

THE COUNTRY OF SOMALIA

*A NOMADIC NATION WITH A RICH CULTURE AND A POOR LIFESTYLE
WHERE A MARXIST REGIME IS SUPPORTED BY THE UNITED STATES
(RD 1987:591)*

Somalia, or more properly the Somali Democratic Republic (Jamhuriyadda Dimoquadiga Soomaliya), is located in what is called the Horn of Africa or the easternmost part of Africa. As the “tip” of the Horn, Somalia forms an inverted “V” around the central part of Ethiopia (1,022 miles) with the sides of the “V” bordering Djibouti (38 miles) and the Gulf of Aden (650 miles) in the north and Kenya (424 miles) and the Indian Ocean (1,350 miles) in the south. “All borders are arbitrary lines drawn during colonial times that ignore ethnic boundaries. None of these borders has been formally accepted by Somalia, which continues to press irredentist [unredeemed, from Italian] claims against all its neighbors, but so far without success” (Kurian 1987:1793).

Known in ancient times as the Land of Punt (or God’s Land), Somaliland covers an area of 250,000 square miles (slightly smaller than Texas) and is home to almost seven million inhabitants (WA 1998:843). The Somali people belong to the Hamitic ethnic group with the closest kinsmen the Cushitic peoples in neighboring Ethiopia and Eritrea (Lewis 1988:4). “With 85 percent of its people belonging to Hamitic stock and 14 percent to Bantu stock, as a result of intermixture, 98 percent of the people are described as Somalis” (Kurian 1987:1795). In fact, the word “Somali” bears no other meaning than “a very tall and dark Cushitic-speaking people of Somaliland apparently of mixed Mediterranean and negroid stock and almost universally Muslim” (Gove 1981:217). More than 99 percent are Sunni Muslim, and over 98 percent are ethnic Somalis. As such, Somalis comprise “one of the most homogeneous populations in the

world” (Salter, et al. 1998:421). This seemingly uniform ethnicity of the Somali Peninsula presents a unique case.

In contrast to most of the rest of Africa, where independent states seek to forge a common national identity from a multiplicity of ethnic groups within their boundaries, Somalia is essentially a one-nationality state whose population shares an ethnic identity with Somalis in three adjoining states (Cassanelli 1982:3).

With a common language (the official language is Somali, although Arabic, Italian, and English are also spoken), shared Islamic heritage, belief about similar ancestry, and a pastoral way of life, Somalis have a strong sense of kinship (ibid.). Ironically, “genealogical ties have also provided the basis on which divisions between Somalis have occurred with division historically more common than unity” (Metz 1993:71). “Somalis trace their origin to two brothers, Samaal and Saab, said to have been members of the Arabian tribe of Quraysh, to which Muhammad belonged” (Kurian 1987:1795). Yet six major clan-families with numerous sub-clans or smaller tribal units fragment the people into often warring factions (see Cassanelli 1982:18; cf. Kurian 1987:1795). This strong common pedigree is paradoxically both “the heart of the Somali social system” and “the basis of the collective Somali inclination toward internal fission and internecine conflict, as well as the Somali sense of being distinct—a consciousness of otherness that borders on xenophobia” (Metz 1993:71). This aspect of Somali society is summarized nicely by the proverb, “If you love a person, love him moderately, for you do not know whether you will hate him one day; on the other hand, if you hate someone, hate him moderately also, for you do not know whether you will love him one day” (Cassanelli 1982:21). Even more succinct is another proverb,

I and my clan against the world.
I and my brother against the clan.
I against my brother (ibid.).

However, “despite the prevalence of war, feud, and fighting, particularly amongst the nomads, not all men are warriors” (Lewis 1988:15). Men of God, *wadads* or sheikhs, influence cohesion in Somali society by “teaching the young the Quran and the elements of the faith, solemnizing marriage and ruling according to the Shariah in matrimonial disputes and inheritance, assessing damages for injury, and generally directing the religious life of the community in which they live” (ibid.).

Topographically, “Somalia’s terrain consists mainly of plateaus, plains, and highlands” (Metz 1993:59). The physiography can be described as four broad natural divisions.

The northern coastal plains, which stretch from the Gulf of Tadjoura along the Gulf of Aden into Mijirtein region, are known as Guban (burned land) from its semi-arid and parched condition. Inland this coastal strip gives way to the rugged mountain ranges that extend from Ethiopia to the tip of the Horn at Cape Guardafui, the easternmost point of Africa. This range contains the country’s highest point, Surud Ad (7,900 ft). The mountains descend to the south through a region, known as the Ogo, consisting of shallow plateau valleys, dry watercourses and broken mountains. This region merges imperceptibly into the vast tilting Haud Plateau, with an average elevation of 3,000 feet in the center, itself a part of the larger Somali Plateau. The region between the Juba and Shebeli Rivers, the only two permanent rivers, is low agricultural land. Southwest of the Juba River to the Kenyan border is low pasture land (Kurian 1987:1793-1794).

On the whole, Somalia is a hot, dry place. “The climate varies from arid subtropical to tropical” (CIE 1996). Annual mean temperatures range from 98 (85-105) degrees Fahrenheit in the north to 82 (65-102) degrees Fahrenheit in the south. Rainfall is generally less than twenty inches annually with some of the north, the Guban, receiving less than two inches annually. The “monsoonal winds and transitional periods known as *tangambilis*” determine two wet seasons—the *gu* (March through May) and the *dayr* (October & November)—and two dry seasons—the *jilal* (from December or January to March) with dry, dusty winds, and the *hagaa*

(June to August) with extreme heat (Kurian 1987:1794). Because of the lack of much rain, severe droughts are common. “Natural vegetation is limited to scattered small trees, low bushes, and patches of dry savannah grasses” (CIE 1996). Some forests, though, exist in the highlands, and the country supports wildlife like lions, leopards, elephants, hyenas, foxes, giraffes, and zebras (ibid.).

A popular Somali poem by Salaan Arabay suggests, “Of every two problems that are discussed, the first must be on the subject of subsistence” (Cassanelli 1982:9). This highlights a common theme of life in the Somali Peninsula—“the difficulty of eking a living from its sunbaked, often barren soil” (ibid.). Agriculture is very limited as only 13 percent of the land is arable. But bananas (the chief commercial and export crop), sugarcane, sorghum, corn, sesame seeds, and fruits are grown along the Juba and Shebeli Rivers (CIE 1996). The majority of Somalis, perhaps as high as 70 percent, live a traditional nomadic life. With estimates of 5.2 million cattle, 12.5 million goats, 13.5 million sheep, and 3.0 million chickens, Somalia may very well have the highest livestock-to-person ratio in the world (WA 1998:843). A few industries, such as fish-processing plants, textile and shoe factories, leather tanneries, and a petroleum refinery, provide some economical diversification, while historic trade of frankincense and myrrh is supplemented by the mining and export of bauxite, gypsum, iron ore, tin, and uranium (CIE 1996). Trade, estimated for 1994, ran 269 million U.S. dollars for imports (24 percent from Kenya and 18 percent from Djibouti) and 130 million U.S. dollars for exports (57 percent to Saudi Arabia) (WA 1998:843). In September 1998, one U.S. dollar equaled 2,620 Somali shilling (ibid.). In August 1985, one U.S. dollar equaled only 40 Somali shilling (Kurian 1987:1793).

Measured by East Asian, European, and United States standards, the people of Somali are dirt poor. “Millet, rice, and corn are the staple foods. Meat is not a staple and is eaten only on ritual or festive occasions. Milk, especially camel milk, is regularly consumed. The national drinks are coffee and tea” (Kurian 1987:1807). “Health services are meager, especially in the rural areas. The infant mortality rate is high and life expectancy is only about 45 years. Tuberculosis, malaria, and leprosy are common diseases” (CIE 1996). Communication and transportation technologies are both sparse and spartan. Few newspapers and radio stations exist. “Somalia has no railways or navigable inland waterways” (Kurian 1987:1804). Energy resources are likewise skimpy. “Apparent per capita consumption of gasoline is five gallons per year” (ibid.). Although education is free and compulsory, ages 6-14, literacy is only about 25 percent (WA 1998:843). Predictably the bulk of the populace remains rural (about 75 percent), although there are a few large towns—Mogadishu (Muqdisho and Mogadiscio), the capital city with about one million people, Hargeisa, Kismayu, Merca, Berbera, and Jowhar.

From its rich classical heritage, Somalia retains a wonderful oral tradition of anecdotes, proverbs, and stories (see Cassanelli 1982). Contrarily, the modern history, that begins with European exploration in the 19th century, left a legacy of factionalism, war, and great human suffering (e.g., the Bantu Former Slave Communities in Kopytoff 1987:216-238). During its colonial days, Italian (see Hess 1966) and British claims dominated, but French, Russian, and United States interests were not absent in the Horn (see Henze 1991:39-89). After the turbulence of World War II pitted Britains against Italians in Somaliland, the two territories united to form the Somali Democratic Republic on July 1, 1960. A military dictatorship ruled until quite recently, 1991.

After independence, Somalia struggled with Ethiopia for the Ogaden region, the west-central section inhabited mostly by Somalis but given to Ethiopia by the British in 1948. In 1977, “some 11,000 Cuban troops with Soviet arms defeated Somali army troops and ethnic Somali rebels in Ethiopia. As many as 1.5 million refugees entered Somalia” (WA 1998:843). Guerrilla fighting continued until both countries signed a peace agreement in 1988. The military dictatorship eventually collapsed and civil war erupted again in 1991. “Fighting between rival factions caused 40,000 casualties in 1991 and 1992, and by mid-1992 the civil war, drought, and banditry combined to produce a famine that threatened some 1.5 million people with starvation” (ibid.). United Nations relief efforts, along with United States peacekeeping forces, could not prevent widespread anarchy and factional fighting. The United States pulled its troops in March 1994, and with endless clan warfare, the United Nations withdrew in March 1995 (see UNS 1996). The government is currently in transition.

The country is changing as Somalia is a developing nation. But is it for the better or for the worse? Time will tell. It is true of the old, pre-colonial days that “Somalia’s fortune depend[ed] almost entirely on the length and severity of the drought” (RD 1987:591). But this is the eve of the 21st century!

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