"Kinsmen and Comrades: Towards a Class Analysis of the Somali Pastoral Sector"

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Newsletter of the Commission on Nomadic Peoples, Number 7, 1980

Kinsmen and Comrades: Towards a Class Analysis of the Somali Pastoral Sector[1]

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Analysis of the political economy of the contemporary Somali republic s torn by a double paradox. On the anthropological "right" a vision ersists (Lewis 1961, 1972, 1978) which sees pastoral production as both herently and empirically demanding a radical egalitarianism that Ioan wis called "pastoral democracy."[2] On the political left (Pestalozza 74), analysts sympathetic to the aspirations of the 1969 Somali revolution ve lauded the government's articulate plans to transform the country accordance with its commitment to a truly scientific socialism, and ve declared the revolution a success worth supporting.

Neither of these dogmatic statements is correct. To the contrary, th before and after the Revolution, the post-independent Somali ate has relied on a miniscule class of bourgeois merchants who form e backbone of the national economy. In the last decade Somalia has epened its status on the international level as a satellite to the lloping capitalist economies of the Arabian peninsula, while domestically has strengthened the position of the sets of about 130 banana planter/ rchants and 150 livestock traders on whom the state's income fragilely pends.

This paper describes the state's relationships to the 70 per cent of e population of the country who are nomadic pastoralists. It shows that ate/local relationships are conditioned not just by the weakness of the ate apparatus, but by its active collaboration with the private live- ock traders who are transforming the operation of the pastoral economy. ither the people's democracies of tradition nor of the millenium luminate socio-economic dynamics in Somalia: some simple class analysis es much farther.

I. Somali Pastoral Production

The agricultural economy of the Somali Democratic Republic is over- elmingly based on pastoral production. Two rivers in the south of the untry provide the surface water resource for irrigated crop production, st of it now in cash crops, while the so-called "Inter-Riverine" area ogether with a small, well-watered area in the extreme northwest) ovides the staple grain crop, especially sorghum, in two distinct rainy asons during the year. Only 13 per cent of all land in the country, wever, is deemed suitable for this rainfed cropping, and indeed only e per cent is under cultivation at any one time. The national census assifies the crop farmers as among the 20 per cent of the population unted in settled villages, but nearly all crop-raising households also ep livestock.

Livestock producers thus include the 71 per cent of the population ich the census classifies as nomadic, and much of the rest of the population as well. Over large areas of the country, under available technology no form of agricultural production is possible other than nomadic animal husbandry.

The Somali socio-cultural system has thus been identified with its pastoral economy, despite the fact that two of the six great clan-families of the Somali people are primarily cultivators. Classically described by I.M. Lewis in A Pastoral Democracy (1961), Somali pastoralism is based on: (a) wide-ranging transhumance of small camping-groups between permanent dry-season water points, usually wells, and broad areas of rainy season grasslands with not more than temporary surface water; (b) herd composition of goats, sheep, and camels in the northern two-thirds of the country and goats, sheep and cattle in the wetter southern area; (c) the splitting away, during the rainy season, of the main herd of camels from a small milch herd and the small stock, a strategy which makes efficient use of the sparsest rangelands but separates even nuclear family members from one another for long periods of the year; and (d) the use of formal contracts (heer) of alliance by groups of agnatic lineage-mates and their followers, contracts which make concrete one's political obligations (in payments of diya, blood-compensation) to members of one's own and other groups. These contracts provide physical and social security in circumstances which might otherwise invite both pervasive predation upon solitary herdsmen and the neglect of burdensome but diffuse obligations to kinsmen nomadizing far away. In Somali life the individual's responsibility in herd management (heightened by the fractionated part-herd management) combine with a strong sense of the equal participation of all men in the diya-paying group to generate the thorough-going egalitarianism that Lewis highlighted in his title.

II. The Livestock Trade

The picture that Lewis paints of Somali political decentralization is restated by Salzman (1967), who relates the absence of significant chiefly institutions to the very marginality of the ecological situation, to its inability to generate enough steady surplusses or fixed resources to sustain political inequality. Lewis (1965:166-168) himself suggests that modern Somali nation-building has contended unsuccessfully with the fissiparousness of segmentary lineage interests, which, he argues, continue to dominate the political life of the independent state (1978:20).

Yet recent reexamination of the Somali pastoral productive system has begun to uncover the economic inequalities that have been built up in the regional economy of which the actual nomadic encampments form only one part. Somali pastoralists have always produced for the market. Some of their products, especially the gums (frankincense, myrrh, and gum arabic) of semi-domesticated trees, have been gathered (and recorded since ancient Egyptian times), while others have been the results of hunting. The bulk have been pastoral products, above all live animals, traded first to the coastal settlements and then across the Gulf of Aden to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Until thirty years ago, trade goods moved to the coast by camel caravans, which passed from the lands of one clan to another under the guarantees of protectors (abbaan) in each area (Lewis 1962:370-371).

From the time of the first records of the coastal trade over 600 years ago, livestock dealing was in the hands of settled merchants (also called abbaan). When in the nineteenth century foreign merchants (Arabs and

:ndians) came to dominate the export trade, they simply operated by :ontrolling (or being the client of) one or more Somali abbaan, who acted ꞉s broker (Lewis 1962:381). The abbaan organized the livestock markets, .oused and/or fed pastoralists or small-scale dealers who brought stock 'rom hinterland to port or trade town, arranged sales to the Arabia-based mporters (some of whom were Somali) who either owned or hired the boats, anaged the logistics of loading the cargoes, and handled the credit and ayment arrangements for the sellers. The towns where they lived, about day's sail apart all along the coast, were, as Lewis says, "the focal oints of the pastoral system" (1961:124), helping to give definition to he dispersion of lineages in the pastures. But, says Lewis, townsmen ere nonetheless clansmen, and even town disputes assumed the same "lineage haracter" they had in the pastoral camps. Despite his admission that astoral lineage affairs were managed "from the towns" (1961:124), and ven though he says it is "proverbial that the rich elder commands eady support for his proposals while a poor man's words carry little eight" (1962:384), Lewis accords no special class position to the livetock middlemen and political leaders around whose activities the towns perated. Instead, he argues that a merchant's "prosperity is counted as direct gain to his clansmen" (1962:380).

From the middle of the nineteenth century commercialization of livestock xpanded to supply meat and burden animals to the new British garrison at den, a day's sail from the ports of the northwestern coast. Trade xpanded to provision vessels with fresh meat once the Suez Canal was pened. Though the figures fluctuated widely, in the first decade of this entury Somalia held a fifth of Aden's overseas trade both for imports nd exports. Eventually a community of over ten thousand Somalis ormed in Aden around the activities of wealthy family-based import-export rms there. (For an account of Somali relations with Aden see Gavin 1975: assim; cf. Little 1968).

The monsoon trade by dhow persisted until about the time of Somali ndependence in 1960. With increasing demand from Arabia after 1950 when e petroleum industry there began to expand dramatically, with the construction of the Port of Berbera by the late 1960's and with the ale economies of large oil-powered freighters, the dhow trade declined d virtually disappeared. Coastal communities other than Berbera that d depended on the trade soon withered, and such small but ancient ports Mait, Zeila (which had suffered an earlier decline: vide Lewis 1962:368), ula and Las Khoreh have been all but abandoned. For the livestock trade ese processes had profound consequences, because just as there was a amatic new increase in the size of the overseas market there was a parallel ncentration of virtually the entire export trade through the one port of rbera.[3]

Currently, then, the livestock trade is organized in and through the rthwestern part of the country (ex-British Somaliland). Buyers fan out to the countryside, where sales go on year round at rural trade settlements d even in the camps themselves. (In the last three years the supply zone s expanded far to the South with the completion of the paved national ghway.) The nomadic producer receives payment usually only during a turn visit of the local buyer after his animal is finally sold to the porter, so the producer bears much of the cost of credit. The buyers y be small-scale traders working on their own account, or they may be direct agents (dilaal) of the large-scale exporters who are all town-based. From individual herds the trade animals are channeled into traders' herds, which may be moved more or less slowly (by trucking and/or trekking) to the port, depending on conditions in the final markets and contingencies in the transport system.

The scale at which this activity takes place is now immense. Over the past five years (1973-1978) a million and a quarter animals have moved annually through the marketing system. Large flatbed trucks now range as far as three hundred miles away from Berbera, venturing regularly across the border into the Somali "Haud" pastures of the Ogaden in eastern Ethopia, to pick up trade herds.[4] Large-scale traders have invested in cemented water-tanks (birkets) to focus pastoral herd movements onto points within their commercial orbit. Lewis has described in some detail (1962:372-377) the small-scale trading centers that have grown up across northern Somalia. Indeed Jeremy Swift talks of a "transformation" of Somali pastoralism that has taken place, from a former subsistence orientation to an export/commercial one (Swift 1979). As he recognizes, though, there has been little change in production techniques, so that there is no evidence either of a reduction in the direct subsistence importance of the herds or of an acceleration of the rate of off-take of animals from those herds. On the other hand there may be a change in species mix taking place toward a greater ratio of sheep to goats and the introduction of cattle into new areas as responses to market demands for these two favoured meats.

These millions of Somali animals all funnel into a triangular export staging area bounded by the port of Berbera and two towns inland, Hargeisa and Burao. Because a coastal escarpment rises sharply from the Gulf to altitudes that reach over 1500 meters, the two cool and well-watered hinterland towns serve as the main residential and commercial centers for the whole area. The port of Berbera, meanwhile, lies in the torrid coastal plain that even in Somali is called the "burned" zone (Guban), and so for much of the year it counts as residents only the skeleton personnel necessary to actual shipping operations. Hargeisa was the colonial capital of British Somaliland, and has the more diverse facilities, while Burao may now come to challenge Hargeisa's preeminence since the Government has paved the national highway from Mogadishu to Burao while leaving the Burao-Hargeisa portion a rutted dirt and sand track. The paved roads from both Burao and Hargeisa to Berbera carry animals for export, imported manufactures, and a daily commuter traffic of port and livestock trade workers and managers.

III. Vertical Integration of the Export Trade

There are between 150 and 200 major livestock dealers (ganacsato) in Burao and Hargeisa, of whom perhaps fifty are the real kingpins of the trade. Ethnic Somali (and some Arab) agents (again, dilaal) of these dealers live in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, to which port well over 80 per cent of all animal exports now go. They find the buyers, Arab wholesalers. Letters of credit for the minimum Somali government price per animal are forwarded to the Somali Commercial Bank in Hargeisa, on the basis of which Somali funds at the offical rate of exchange are granted to the dealers to finance their bulking operations.

Ships that carry animals from Berbera are mostly owned by Saudi companies, and to a minor extent are specially fitted for live animal shipments. As they arrive in Berbera, the exporters' agents at the port send for animals

The Revolution also vowed to take over key sectors of the economy, and applied itself to the task especially in the plantation areas of the south, in related processing plants, and in the banking system. With respect of the livestock trade, it created the Livestock Development Agency both to start up processing industries and to control exports. The goal was to increase the prices paid to nomadic producers and to licence "trusted persons" as exporters. The phrase "trusted persons" is from Pestalozza (1974:337), who, writing at the time these plans were first formulated, claimed that "the traditional dealer, still strong in the north, is thereby eliminated" (1974:338).

Like many other programs undertaken by all manner of governments, however, this one was little better than still-born. Fully seventy per cent of Somalia's export earnings comes from the livestock trade, and the Government was not about to tinker with its major economic and financial motor in any significant way. By 1976, President Siyaad Barre was telling French journalist Philippe Decraene that no new nationalisations were in view, especially in agriculture or industry, where "we encourage private initiative" (Decraene 1977:56).

It might be tempting here simply to attribute this lack of resolve to the weakness, the very underdevelopment, of the state structure in a country as poor as is Somalia, where even the colonial apparatus was only half-heartedly set into motion. Long ago Francis Sutton (1961) pointed to a virtually inverse relationship between authority and authoritarianism in many countries: as the legitimate exercise of power became more and more difficult to pursue, a verbal authoritarianism matched by the haphazard use of force became the norm. Some aspects of the exercise of power by the Somali government since 1969 might be taken as a case in point, such as its treatment of the Muslim clergy or its drive to reorganize production by the proclamation of cooperativization. While the government has become increasingly militant, the state has not extended its control much farther into the pastoral rangelands: in recent discussions in Mogadishu, high government officials conceded that an occasional veterinarian's visit was all that most nomads ever see, and from other sources it is clear that even these visits are extortative (money being demanded for what should be free services), and therefore strained.

But it is not weakness alone that accounts for the relationship between the government and the livestock producers. The producers have been neglected because the government inexpensively accrues its profits from the livestock sector by means of its active collaboration with the dealers, and it lets the dealers in turn manage the sector. The Livestock Development Agency was organized with a view to taking over the Exporters' role, but its empty holding grounds near Burao are a sign of its inability to compete. Instead, the dealers promptly got government licenses and the LDA, now working in collaboration with the private dealers, oversees the health measures at Berbera and hires the wranglers for the voyage to Saudi Arabia. But to see the true nature of the alliance it is necessary to look further into the nature of the trade across the Gulf.

We have noted that the letters of credit bring hard currency (prices are usually quoted in U.S. dollars, but may be set in Saudi rials) to cover the government-decreed minimum price for animals. That price has not been changed since 1971 (just as civil service salaries have been only marginally changed, maintaining visible egalitarianism in principle, while a number of "allowances" have been added to the senior levels of the salary ructure). But with the galloping oil price rises since 1972, and the nstruction and immigration balloon in Saudi Arabia, demand for fresh at has shot up dramatically. There is now a substantial difference tween the official price, remitted to Somalia officially and eventually turned to the animal producer minus transport and processing charges, kes and the various middlemen's profits[5], and the actual price finally ceived by the traders' agents in Jiddah. The final price is set at the me the animals are delivered, and it takes into account the quality and ight of the animal after the voyage (the feed and water supplies are rely fully sufficient, and at any rate there is stress loss involved), y shortages in the total consignment, and other factors of the changing cal market. The result is a sum in hard currency that is kept outside mali jurisdiction, with the full knowledge and acquiescence of the mali government.

The traders have their agents buy manufactured goods with this money, d export those goods (the system is called <u>Franco Valuta</u>) back across Somalia. Since the exchange rate of the <u>Somali shilling</u> has been kept tificially low (unofficially it trades at about 10 or 11 to the dollar, ficially at just over 6), the imported goods are effectively undervalued r customs duty purposes, and the goods thus arrive on the Somali market th a double profit (on entry and at the point of further sale) for the ader.

In this system the government benefits in several ways: it guarantees floor of foreign exchange through the banking system and avoids more vious subterfuges; it saves its own foreign currency for other purposes an the consumer-goods trade financed by the livestock traders; it is abled to have goods it could not procure at the same cost on the world rket. Indeed, so tight is the bond between government and traders that times of consumer goods shortages the traders are often asked to import ecific items and induced to do so by further duty reductions. The traders, short, serve as the government's jobbers.

On their side the livestock traders are in fact import/export firm ners. They claim that their profits on livestock exports themselves e meager, that it is the imports on which they really depend. Seen in is light the livestock trade principally serves to finance the imports, d any curtailment of the franco valuta system might rebound against vestock exports. It is this crucial calculation, among others, that has evented the government from revaluing the currency.

V. The Effect on the Nomads

The alliance of government and trader hardly works to the benefit of e nomadic producer. Increasing areas of rangeland, especially in the rthwest, are being appropriated for fodder production or for grazing by ade herds. Nomadic movement is being constrained by the pressure of a owing population on the water supplies that are progressively in the nds of the traders. The primary producers have no control at all over ices, markets, or the credit system.

Worse still, the government has made only the feeblest of efforts to versify its international markets. Swift (1979) has argued (from mittedly sketchy data) that producers have been caught in a long-term ice scissors in which prices for animal products have not kept up with ices for the goods they purchase. His critical data come from the period immediately after the worst drought in living memory (1974) when the glut of animals being dumped because they could not be sustained on the range had driven down the prices dramatically. Longer time-series are necessary to test Swift's extremely important hypotheses. In any case, producers have no means at their disposal to increase or diversify their production systems so as to untie them from dependence upon their present livestock enterprises.

At least as important, however, is the growing subjection of the pastoral economy to the market in Saudi Arabia through the livestock traders. This market concentration, understandable in terms of the livestock exporters' profit interests, has made the whole pastoral economy vulnerable to sharp fluctuation. The traders deal in Saudi Arabia because their imports are purchased more cheaply there than in Iran or Oman, to which larger animal exports used to go. In Saudi Arabia, however, the demand is growing for beef, which northern Somalia simply cannot produce effectively, and for mutton from sheep who are more destructive of rangeland than a balance of sheep and goats. In the meantime other countries - in the short term Sudan and in the longer term even Australia - are developing the capacity to compete with Somalia for the Saudi market. Both the former countries have greater opportunities to intensify production than does Somalia.

The Somali nomad is thus neglected. With no changes in technology and no ability to break the government's alliance with the traders, he is immobilized in a production system that threatens maladaptation and breakdown. In the meantime the Somali livestock trader may have once claimed that "between wealth and clanship, I choose clanship" (Lewis 1962:384), but now pursues his interests versus government in such a way that government hardly interacts at all with his clansmen.

VI. Conclusion

The temptation in analyses of Somalia, as in other socialist states in Africa, has been to take the word for the deed, or to blame lack of accomplishment on outside forces or general instability. In turn for Sekou Toure's Guinea, Nyerere's Tanzania, and other states, analysis of class alliances between rulers and particular interest groups reveals, better than blanket labels, the factors influencing the state's performance or non-performance. As the perceptive young Somali socio-political analyst Mohamud Abdi Ali has reminded us, however, "all theories..., in the final analysis, express and consolidate the interest of one class (or) social group or an opposing class or social group" (Abdi Ali 1979:29). Although Abdi Ali's analysis was of capitalist systems, it is clear that his words apply equally well to contemporary Somalia.

The fuller study of Somalia that is needed by all who would look to the welfare of Somali pastoral producers would examine present ecological relationships, the stability or fragility of the marketing chain, the share of economic gain realized by primary producers, and the potential for transforming or diversifying small-scale production enterprises for sustained higher returns. Somalia has laid down the organizational context for such studies in the Northern Rangelands Project, its first major attempt to intervene in production. Yet this Project has had no major research element built into it. Until Somali pastoral producers are taken into greater account (they are already known intimately, of course) by their kinsmen and comrades in power, they will continue to be ransomed to present

;onomic expedience.

)otnotes

The analysis presented here is only an aperçu of a larger study that needs to be done in Somalia. Data for the present article were collected during a visit to Somalia in mid-1979 as a consultant to the World Bank and USAID (Aronson 1980). It probably goes without saying that the latter two agencies are in no way responsible for the views presented here.

I mean in no way to disparage Lewis' contribution to Somali studies. Outside Somalia itself Lewis is the (only) major student of Somali society, and this analysis owes a great debt to his work. We are the worse off for there not having been many more analysts of his depth working in Somalia over the last twenty-five years.

A small percentage (not more than 15 per cent) of livestock exports passes through the southern parts of Mogadishu and Kismayo.

For the Anglo-Ethiopian agreements that permitted (or legitimated) Somali use of the Haud, see Lewis 1961:277-278. Even during the continuing Somali/Ethiopian hostilities, some Somali livestock are apparently being moved commercially across the border.

The ILO/JASPA team calculated for the cattle trade that the producer and local intermediary together received about 40 per cent of the final price to the butcher in Saudi Arabia for their animals (ILO/JASPA 197:295).

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