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SOMALIA'S JUDEAO-CHRISTIAN HERITAGE: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

Ben I. Aram*

INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity in Somalia is considered to be very brief and as such receives only cursory mention in many of the books surveying this subject for Africa. Furthermore, the story is often assumed to have begun just over a century ago, with the advent of modern Western mission activity. However, evidence from three directions sheds light on the pre-Islamic Judeo-Christian influence: written records, archaeological data and vestiges of Judeo-Christian symbolism still extant within both traditional Somali culture and closely related ethnic groups¹. Together such data indicates that both Judaism and Christianity preceded Islam to the lowland Horn of Africa

In the introduction to his article on Nubian Christianity, Bowers (1985:3-4) bemoans the frequently held misconception that Christianity only came recently to Africa, exported from the West. He notes that this mistake is even made by some Christian scholars. He concludes: "The subtle impact of such an assumption within African Christianity must not be underestimated. Indeed it is vital to African Christian self-understanding to recognize that the Christian presence in Africa is almost as old as Christianity itself, that Christianity has been an integral feature of the continent's life for nearly two thousand years."

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¹ These are part of both the Lowland and Highland Eastern Cushitic language clusters such as Oromo, Afar, Hadiya, Sidamo, Kambata, Konso and Rendille.

Bowers' comment is particularly relevant within an African Muslim culture such as found in Somalia. For a variety of reasons, Muslims have deep historical consciousness. Also, along with other Cushitic and Semitic peoples of the Horn of Africa, Somalis place a high value on history². At the same time, non-Arab Muslims such as the Somalis tend to view their pre-Islamic history and culture from a perspective inherited from Arab Muslims. Just as Arabs have tended to glorify their post-conversion history while denigrating their "*jaahiliya*" (time of ignorance), traditionally Somalis have more often focused on their more recent history than their pre-Islamic era.

V.S. Naipul (1998: xi) eloquently expressed this dilemma:

"Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense... People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. (Naipul 1998: xi)

At the same time, the overwhelming perception of Christianity by Somalis is that it is the religion of foreigners, whether Ethiopian or European. No doubt, over five hundred years of intermittent conflict with the Monophysite Orthodox highlanders of Ethiopia, as well as the colonial experience over the last century, has greatly reinforced this view (Ali Abdurahman 1977:278-279). To be Somali is to be Muslim (Ali Abdurahman 1977:109).

My purpose in this paper is to record what is currently known about the Judeo-Christian heritage within the boundaries of the Somali-speaking people. While this data is much less detailed than that of northern Sudan or the Maghreb, it nevertheless adds a further dimension to the history of the spread of the Christian faith on the African continent. My hope is that

² See Braukämper (1973:29) for his observation derived from his study of Hadiya, Sidamo and Oromo in southern Ethiopia.

what is presented will stimulate additional research, and more importantly, be an encouragement to the small but growing modern Somali church.

CURRENT SOCIAL CONTEXT

Recent years have been a particularly dark period for the Somali nation, as yet the unresolved civil war enters its second decade. There has been no effective national government since the end of 1990. Countless peace agreements have been broken and frequent attempts to rebuild a national government have yet to succeed.

Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have fled their country, both to neighbouring lands and to distant locations in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and North America. This traumatic national disintegration of one of Africa's most ethnically homogenous countries has provoked considerable soul-searching from Somali intellectuals. Dozens of books and articles reflecting on the immediate and more remote causes of the current conflict have been authored in the past decade.

Minority Scholars Seek to "Re-invent Somalia"

Members of various ethnic minorities have authored a significant part of these writings. Apart from describing past discrimination and demanding a fairer share in whatever government finally emerges from the current wreckage, these writers have also attempted to re-write Somali history. The most classic example of this is *The Invention of Somalia* (1995; edited by Ali Jimale Ahmed; hereafter *Invention*), which takes a decidedly revisionist view of Somali history. The authors attempt to **reverse what they feel is a scholarly neglect or distortion of the contributions to the Somali nation of various minority clans found in the southern third of the country (particularly those with a non-nomadic culture).**

In this book Siyaad Barre's popular slogan "One language, one religion, one culture" is strongly critiqued (Besteman 1995:43). In actual fact, the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of Somalia has been over-emphasized. The author of the lead chapter in *Invention* laments what he terms "cultural alienation as a weapon of domination" in the way Somalia's history has been written only from the perspective of the purely nomadic clans of the northern and central regions (Mohamed Haji 1995:1-27). Haji

faults both Somali and foreign scholars in this and calls for more recognition of the history and culture of the primarily southern sedentary societies. While I doubt Mohamed Haji was considering religious diversity, my purpose for this paper resonates with his final plea:

"The time has come to assess Somalia's history and culture in a more serious way. It is time to incorporate all Somalia's cultural heritage in all its diversity in a comprehensive and more meaningful future Somalia." (Mohamed Haji 1995:21)

While more homogeneous than most other African lands, approximately 30% of the Somali population are members of clans with different languages.³ Not only do these minorities have different languages, but also different cultures than the majority Somali clans (belonging to the Dir, Isxaaq, Hawiye and Daarood clan families (*sensu* Lewis 1980:6).

While the contributors to *Invention* clearly demonstrate a much greater linguistic and cultural diversity, the religious homogeneity of the Somalis seems indisputable. Over 99.9% of the population is Sunni Muslim in the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Only one minority group has gone so far as to express some dissatisfaction with the Islamization process. These are a cluster of low-caste tribes (Yibir, Midgaan, Tumaal, et al.) who have formed a political party called "United Somali Roots". They view themselves as the aboriginal inhabitants of Somalia. While all are professing Muslims, a recent English language publication of this party (Mohamoud 1996:2) made the following radical observation that questions their total allegiance to Islam:

Jomo Kenyatta once said, when the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land, the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed and when we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible. The Minority clans in Somalia experienced similar situations when some Arab Sheikhs with their disciples arrived in their country. The Minority clans have been in Somalia a long time, but other Somali clans have been here a short time and the other Somali men only knows about

³ Five are Lowland Eastern Cushitic (Af-Maay, Af-Tunni, Af-Garre, Af-Dabarre, and Af-Jiiddu) and are related to Standard Somali (Af-Maay and Af-Garre being the closest and Af-Jiiddu being the most distant), while the other three are Bantu: Chi-Mbelazi, Ki-Bajuuni (themselves dialects of Ki-Swahili and Ki-Mushunguli (essentially the same as Ki-Zigua in NE Tanzania).

himself (sic) and what he's been told. He came to himself up in the desert of Arabia and he can't get any information that goes beyond the Desert. (Mohamoud 1996:2)

The Somali diaspora in North America, Europe, Africa, and Australasia has made remarkable use of the Internet. Not surprisingly, the main topic of most forums is political debate. However, it is noteworthy that in this modern communication medium, Somalis are also probing into their pre-Islamic past in an effort to come to a deeper understanding of their current dilemma⁴.

Abdi Mohamed's (1992) perceptive article demonstrates his soul-searching in examining the relationship between cultural differences and the root causes of the civil war: "...shared surface identities came to perpetuate nationalistic emotions that worked against presumed external Christian enemies, but failed to create a strong national unity among the people". He concludes his paper by stating: "On top of these cultural and environmental differences, the Somali nation has used history in a very divisive and negative way. Unlike other African nations...the Somali people used history to depreciate each other...Although these leaders have on several occasions tried to unify the Somali people under the banner of Islam, clan differences have prevailed."

There is an anecdotal account about a remark made by the famous Somali Catholic nationalist and diplomat Michael Mariano. Reportedly, Mariano had once told Siyaad Barre at a cabinet meeting in the 1970s that Somalia would never have peace until it returned to its roots. By that remark, he meant Christianity.

With this current cultural and religious soul-searching as a backdrop, let us now consider the three main areas of evidence for the Judeo-Christian heritage of Somalia.

⁴ For example a message posted to the Newsgroups: soc.culture.somalia by M. J. Ciise discussed the metaphysical foundation of Somali traditional law (*Xeer Soomaali*) and, via linguistic analysis, showed some terms related to pre-Islamic religion (Maxamed Jaamac 1996).

WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Ali Abdirahman (1975: 43-74) begins his comprehensive work by pointing out the earliest record of contacts with coastal Somalia from ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. The first written mention of Somalia as the land of Punt⁵ is from the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty, prior to 2000 BC. Later, Somalia was described in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (dated as AD 50), again pointing to contacts by Greek, Egyptian and other Middle Eastern sailors and merchants with the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts of northeast Africa. Ali Abdirahman (117) quotes several Arab sources from the 10th (al-Mas'udi), 11th (al-Biruni) and 12th centuries (al-Idrisi) that describe Seylac (Zeila), a port in northwest Somalia, near the border of Djibouti as a Christian city, with only a small minority population of Yemeni Muslim merchants. These Muslims lived peaceably with their co-religionists and paid tribute to the Aksumite monarch⁶. Later, control of coastal towns shifted to Yemeni Arabs. This situation changed by 1415, when the Abyssinian king Negus Yakuno Amlak re-conquered Seylac, killed many Muslims and forcibly converted survivors to Christianity and converted mosques to churches. However, within a few decades, Christianity had disappeared again from the city (Bertin 1983: 9)

How long Christianity lingered elsewhere along the Gulf of Aden coast of northern Somalia is not known, but there is a fascinating account from St. Francis Xavier's visit to the nearby island of Soqotra in 1542 (Freeman-Grenville 1966:135-137). In a letter dated 20 September 1542, he wrote to the Jesuit headquarters in Rome about his encounters with inhabitants of that island. They claimed to be converts of St. Thomas, and seemed to be totally illiterate and without any Scriptures. Their "priests" were also illiterate, but were able to do their daily prayers from memory, despite the fact they were in a language they did not understand.⁷ They had totally forgotten the sacrament of baptism, but had Lenten fasts that parallel those of the Monophysite Ethiopian Orthodox Church (hereafter referred to as EOC) in terms of length and severity. St. Xavier remarked several times

⁵ The source of highly sought-after frankincense and myrrh.

⁶ See also Trimminghams' quotation of Ibn Hawqal from 978 (1952: p. 51).

⁷ St. Xavier speculated it was Chaldean, which is a reasonable hypothesis, since Syriac was used as a liturgical language in the Middle East and among the Mar Toma Christians of Kerala in south India.

how proud the Soqotrans were of being Christian, and of their hostility to Yemeni Muslims. In northeast Somalia, there is one Somali clan, the Carab Maxamed Saalax who trace their genealogy to Soqotra⁸. At present, both the inhabitants of that island and their related clan in Somalia are Muslim.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Richard Burton's Observations

In 1854 the first European explorer to visit Somalia described ruins of what the local Warsangeli clan claimed to be a church in what is now Sanaag Region of eastern Somaliland (Burton 1987: 127-129). The Warsangeli nomads told him the ruins were the work of the *Nasraani*⁹. He also mentioned that the related Dhulbahante clan living to the south of the Warsangeli (Sool Region of Somaliland) still used to make stone or plastered wood crosses at the foot and head of their tombs. Other, older graves in the region were also observed to be marked with crosses.

Modern Archaeological Evidence

On 8 September 1991, two European relief workers informed me of a meeting that they had in the previous week with an amateur Somali archaeologist, Cabdi¹⁰ K. in Muqdisho. Cabdi had received some training either in Italy or the USSR. He mentioned having had some contact with Jewish archaeologists who were searching for ancient Jewish antiquities.

Cabdi showed the relief workers a number of artifacts that he had excavated. He was very careful not to mention the precise location, but showed photographs of various excavation sites. At one site Cabdi located a graveyard and had to pay for permission to excavate. While digging, he found an arrow pointing to a place where he found the engraved stone. This engraved stone was on a stone table 4 m below ground surface. It had crosses engraved on it as well as geometric designs. There was a hole bored

⁸ CQW. 1999. Personal communication. Nairobi, Kenya

⁹ An Arabic term for Christians, somewhat derogatory. It can be speculated that these ruins were the work of what Ehret terms the Ahmar-Dharoor people; he postulates that the modern agropastoral Somali clan of Samaroon (Gadabuursi) are their modern descendants (Ehret 1995:242-247)

¹⁰ In the Somali orthography, "c" represents the "ain" sound also found in Arabic and Hebrew.

through one end of this stone. Cabdi also displayed other engraved stones, some in a cursive script that did not appear to be like Arabic or Ethiopic script. In the same location, Cabdi found a stone structure that he believed was a place of worship.

Cabdi also mentioned finding a tomb somewhere in Somalia with a gravestone written in Arabic. The date on the tomb used the Christian calendar even though it dated from within the Muslim era. In 1993 Cabdi approached a European relief agency in Muqdisho with a request for funding in order to do further investigation. He refused to publish his information until he received financial support in order to do further research and publish a book. The relief agency he contacted was not able to assist him and I have not heard any further details about him since then¹¹.

CULTURAL VESTIGES OF JUDEAO-CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

Genealogical Issues

Somali clan structure is based on genealogy, with many people knowing their genealogy beyond their 20th paternal ancestor. As with other non-Arab Muslims, Somalis link founders of particular clan families (eg. Isxaaq, Daarood) with famous Arab sheikhs who arrived from Arabia many centuries before, married a local girl, and founded a clan. In particular, clan genealogies were rooted in the Qureysh clan of the prophet Muhammad. Abdalla Omar (1995: 117-134) has provided some intriguing analysis of these claims, along with dating Islamization of many clans to the 15th century. Despite the fact they spoke their own language, not Arabic, Somalis used to like to emphasize that they were Arabs. This distinction was particularly made vis-à-vis other Africans; however, racial discrimination against Somali migrant workers in Arabia, and disappointment with the lack of Arab relief aid and peacemaking help during the current civil war, have combined to severely erode this claim of Arab origin.

¹¹As a caution, while it seemed these archaeologists had genuine artifacts, the desire for funding may have influenced what the Christian relief workers were told.

There are at least four Somali clans reputed to be of Jewish descent. Throughout various parts of southeast Ethiopia, southern Somalia and northeast Kenya, deep hand-dug wells, ruins and cairns are attributed by modern day Oromo and Somali clans living there as being the work of the extinct Madanle people. Schlee (1989: 96, 226-228) reviews information about their activities in the Wajir area of northeast Kenya. He cites local Somali oral history that refers to the Madanle as "bani-Israel" and that they were wiped out by a confederation of Digil, Reewin and Hawiye clans in the 16th or 17th century. Schlee presents evidence of their possible incorporation into the Somali Ajuuraan clan which now lives to the west of Wajir. Lewis (1969:47) also mentions that the Madanle occupied much of southern Somalia prior to that time. Cassanelli (1982: 92-96) gives additional data on this mysterious clan, based on original sources in southern Somalia; he considers the Madanle as part of Ajuuraan theocracy that ruled southern Somalia in the 16th century. Brown (1989:29-36) gives extensive attention to oral history of both Somali and Borana clans in northeast Kenya concerning the wells and cairns attributed to this mysterious people. However, he quotes an early British colonial administrator, Lord Delamere, that the Madanle were Muslims.

The remaining three clans still exist today. The low-caste magician clan of Yibir is found mainly in eastern Ethiopia, Somaliland and northern Somalia. Some sources consider Yibir to be a corruption of the Somali word for Hebrew, "*Cibraani*". During the civil war, Yibir refugees in Kenya publicized their supposed links with the Falasha of northern Ethiopia. This was no doubt linked to their desire to find re-settlement in Israel, just as the Falasha had done. Some Yibir claim their early king Bucul¹² Bacayr¹³ was Jewish and defeated by the Islamic missionary Aw Barkhadle in a contest of magic that took place in northern Somalia.

Somalis refer to members of the clans inhabiting the ancient Benaadir coast cities of Muqdisho, Merka, and Baraawe of southern Somalia as the *Gibilcad*¹⁴. Their background is largely Arab and Persian, and they represent the northernmost extent of Swahili culture on the Indian Ocean coast. However Swahili is spoken only in the southernmost city of

¹² An alternate pronunciation is spelled "Bucur".

¹³ Also known by a Muslim name of Maxamed Xaniif.

¹⁴ Literally, "paleskins".

Baraawe. Lewis (1969: 42) refers to possible Yemeni Jewish origins for some of the coastal city dwellers but does not elaborate. I have heard various accounts of the Begedi (inland from Merka) and Xaatim¹⁵ (Baraawe) also being of Jewish descent.

Of lesser significance, but still intriguing, is the use of certain Biblical names among Somalis that are not typically used by Muslim Arabs in the Middle East¹⁶. These would include Isxaaq (Isaac), Eliyaas, Makahiil (Michael), and Daa'uud. Generally, only Arab Christians or Jews would employ these names. The fact that Isxaaq, Makahiil and Daa'uud are found near the beginning sequence of several clan genealogies may indicate earlier use of the names from pre-Islamic Jewish or Christian influence.

Sabbath Observance

While living in the small town of Homboy, Jilib District, in southern Somalia in 1988, I noticed that a significant portion of the population obeyed the injunction of a local religious leader not to cultivate their fields on Saturdays. These people were disciples of Sheekh Ibraahim from the Garre clan, whose father had founded the town in the early 20th century. They believed that farm work on Saturdays would result in various plagues striking their fields. Those observing this Sabbath rest worshipped normally with other villagers at the mosque on Fridays. I have been told of a family from the Baadacade clan in Buulo Burte in central Somalia that observed a similar taboo on Saturday work¹⁷. If this issue were to be surveyed, it is likely that more instances would be found.

In terms of Sunday observance, Schlee mentions that the Somali Garre clan of Mandera District in northeast Kenya will not begin a migration on Sundays, nor begin training a young baggage camel on a Sunday (Schlee 1994:55). He himself remarked on finding it unusual to see Muslims more concerned about Sunday than Friday.

¹⁵ In the Somali orthography, "x" represents an emphatic, aspirated "h".

¹⁶ They are found in the Quran, but are not normally used by Muslims in most Arab lands (contrasting with the common usage of names like Yuusuf, Ibraahim, Ismaaciil, Muuse, and Sulaymaan).

¹⁷ ACX. 1997. Personal communication. Nairobi.

Uses of the Cross

As noted by Burton over a century and a half ago, the symbol of the cross is still used in Somali culture. Some use the sign of the cross for a variety of superstitious purposes. In times of extreme danger, a cross may be drawn on the soil for its supposed protective power. Or, in cases where an oath is being taken a sign of the cross may be made. This mark of the cross is sometimes termed *falaad*. This could be related to the root word *fal* which means magic, from which other words meaning magic, bewitched, or wizard are derived, viz. *falaanfal*, *falan*, and *falanfallow* (Zorc & Osman 1993: 132). While Somalis use either *iskutallaab* or *saliib*¹⁸ for cross, it is interesting to note that the official name of the Red Cross was translated as *laanqayr* (literally, "branch that is blessed").

Some sections of the Sheekhaal clan in eastern Ethiopia use the cross as a brand on their camels. They also inscribe a cross on stones marking graves. This mark is called *summaddii awliyo*, meaning, "brand of the saints". The Sheekhaal are a small priestly clan¹⁹, aligned with the Hawiye clan family and are famed for their knowledge of Islam. Certain sections of the Karanle (Murusade) Hawiye clan brand their camels with a cross²⁰. The Karanle are located both in central Somalia²¹ and in the Shabeelle valley at Iimi within Ethiopia, adjacent to Oromo clans inhabiting the Bale mountains. It is likely that further investigation would reveal that other clans use the cross as a livestock brand.

From several Somali Christians from northwest Somaliland, I learned that pilgrims to the tomb of the pioneer Islamic missionary Aw Barkhadle make a sign of the cross from the white soil from his tomb. They keep this sign on their foreheads until they return to their homes. Three of these pilgrimages are considered to be equal in merit to a pilgrimage to Mecca.

¹⁸ From the Arabic term.

¹⁹ Their name is derived from the word *sheekh* in Arabic, meaning a religious authority.

²⁰ ACX. 1997. Personal communication. Nairobi

²¹ Ceel Buur district in Galguduud Region and Afgooye District in Lower Shabeelle Region.

The present survival of the cross as a symbol has no inherent spiritual value, yet it does support the archaeological evidence²². No Somali recognizes any Christian content within the sign of cross. Traditionally, Somalis knew very little about the Christian religion, other than it was something evil. The pejorative term *gaal* (unbeliever) was applied to all non-Muslims, regardless of whether they were "people of the Book" or pagans.

DISCUSSION

The "Greater Ethiopia" cultural region

Vestiges of Judeo-Christian influence persist in Somali culture. However, in order to appreciate the significance of the above data, we need to step back and recognize the larger context of the historical-cultural geographic unit to which the Somali belong. Here the groundbreaking work of Levine (1974:40-84) is essential for understanding both the origins and significance of the evidence presented above. Levine, following on the pioneering research of Enrico Cerulli (1959), demonstrated a great deal of cross-cultural interchange over the past millennia between various ethnic groups speaking related Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic languages²³. He lists a number of common religious features among peoples of what he terms "Greater Ethiopia"²⁴:

- a belief in a supreme deity, a sky-god called *Waaq* (Oromo), *Waakh* (Rendille), *Waaq* (Daasanach), *Waac* (Afar).
- position of priests as intermediaries between *Waaq* and humans
- religious rites often involved sacrifices of livestock, particularly on either hilltops or along riverbanks

²² It is similar to the use of the cross as an artistic motif by the Muslim Berber Tamasheq (Tuareg) nomads of the Sahara in Algeria, Mali, and Niger.

²³ Themselves all part of the Afro-Asiatic language family.

²⁴ Levine is not making a political statement by this regional term, which would include northeast Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and northern Kenya. Rather, he is pointing out that millennia of contact between speakers of three branches of the Afro-Asiatic language family (Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic) have resulted in many unifying religious and cultural features. Ehret (1998) provides insight into the differentiation of this language family.

- use of a calendar to order ritual events; days are viewed as being auspicious or not within the context of the calendar²⁵
- use of a bonfire to symbolize beginning the new year; a custom followed by EOC, Muslims²⁶ and adherents of traditional religions
- belief in spirits, with possession termed *zaar* or *saar*
- importance of snakes as totems of clans
- religious significance of large trees such as sycamore fig, baobab as residence of spirits
- strong food taboos against eating pork, fish, and carrion
- a tendency to re-align the beginning of genealogies to connect with ancient personages held in high esteem within a given religion (eg. Solomon for aristocracy within the EOC) or the Qureysh clan of the prophet Muhammed for Muslims.

Levine (1974:64-66) describes in detail the “creative incorporation” of Semitic religion within this context. First, Judaism, then Christianity, and finally Islam, were all adopted to some degree by various ethnic groups. Levine notes a highly syncretistic element that has been present within the various cultural groups making up “Greater Ethiopia”.

Somali Traditional Religion

Since essentially all Somalis have been Muslims for the last 500 years, is it possible to describe their traditional, pre-Islamic beliefs? Focussing in a bit within Levine’s approach, the most fruitful approach has been to make comparisons with the traditional religion of closely related Lowland Eastern Cushitic ethnic groups who have not been Islamized. Schlee (1994) has given particular attention to the Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye of northern Kenya²⁷. He postulates that they are offshoots of the Somali²⁸ who were in the early stages of Islamization²⁹ when they were separated from other Somali by the Oromo expansion around 1540. Being separated

²⁵ Udessa (1994) provides a detailed view of this from the Guji Oromo context.

²⁶ Interestingly, while this custom is usually called by its Somali name *dabshid*, it still is called by a Farsi word *Neyruus* by some Somali, showing its link to pre-Islamic Persia.

²⁷ Schlee uses the term “Proto-Rendille-Somali” culture to describe these three ethnic units.

²⁸ Mainly from the Garre clan.

²⁹ For a Muslim perspective on this issue, see Abdi Ali 1993.

from the rest of the Somalis by the Borana section of the Oromo from 1550 until the late 19th century, these three ethnic groups did not cross the line into full conversion to Islam. Schlee points out that the Rendille (who retained their language, which is fairly close to Somali) were the earliest to separate from the "Proto-Rendille-Somali". They have fewer Islamic elements than the Gabbra and Sakuye (who adopted the Borana dialect of Oromo). The unusual way that Oromo traditional beliefs could supplant Islam is further attested by an account I heard that the Ajuuraan in Kenya, while still maintaining Islamic identity had adopted many elements of the religious rituals of their Borana neighbors³⁰.

The veneer of Islam had extended only to usage of some Arabic names for days of the week, some months and some religious terms like "*alal*³¹" and "*dikir*³²". In particular, the Rendille and Gabbra remain largely non-Islamized, so studies of their religious beliefs are very useful in both reconstructing Somali pre-Islamic religion, as well as discerning external religious influences paralleling those within Somali cultural history³³. According to Schlee the Gabbra have a self-perception of their religion as non-pagan and on par with Islam (134).

Braukämper has published several detailed papers on the survival of vestiges of Islam among the Highland Eastern Cushitic Hadiya, Kambata and Sidamo people of southern Ethiopia (1973, 1988, 1997) after their conquest by the Oromo. Following the Oromo expansion, the remnants of these ethnic groups inhabit mountains between the Omo River and the Great Rift Valley (in the case of the Sidamo, Gedeo and Burji, they extend to mountains east of the Rift). They are currently separated from the Somali by 300-400 km of mountains and plateaus by the Arsi, Guji and Borana Oromo. In particular, the Arsi Oromo absorbed a large amount of

³⁰ Yuusuf Tadiija. Personal communication. Muqdisho, 1983.

³¹ Derived from the Arabic word *halaal*.

³² This is an Arabic word for religious chanting; meaning literally "remembering the names of God". The chants used in the *almodo* sacred fire ceremony contain Arabic words, including references to Mekka and Medina.

³³ Schlee poses an interesting example that Gabbra and Rendille, with their common Proto-Rendille-Somali heritage use sheep as a peace offering when ending hostilities between them; however, this does not take place with the neighboring Turkana, who have a much more distant Nilotic culture.

the Hadiya people in the Bale mountain area, so much so that the majority of Arsi are actually of Hadiya background.

Braukämper details how many adherents of both *sagidda* (as those preserving some Islamic traditions were known among those Hadiya assimilated by the Arsi Oromo) and *fandano* (unassimilated Hadiya) Islamized in the 20th century (1988: 772). There are many parallels with the situation 500 km further south among the "Proto-Rendille-Somali", all which shows the tremendous cultural and religious disruption of the Oromo conquests of the 16th century. While *fandano* was largely derived from Islam, Braukämper (1997: 321) mentions some incorporation of Christian elements (particularly veneration of Mary and Saint George) borrowed from their closely related Kambata neighbors.

Schlee (1994: 3) terms Rendille and Gabbra religion "traditional monotheism", and modern missionaries have noted some striking parallels in the ritual calendar and sacrificial system with that of the Old Testament (Anderson 1983; Underhill 2001). These practices await comprehensive description and analysis. Again, referring back to Levine, Rendille and Gabbra rituals can be seen within the larger pattern of syncretistic Cushitic religious practice. Schlee (55) notes that Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye (along with the Muslim Garre noted above) observe Sunday as a special day of rest for camels. He also describes the ritual use of blood by the Rendille for the blessing of livestock and people (65). Furthermore, Schlee (92) detects some influence of the Exodus account (although he sees it as coming via Islamic tradition) in the common oral history of Rendille, Gabbra and Sakuye of a long, difficult trek their ancestors made 500 or more years ago. He notes that the Gabbra have a legend with parallels to the judgment of Solomon in 1 Kings 3:16-27 (255). In terms of possible Christian elements, Schlee notes that some of the Gabbra use a cross as a brand on their camels (193).

Origin of Jewish Elements in Somali Culture

Elements of Judaism likely entered Somalia first from the north (Ethiopia), and later from the northeast (Yemen) beginning in the pre-Islamic period and continuing on for some centuries thereafter. Considering how widespread the primitive, pre-Talmudic form of Judaism was in northern Ethiopia a millennium or more ago, elements of Judaism could have easily spread southward. It is noteworthy that while the Falasha

speaking Amharic, their origins were from the Central Cushitic Agaw people. Gamsts' (1969) study of another Agaw group, the Qemant gives fascinating insights to the syncretism of Judaism with indigenous Cushitic religion. He describes their religion as "Pagan-Hebraic" (29-43); whatever elements of Judaism reached the Somalis and other closely related people was likely similar.

To illustrate how far south Judaism may have spread in Ethiopia, the account of Queen Gudit, the nemesis of the Aksumite Kingdom should be noted. According to Sergew (1972), quoting an ancient Ge'ez manuscript, Queen Gudit was Jewish³⁴. Her kingdom of Damot lay to the southwest of the Aksumite Kingdom. It is quite likely she was from one of the Agaw tribes that had embraced Judaism in earlier centuries³⁵. Tadesse (1972: 40-43) gives additional details on Gudit's destruction of Aksum in 979; however, he identifies "Damoti" as being further south in the Sidamo region and terms Gudit pagan rather than Jewish. Balisky (1997: 8-9) gives a comprehensive view of all possible locations for Damot; he essentially agrees with Sergew and concludes it was near the Gibe River valley, in the area now inhabited by the Gurage and Oromo people.

Braukämper (1973: 34-35) sketches historical relations between Highland Eastern Cushitic Hadiya and the Central Cushitic Agaw. At the same time, the Hadiya have lived in relatively close proximity to the Somalis in the past (1973: 42-45), in what is now occupied by Arsi Oromo (many of whom are of assimilated Hadiya origin). It is conceivable that the Somali Yibir clan could have Falasha Jewish elements descended from Agaw settlers among the Hadiya. This would most likely have occurred in the Harar area. Braukämper (1973: 35, 47-48) examines evidence that the Hadiya and Sidamo lived as far east as Harar prior to the 16th century Oromo conquests; this would have made them direct neighbors of the

³⁴ He does cite some authors who hold that she was pagan.

³⁵ Trimmingham (1952: 52) discusses the possible geographical and religious origins of "Guedit", as well as citing a contemporary Arab historian, Ibn Hawqal who referred to her war against Aksum. Furthermore, he attributes Judaistic influences unique to the EOC to the conversion of Judaized Agaw in the 9th and 10th century (35-36, 53-54). For further details on the unique degree of Judaism persisting within the EOC (particularly with regard to Sabbath observance) see Hammerschmidt (1965: 1-12).

Somalis. Lewis (1969: 54-55) recounts the legend that Bucul Bacayr's (Maxamed Xaniif) wife Xantaale is buried in Harar³⁶ and that Yibir still make pilgrimages to her tomb.

Actually, it is a rather common phenomenon within "Greater Ethiopia" that small clans of religious specialists claim foreign descent. For example, both the Sheekhaal and Asharaaf among the Somali emphasize their Arab roots. However, it is interesting to note that among the Rendille, the section of ritual specialists known as Iibire (derived from same root as Yibir in Somali) are not a despised minority as are the Yibir among the Somalis, although they share a reputation for having the ability to make powerful curses (Schlee 1994: 10-11, 241-242). This gives a glimpse into what may have been the role of the Yibir among the pre-Islamic Somalis. It provides a background for the "power encounter" between their chief priest and one of the early Muslim missionaries, as well as for lingering resentment against Islam among the Yibir.

Also, some Old Testament traditions like animal sacrifices (such as those noted among the Rendille and Gabbra), and fusion of the Sabbath concept into the pre-existing ritual calendars with their observation of auspicious days could have spread southward throughout various Somali clans.

Southward Movement of Christianity

As with Judaism, Christianity likely entered Somalia from the both highland Ethiopia to the north, as well as from southern Arabia.³⁷ South Indian merchants may have also been involved, in terms of the Soqotra connection. This process began in the pre-Islamic period and continued on until perhaps as late as 1500 with the ebb and flow of the Christian Abyssinian Empire. Levine (1974: 71) notes that Seylac was part of the Aksumite Empire in the 900's, fell to the Arabs, and then was re-conquered in the early 15th century. Southward expansion of Christianity to both

³⁶ Other Somalis believe that Xantaale is buried in Jigjiga.

³⁷ The history of the Church in southern Arabia is not well documented; the main sources I found were Bell (1968:1-63; 134-161) and Trimmingham (1952:32-55). Both authors stress the close relationship between the Christian Aksumite Kingdom and the Christians of Najran. Bell (1968: 36 indicates that the Arabian Christians were also Monophysite.

Eastern Highland Cushitic peoples (Hadiya, Kambata, Sidamo) and Omotic (Wolaitta, Kafa) began in the 13th century with the work of the famous missionary Takle Haimanot (Balisky 1997: 36-42, 67-79). This southern penetration of Christianity continued in the 14th and 15th centuries (Levine 1974: 73, Getachew Haile 1984: 113).

Studies of the expansion and contraction of the EOC among four southern highland groups from 1200-1900 show some common patterns. Rønne (1997:133-148) focuses on the *Kitoosa*³⁸ cult, which preserves remnants of medieval Orthodox Christianity that penetrated the Kambata and Hadiya cultures in the 13th century. Some persisted, mainly among the Kambata, until the conquest of the area by Menelik II in the late 19th century. Certain clans claimed ancestry from northern Semitic roots and maintained some vestiges of Christianity terminology and ritual (Rønne 134-135); some even claimed a link with Takle Haimanot.

Balisky's (1997: 82, 95, 103) study of the Omotic Wolaitta³⁹ people documents survival of Christian terminology from the medieval period, although this was to a lesser extent than among the Kambata. As with the Kambata, survival of Christian terms is particularly in clans claiming their origins from medieval settlers from northern Ethiopia.

As Braukämper (1997: 319) pointed out, the contraction of the medieval southward expansion of Christianity came about from the disastrous invasion of Ahmed Gagn from the coastal Adal Kingdom between 1530-40⁴⁰. Following this, the multi-directional expansion of the Oromo people from the Liibaan plateau in southern Ethiopia profoundly rewrote the ethnographic and religious map.

Trimingham (1952: 109-110) recounts several anecdotes from early European travelers in southern Ethiopia who encountered survivals of the last vestiges of EOC practice. For example, in Enarya (an area either now

³⁸ The Kambata/Hadiya version of Ge'ez *Kristoos*.

³⁹ The Wolaitta live across the Great Rift Valley, to the west of the Kambata and Hadiya.

⁴⁰ Braukämper (1973) provides additional background on the effects of the Muslim-Christian warfare on religious allegiance of the various Highland Eastern Cushitic groups.

part of Gurage country or inhabited by the Jimma Oromo), d'Abbadie wrote in 1843 there was a minority of Christians within that Muslim kingdom who had no priest for over a century. In a more remote location, the remnant of "Christians" were also without priests and made processions around their churches on Sundays, invoking the help of Mary.

In view of the long term presence of Christianity in the highland regions immediately to the northwest of the Somali-inhabited lowlands, it seems likely that some Christian practices (such as use of the cross, Sunday as a day of rest) could then have diffused southward into Somali territory as early as 1300, especially along the Shabeelle River valley. These clans living to the south of the Bale mountains and Liibaan plateau were probably the last to be Islamized. It is noteworthy that the Jiiddu clan of the lower Shabeelle River valley in southern Somalia speaks a language with significant Highland Eastern Cushitic elements. Lamberti postulates that the Jiiddu originated in what is Gama-Gofa province of southern Ethiopia, and then migrated via the Bale mountains to their present location (1986: 3-10). On the Gulf of Aden coast, Christianity may have been more widespread many centuries earlier, as the accounts of a Christian majority in Seylac until at least the 11th century indicate. While the above evidence precludes conclusive proof that many, or any, Somali clans were actually converted to Christianity before the coming of Islam, the possibility cannot be totally ruled out.

The spread of Islam

Ali Abdirahman (1975: 109-141) has described the Islamization of Somalia in detail. He presents considerable evidence that the Somalis were entirely Islamized by the beginning of the 16th century (1975:141). This process had taken nearly 800 years, since Seylac had Muslim inhabitants (due to its close proximity to Yemen) in the very first decades of the history of Islam. Ali Abdirahman (1975:135-138) specifically mentions that both Axmed Guray (Ahmed Gagn)⁴¹ and the Ajuuraan theocratic kingdom⁴² were instrumental in Islamizing the Somali clans of what is now southeast Ethiopia and southern Somalia during the 15th and 16th centuries. Abdi

⁴¹ His kingdom of Adal (Awdal) had the most influence in what is now Somaliland and in neighboring Djibouti and eastern Ethiopia

⁴² Their sphere of influence began in the Shabeelle River valley of southern Ethiopia and extending through much of central and southern Somalia.

Mohamed (1992: 189) claims that Islam made little progress in the interior until the late 1800's; however, he does not document this position.

Cassanelli (1982:98-99) concurs that these centuries saw the culmination of the Islamization of the Somali clans, along with significant immigration of Muslim religious teachers from Yemen. The arrival of the latter helped to consolidate the gains made among new converts and to further add to the popular concept of Arab origin of most Somali clans or clan families. He postulates that the Ajuuraan theocracy had its origins in the Bale highlands of southern Ethiopia, on the headwaters of the Shabeelle River⁴³.

However, some elements of traditional Cushitic religion⁴⁴ survive among Somalis to this day, especially as incorporated in various Sufi or folk Islamic rituals. Braukämper (1992: 145-166) discusses common elements of Islam among Somali and Oromo in terms of the major pilgrimage center of the 12th century Somali Sufi saint, Sheekh Nuur Xuseen. While this saint cult is most common among Muslim Oromo in both southeast and southwest Ethiopia, Somalis are also involved, illustrating the fact of the way that religious movements transcend linguistic and cultural differences, within the overall "Greater Ethiopia" context.

CONCLUSION

From a consideration of historical records, archaeological finds, and modern cultural anthropological studies of related groups, there appears to be a greater religious diversity in Somali culture than commonly perceived. The results presented here are only preliminary, and additional research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of both Judaism and Christianity within Somali history.

What is most significant is the evident desire by some Somalis, both Christian and Muslim, to rediscover their past heritage—a heritage that

⁴³ This would make it the southernmost of the cluster of eastern Ethiopian Islamic kingdoms that were frequently warring with the Christian Abyssinian kingdoms.

⁴⁴ In particular, pilgrimages to tombs of saints and animal sacrifices, both overlain with an Islamic veneer.

may have included a brief, incipient Christian era. At this point it is wise to recall Unseth's (1999: 157-158) caution to Sudanese and Ethiopian Christians against any spiritual pride based on historical heritage.⁴⁵ However, consideration of the above evidence demonstrates that Christianity cannot be labeled merely as a recent arrival to Somalia, brought by European colonialists.

We can nevertheless rightly ask: Why did Christianity not take root among the Somali? Tadesse (1972: 43) points out that the lowland nomads had significantly differentiated from the highlanders before the coming of either Christianity or Islam. Braukämper (1988: 772; 1997:323) observes that the EOC emphasis on over 150 fast days per year where animal products could not be consumed made it essentially impossible for pastoral nomads to be members of the Church. Furthermore, the EOC taboo against camels⁴⁶ stood in total opposition to survival of a people who depended so heavily on this animal for food, drink, and transport in a harsh environment where other livestock could not survive. On the other hand, some of the nomadic Tigrë in lowland Eritrea were members of the EOC from antiquity until 1820 when they converted to Islam (Trimingham, 1952: 112). How they managed to be practicing Monophysites is not clear. How flexible EOC clergy (especially pioneer missionaries) would have been with pastoralists is a matter for conjecture. Balisky (1997: 79) cites an example of one of Takle Haimanot's associates, Filopos, who evangelized in the Mt. Zuqwala area allowing recent converts there to continue some of their traditional sacrifices.

Bowers' (1985: 16-17) analysis of the decline of the Nubian church (loss of spiritual vitality, overemphasis of clergy over against the laity, and isolation from other Christians) parallels similar features that would have militated against the EOC maintaining itself among the Somalis. The above data shows its decline from 1500-1850 among more culturally receptive Highland Eastern Cushitic farmers of the southern mountains. It would have been even less likely to thrive where its extra-Biblical claims contradicted a culture well-adapted to a harsh environment. The obscuring

⁴⁵ See also the apostle Paul's caution in his letter to the Philippians, 3:4-9.

⁴⁶ While this is rooted in Mosaic law (Leviticus 11:4) and is part of the unusual Judaistic element within EOC theology, this anti-camel taboo is also shared by the cattle-herding Oromo within their traditional belief system.

of the core gospel message with unmanageable fasting and food taboos would have created a deep-seated weakness in early Somali Christianity in the face of competition with the apparently more culturally suitable religion of Islam.

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