armed warfare buoyed up for their clans against other clans. Motivated by clan superiority, rather than a common agenda, women in post-Siad Barre Somalia put pressure on local militiamen to choose between two paradoxical choices: (1) to wear women's clothes or (2) to die on the war front for defending them from enemy clans and preserving the honour of the clan. In Somali culture, the notion of men wearing women's dress referred to inferiority and weakness, thus the exhortation was most certainly precipitated and prompted the militiamen to do something supplementary (if not extraordinary) for the restoration of clan pride.²⁹

Conclusion

This article explored Somali women's movements and activities through interdisciplinary approaches. From the multiple layers of history, culture, conflict and development, it traced the historical status and social position of women in Somali society through the prisms of both 'traditionalist' and 'modernist' gender perspectives. Despite the fact that major changes occurred in the urban centres during the era of late colonialism all the way through the dictatorial military regime of Siad Barre, the social status and position of Somali women, especially those in the rural areas, lies in between struggle and survival.

Indeed, Somali women have struggled and survived in precarious and uncertain circumstances. They seemed as though they became forward-thinking when compared with many other women in post-colonial settings. They nonetheless shared certain characteristics with others, such as the perpetuation of marginalisation in politics. Even if they played a crucial role in the years of active nationalist movements of the 1940s and 1950s and the constituting of Somali post-colonial government in the 1960s, they lost whatever gains they had achieved in those days. The initial support they provided the Siad Barre regime made their status worsen instead of developing into that for which they had struggled.

²⁷ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdw8jO12oTI> (between min. 2:07 and 5:50), accessed on 20 December 2013. My translation. The Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah reports that women of (his clan) in Kismaayo provoked their men to take action, 'defying the conviction that enjoins female sartorial modesty, bared their breasts in public in front of a crowd of men. Fists raised, voices harsh, they shouted "Rise, Rise!" challenging the men to action' (Farah 1996: 18).

²⁸ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdw8jO12oTI> (between min. 6:11 and 7:00). My translation.

²⁹ For the importance of clan pride in Somali society, see Elmi, *Understanding the Somalia*, chapter 2.

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