

# ***Haweenku Wa Garab* (Women are a Force): Women and the Somali Nationalist Movement, 1943–1960**

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Safia Aidid

We wanted to break away from our seclusion.  
We wanted to have the responsibility  
to express our feelings and our views.  
We wanted to show concern for our country.  
Hawa Jibril<sup>1</sup>

In 1972, the Supreme Revolutionary Council of General Mohammed Siad Barre passed a resolution to erect several monuments in Mogadishu in honour of symbolic nationalist figures and events in Somali history.<sup>2</sup> These monuments would come to include Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, leader of a twenty-three year anti-colonial war (1898–1921) against the imposition of British rule; Daljirka Dahsoon (The Unknown Soldier), representing all Somali lives lost in battle; and Hawa Osman Taako, a woman killed at the time of a 1948 Somali Youth League organized demonstration that was violently disrupted by pro-Italian groups.<sup>3</sup> At an intersection, home to the National Theatre and in the heart of the capital, Hawa Taako's concrete figure, sword and stone in hand, is permanently inscribed in the collective historical consciousness of Somalis.

Historians of public memory have argued that the construction of public memorials like that of Hawa Taako often operate politically, acting as registers of present and future political concerns, and rhetorically shaping the shared values and identity of the nation.<sup>4</sup> The monument embodies a set of meanings and significations in its negotiation of national identities and narratives, not least of which are the ones defining the social and political positionality of those responsible for its construction.<sup>5</sup> The Somali Youth League (SYL) was among the political parties and social organizations dissolved when Siad Barre came to power in October 1969, yet the death of Hawa Taako is appropriated and allegorized as a national symbol of resistance, devoid of its true political meaning and agency.<sup>6</sup> The statue, with its weapons and fight-

ing stance, makes official memory out of the popularized narrative of Taako dying in combat. The establishment of the women's section of Siad Barre's Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party in 1977, the Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO), saw the regime and its state feminism further linked to the monument, as the SWDO headquarters was constructed directly facing Hawa Taako's statue.<sup>7</sup> While the rest of the SYL members carried out their long-planned demonstration against the return of Italian rule under United Nations trusteeship, the young woman left behind at headquarters (with several other SYL members) was killed by a pro-Italian mob intending to demolish the building. Her true narrative has been obscured.<sup>8</sup>

While women like Hawa Taako are incorporated into what can be called the "national metanarrative" of Somali history, they enter national memory as subjects whose agency is delimited by their metaphorical and symbolic significance. Taako, then, becomes relevant not as a politically engaged actor in the nationalist struggle, but rather as a metaphor of the tyranny of colonialism, in which even women cannot be protected from its violence. Subsumed into the national body politic, Anne McClintock argues, women are "typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency."<sup>9</sup> The gendered nature of the national metanarrative becomes most explicit in historical moments when women's participation is mobilized, as in the case of the Somali nationalist movement, and the ways in which these moments are narrated and remembered.

The historiography and metanarrative of nationalism in Somalia is often one of "men, their movements and parties, and struggles over power," with the nationalist movement itself framed as a masculine project.<sup>10</sup> In what is perhaps the only comprehensive analysis of nationalism in Somalia, Saadia Touval's *Somali Nationalism*, there is not a single reference to Somali women, let alone any references implying a secondary, supportive role (such as what Susan Geiger challenges in the historiography of present-day Tanganyika).<sup>11</sup> What, then, does one make of the elderly Somali women who, when asked to describe women's participation in the Somali nationalist movement, retorted with "who built it?"<sup>12</sup>

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Let them start war and lock us away,  
Let them burn us with fire and bullets, men and women,  
The few who are left will attain independence.

Dahabo, daughter of Musa, don't you ever despair.  
Let them make us porters and treat us like dirt,  
Let them treat the wise men of the League like *hujuris*.<sup>13</sup>  
Until the independence which we have struggled for is realized  
We will not be upset by what the Italians are doing.  
Timiro Ukash<sup>14</sup>

Of the various Somali experiences of colonialism, Somalia under Italian rule has been the most interventionist and intrusive form.<sup>15</sup> Initially opposed to an overseas empire, with domestic pressures from the industrial north and fears of political isolation in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884, Italy began to explore the possibility of expansion into East Africa.<sup>16</sup> Negotiations between 1887 and 1893 with the sultan of Zanzibar—who maintained his sovereignty over the Benadir port cities of Mogadishu, Kismayo, Brava, Merca, and Warsheik—ended with their cession. Combined with a series of protectorates and agreements with Somali sultanates in the region, Italy commanded all of Somalia from the Juba River to Cape Guardafui.<sup>17</sup> A slavery scandal involving the Benadir Company, which administered the region, forced Italy to take over direct administration in 1904, and over the next years Italy continued to expand into the interior and consolidate its colony, acquiring Jubaland from British-administered Kenya after the Second World War.

The Fascist era in Somalia opened with the arrival of Governor Cesare Maria De Vecchi on December 5, 1923. He believed in rule by force and considered existing Italian colonial policy, which resembled British indirect rule, "intolerable."<sup>18</sup> With all of Somalia under direct administration after the annexation of the northern protectorates, and intending to establish a settler colony, the colonial government focused on intensifying the economic development of what publicists at home described as "*La Grande Somalia*."<sup>19</sup> The first direct tax was instituted in the form of an annual hut tax, bringing in much needed revenue. An emphasis on Somalia's agricultural potential underpinned many of the new policies introduced in this period, which was marked by a growth in the plantation economy and the amount of land under cultivation.<sup>20</sup> The largest and earliest of these concessions for large-scale agricultural production was the Societa Agricola Italo-Somalia (SAIS) at Villabruzzi, employing 4,000 people, and whose 420 miles of channels from the Shabelle River watered fields of bananas, sugar cane, and cotton over 25,000 hectares of land.<sup>21</sup>

While most of the hectares under cultivation at Villabruzzi were purchased, this was an anomaly from the “imperial praxis of outright confiscation” under the colonial government.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the British Somaliland Protectorate, Italian Somaliland appropriated land and used forced labour from the outset, which was intensified under Fascist administration.<sup>23</sup> The journals of Lord Rennell of Rodd, a Major-General under the British Military Administration, provides the following account:

The conception of these agricultural enterprises as ‘exploitation concessions’ engendered under the Fascist regime a labour policy of considerable severity in theory, and actual brutality in practice. It was, in fact, indistinguishable from slavery.<sup>24</sup>

Families who settled at Villabruzzi were grouped into one of sixteen villages and assigned a hectare of irrigated land, half of which was designated for raising company cash crops. To assist the development of the newly established estates, the Italian administration introduced new regulations to facilitate the extraction of “native labour” through what came to be known *asnikaax talyani* (the Italian marriage), allowing men to marry women without her or her family’s consent.<sup>25</sup> The policy was intended to improve the productivity of the male Gosha population, sedentary agriculturalists who settled along the fertile Juba and Shabelle rivers (where most of the plantations were concentrated), and were forced to work on Italian estates during the week. Though rural Somalis did not come into contact with Italian settlers and the colonial administration to the same extent as their urban counterparts, through land alienation and policies like the “Italian marriage,” their lives and social relations were affected by colonial processes in highly gendered ways.

While the women I interviewed were from Mogadishu and other large cities, they related stories of sexual violence and concubinage that took place in and around Italian estates.<sup>26</sup> They pointed to the large numbers of “*mistiioni*” children born to Somali women under Italian rule. Under Fascist Italy’s “half-caste” laws, these children inherited the status of the native parent and could not take their Italian parent’s name.<sup>27</sup> The colonial state’s interest in and reliance on animal exports to generate income, making up over a third of Italian Somaliland’s exports, affected women as well, as the husbandry of sheep and goats is traditionally the work of women.<sup>28</sup>

Thus in the years leading up to the Second World War, Italian administrators concerned themselves primarily with the mildly successful development of industrial agriculture in the riverine areas, as well as meeting the needs of its influential settler population.<sup>29</sup> In 1941, this population numbered 8,000. Concentrated in Mogadishu, it was made up largely of civilians, civil servants, and their dependents.<sup>30</sup> It was not until changes made under the British Military Administration that Somalis were recruited and trained for junior positions in government (previously reserved for Europeans), although Somali men in cities were involved in wage labour, the merchant trade, and the colonial police force and military.<sup>31</sup> Public education was virtually nonexistent in the colony, with only thirteen elementary schools, run by missions providing education to both Somali and Italian children, due in part to Italian fears of creating the “native intelligentsia that was a folly of Britain.”<sup>32</sup> The presence of a large Italian community in Mogadishu also circumscribed the mobility of urban Somalis through enforced practices of segregation, which prevented native access to certain neighbourhoods, restaurants, theatres and even sidewalks.<sup>33</sup>

Women in Mogadishu, like their sisters in British Somaliland, had no such access to the colonial administration or the formal sector.<sup>34</sup> Whereas in rural areas pastoral women’s labour was crucial to her kin group and community, urban women’s labour was not (apart from reproductive labour). Urban marriage was a relationship between two individuals and their families. It was no longer a social institution significant to the wider kin group in which a wife becomes representative of “the rights and duties of reciprocal sharing” between two groups tied through an exogamous union, a conception of marriage that had allowed pastoral women to exercise some agency as “bearers of social capital.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, social roles of urban women were different, and now varied along class lines as well.<sup>36</sup> Middle-class Somali women, historian Lidwien Kapteijns writes, had a distinctively urban lifestyle, in which they “embroidered, wove, sewed, mastered the art of a fine urban cuisine, and spared neither time nor effort in beautifying themselves” for their role as the status symbols of husbands upon whom they were economically dependent.<sup>37</sup> Lower-class women who were forced to work for a living, on the other hand, were neither secluded nor dependent on men. They were involved in petty commodity production (such as the selling of *laxoos*, a type of flatbread), hired out their labour for tasks such as sorting bananas and gum, and lived off donations.<sup>38</sup>

Though urban Somali women were largely invisible to the colonial state, its gendered nature is once again highlighted in its presumed source of authority over women.<sup>39</sup> Women were enrolled in the political project of containing social change in the colony and maintaining law and order, but in doing so, colonial authorities institutionalized patriarchy by leaving the control of women to colonized men.<sup>40</sup> The administration of British Somaliland, exported to the former Italian Somaliland under the British Military Administration in 1941, gave legal sanction to what it deemed “tribal custom” in marriage—understood as male kin authority over women—in the 1928 Natives’ Betrothal and Marriage Ordinance.<sup>41</sup> Autonomous working women, like the lower-class urban women engaging in petty commodity production, were also assumed to be dependent on men and often carried the stigma of illegality and suspicion over their activities.<sup>42</sup> If a District Court felt there was a “reasonable possibility” a young woman would turn to prostitution, she was handed over to her kin group, and for repeated “offenses,” fined and imprisoned.<sup>43</sup>

On January 24, 1941, British colonial troops of the 11th and 12th African Divisions crossed the Jubaland border from Kenya to invade Italian Somaliland. Within weeks the port city of Kismayo had been captured and Italian forces routed at their main position at Jelib. On February 25, Mogadishu was occupied, and Italian dreams of *La Grande Somalia* came to an abrupt halt.<sup>44</sup>

With Italian Somaliland now in Allied possession, General Alan Cunningham’s forces advanced westward into the Ogaden, capturing Harar and Dire Dawa in March, and finally entering Addis Ababa on April 6, 1941.<sup>45</sup> With the exception of French Somaliland, which remained under Vichy administration until 1942, all Somali territories of the British Somaliland Protectorate, the former Italian Somaliland, and the Ogaden and Reserved Areas would be unified under a British Military Administration for the next decade.<sup>46</sup>

The British Military Administration in Somalia after the Second World War marked a period of significant change and transition, as the most direct and interventionist colonial rule Somalis would experience came to a close with Italy’s defeat. All Somali territories were now unified for the first time under British administration. The changes were seen almost immediately with the “Somalization” of the lower positions in government, now open to Somalis for the first time, and the lifting of a ban on local political associations and clubs.<sup>47</sup> Italian civil societies and political parties, suppressed under the Fascist regime,

were the first to appear in Mogadishu among the Italian settler population. All were interested in the future of Somalia and virtually unanimous in their claims for a return of Italy's former colonial possession.<sup>48</sup> In the midst of this swelling Italian political activity and changing colonial situation emerged the first Somali society, the Somali Youth Club (SYC), founded on May 13, 1943. Its thirteen founding members, belonging to the urban middle class, represented all major Somali clans and articulated a national identity of *Somalinimo* (Pan-Somali identity).<sup>49</sup> As its name implies, it found much of its initial support among young, educated Somalis who were now in the civil service, as well as those who were members of the newly established Somali Gendarmerie forces, created by the British to replace the disbanded Italian forces.<sup>50</sup> By 1946, the administration had officially estimated SYC support to be no less than 25,000 affiliates.<sup>51</sup>

In 1947, the Somali Youth Club reorganized itself as a political party, changing its name to the Somali Youth League (SYL) as the Four Power Commission of Investigation, established to determine "the views of the local populations" before deciding the fate of Italy's former colonies, prepared to visit Mogadishu the following year.<sup>52</sup> Mogadishu exploded with political activity in anticipation of the Commission's arrival, as Somali nationalists and the Italian community and their allies prepared to make their cases to the Four Powers.<sup>53</sup> The Somali Youth League was no longer simply the Club that spoke against "what might be prejudicial to the interests of the Somali people," it was a full-fledged political movement, with offices in all Somali territories, and it commanded popular support.<sup>54</sup> With memories of Italian colonial rule still raw, the possibility of its return and the uncertainty of Somalia's future made the moment critical.

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Sisters, you joined the fight  
Remember the beautiful one,  
Hawa—stabbed through the heart.<sup>55</sup>  
Hawa Jibril

"The country teems with poets," wrote Richard Burton, reflecting upon his 1854 visit to Somalia, which he called a "nation of bards."<sup>56</sup> "The fine ear of this people causes them to take the greatest in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions." A predominantly oral culture, poetic

traditions continue to maintain an important social function in the daily lives of Somalis, often employed as a pedagogical tool for communication, consciousness-raising, and preserving history.<sup>57</sup> The distinctly female genre of poetry known as *buranbur* historically provided a socially acceptable means to express and protest women's grievances, often dealing with the frustrations associated with "female" domains such as child-rearing and housework.<sup>58</sup> Though respected among the various modes of Somali poetry, *buranbur* has neither the cultural currency nor the wide circulation of male-dominated styles, which traditionally deal with "serious" themes of political interest and carry the more complex structural and linguistic forms valued highly in Somali oral literature.<sup>59</sup> The additional function of the poet as spokesperson and the necessity of a public role have similarly contributed to the predominance of male poetic styles, as gender ideology regarding female propriety delimited women's mobility and visibility in public spaces, and undermined their ability to recite publicly.<sup>60</sup> Thus, *buranbur* typically discuss matters of female concern within female-gendered spaces, though often to and within hearing distance of the male ear, conveying messages ranging from celebratory praises at weddings to expressions of sorrow regarding household duties.<sup>61</sup> The following is an example of a traditional *buranbur* lullaby, sung to a female child:

Oh my daughter, men have wronged us.  
For in a dwelling where women are not present  
No camels are milked  
Nor are saddled horses mounted.<sup>62</sup>

Work songs, lullabies, and other forms of *buranbur* poetry provided a platform for women's grievances and self-expression, allowing them to articulate their concerns through this socially acceptable medium.<sup>63</sup> Yet Somali women's poetry took on an increasingly politicized and public role with the emergence of the nationalist movement for independence following the Second World War. Women produced, articulated, and spread nationalist consciousness.<sup>64</sup> Given the historicizing function of Somali oral literature and the limited study of Somali women's history, poetry composed by women is an important source of knowledge about their lives and experiences in the nationalist period.<sup>65</sup>

"Women were there from the beginning," recalled Jamaad Diriye Ali, one of the Somali Youth League women I interviewed.<sup>66</sup> "When it was said that we would struggle for independence, the women joined.



No one needed to convince them.” In the 1940s, women in the Somali territories under British Military Administration joined the nationalist movement en masse with the same enthusiasm and fervor as the men.<sup>67</sup> Denied even the limited opportunities open to men by the colonial government, Somali women felt most affected by colonial rule.<sup>68</sup> The most active were usually unmarried and divorced urban women, who were better able to commit their time to the League.<sup>69</sup> Known as the Sisters, SYL women throughout the 1940s and 1950s were involved in organizing and recruiting new members, promoting *Somalinimo* and nationalist feeling, raising funds and collecting membership fees, housing and concealing nationalists from authorities, and participating in demonstrations. At times they were imprisoned, tortured, or killed.<sup>70</sup> Hawa Jibril’s poem describes women’s activities:

At the time we were fighting for our flag  
Sisters, we chanted and we clapped  
Till our hands and jaws got sore  
Sisters, we sold our jewelry  
Depriving ourselves  
And donated to our League  
Enriching the struggle.<sup>71</sup>

Jibril’s poem underscores the importance of jewelry to Somali women, and the women I interviewed repeatedly emphasized this aspect of their participation. There is considerable evidence that a woman’s jewelry traditionally constituted her assets in a social order in which her ability to accumulate wealth independently was limited. Often passed on generationally through mothers, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets can be sold in times of drought and financial crisis, and collections are expanded in times of surplus.<sup>72</sup> In the three interviews I conducted with SYL women, each group of women recounted the story and poetry of Raha Ayanle, a fellow activist who intended to have her gold jewelry melted into dental crowns for her damaged teeth. Her experience is expressed in her short, but eloquent, *buranbur*: “My mouth with its missing teeth deserves to be filled with gold, but more deserving of that gold is the liberation of my country.”

The Sisters were instrumental in fostering a nationalist consciousness by composing poetry, employing the female *buranbur* tradition to articulate discourses of *Somalinimo* and nationalist solidarity and to urge the political mobilization of men and women alike.<sup>73</sup> One such

poem by one of the first women to join the SYL, Halimo Godane, encourages women to participate:

Men are dying of sleeplessness, as they don't come home anymore.  
They are working all night so that we succeed.  
We decided to stand by their side.  
So, Somali girls, tighten up your skirts.  
Don't let us divide and let the *gaalo* buy us.<sup>74</sup>  
Until we hit the target, we must not rest.<sup>75</sup>

In local Somali Youth League meetings, where matters of political concern were discussed and debated weekly, the recitation of patriotic poetry became a prominent feature.<sup>76</sup> The traditional Somali *shir*, where attendance was limited to the autonomous male producers who could exercise political authority and decision making for the community, was now opened up for the participation of women.<sup>77</sup> The nationalist movement thus gave women the opportunity to claim a stake in the traditionally male-dominated public sphere as national subjects. It allowed them to politicize a poetic tradition that already carried within it elements of protest and defiance, and let them reach a broader audience and take a primary role in producing, shaping, and spreading nationalism.

When the Four Power Commission for Investigation arrived in Mogadishu on January 6, 1948, the political atmosphere in the city was highly charged as the various parties and interest groups prepared to demonstrate their position on the future of Somalia. News of the British government's support for the Bevin Plan, a proposal by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin in 1946 to "give the poor nomads a chance to live" with a continuation of the unification of Somali territories under British trusteeship, was met with efforts by the local Italian community to organize a significant pro-Italian front to sway the Commission.<sup>78</sup> The women interviewed described the divisions in the city in the years leading up to the delegation's visit, and how hostilities intensified in the weeks prior to its arrival.<sup>79</sup> Though the Somali Youth League had the support of most Somalis, the minority view advocated the return of Italian rule under a thirty-year trusteeship. This perspective was represented by the eleven pro-Italian Somali organizations that appeared before the Commission, which were funded by the Italian community and organized as the Somalia Conference.<sup>80</sup>

Concerned about the possible infiltration of pro-Italian Somalis, important SYL meetings were sometimes held underground, and women would network and transmit these details to the community.<sup>81</sup> Taking advantage of their “invisibility” to urban Italians, SYL women also engaged in covert activities, noting Somalis who received special privileges and entered Italian homes.<sup>82</sup>

Hawa Jibril’s poem, titled “The Old Pro-Italian Men,” was composed in 1947 and deals with this issue. The poem curses Somali “collaborators”:

A ninety year old  
Who has deserted his people  
A quisling uttering shamelessly, ‘Si Signore’  
In hell’s fire will he be roasted...

A seventy year old  
Who supports not his brothers  
Who for a few rubias has sold our unity  
Nothing will he gain for his Italian masters...

A fifty year old  
Whom all the Muslims hate  
Who, with the colonizers, treacherously consorts  
May his heart stop, never to recover.

While leaders of Somali and Italian organizations presented their views for the future of the territory to the Four Powers Commission, their followers were given specific dates by the British Military Administration for demonstrations outside. The Somali Youth League memorandum to the Commission stated:

We wish our country to be amalgamated with the other Somalilands and to form one political, administrative and economic unit with them. We Somalis are one in every way. We are the same racially and geographically, we have the same culture, we have the same language and the same religion. There is no future for us except as part of a Greater Somalia.

[...] By this union only can we have the opportunity to give full expression to our national spirit and work out our destiny as a nation of normal human beings. Union with the other Somalilands is our greatest demand which must take priority over all other considerations.<sup>83</sup>

The SYL requested the final day, when a public rally would be held on January 11, 1948, to demonstrate against the possible return of Somalia to Italy under a United Nations trusteeship.<sup>84</sup> Supporters assembled in Mogadishu in large numbers the morning of January 11, SYL organizers having scrapped plans to begin the demonstration at their headquarters and walk to the designated protest area.<sup>85</sup> Demonstrators chanted nationalist slogans and poetry, waved flags, and wore the red armband that identified SYL membership.<sup>86</sup> Women went door to door, encouraging Somalis still at home to come out and show their support.<sup>87</sup> Several of the Sisters stayed behind at the Somali Youth League headquarters nearby, including Hawa Taako and Halimo Godane, as did the men of the Central Committee who were not meeting with the Four Power delegation.<sup>88</sup> First to come under attack was the SYL headquarters, where Italians armed with weapons attempted to set the building on fire. Mohamed Hirsi Nur, one of the thirteen founding members, was killed when he stood in the doorway to ask the men to leave. Upon hearing his yells, Taako came to his aid with a club she had found in the room, before she too was “speared through the heart.” Demonstrators were met with bullets, hand grenades, and arrows as the unauthorized Italian community and its supporters “thronged in lorry loads into the town.”<sup>89</sup> Within two hours, 51 Italians and 17 Somalis had been killed, countless numbers injured, the city placed under military curfew, and many thrown into prison camps as the British Military Administration attempted to contain the violence and looting.<sup>90</sup> A poem by Halimo Godane describes the moment:

The men who were put in the trucks to be deported,  
Our leaders who were arrested,  
The official ban on gatherings,  
O God, the King, may the British lose their dignity.<sup>91</sup>

The Mogadishu riot of 1948 is often remembered as “*ha noolaato*,” a phrase cried out by one man as fighting broke out to invoke *Somalinimo* and encourage Somalis on opposite sides not to fight each other, but to turn their attentions to the Italians.<sup>92</sup> “It was the day the Somali people became one,” described one of the SYL women.<sup>93</sup> With the heroics of Hawa Taako’s death combined with the remarkably fewer Somali casualties despite an armed ambush, the memory of the demonstration has become almost mythical in nature.

Though the Four Power Commission of Investigation reported that the Somali public largely supported the Somali Youth League's proposal for a unified Somali territory, the Powers were unable to reach agreement and left the final decision to the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>94</sup>

Both the SYL and the Somalia Conference sent delegations to the U.N. Assembly meeting at Lake Success while demonstrations continued in Mogadishu and other cities.<sup>95</sup> Eager to welcome Italy back into the Western camp, Britain, France, and the United States voted on November 21, 1949, for a U.N. trusteeship under Italian administration.<sup>96</sup> In a letter to the *New York Times* in response to the suggestion that Somalia's anti-colonial activity was Soviet inspired, Abdullahi Issa Mohamud, head of the SYL delegation, wrote:

The unjust solution proposed for Somaliland is entirely contrary to the wishes and welfare of the inhabitants. That the majority of the Political Committee reached this unfortunate conclusion after considerable bargaining and political expediency at the sole expense of the weak and defenseless Somali nation is a fact well known to the whole world. It is as clear as the light of day that, in order to do something for the Italians, it is proposed to sacrifice the Somalis and offer Somaliland to Italy as a bribe.<sup>97</sup>

The United Nations, however, specified for the first time the independence date for a trusteeship, which was set for 1960.<sup>98</sup> In spite of the firm provisions set by the U.N. trusteeship agreement, the new Italian administration had "much of the character of a military occupation," and many Italian civil servants and administrators who had served under the Fascist regime were returned to their positions because of their experience in the colony.<sup>99</sup> While the Somali Youth League and other nationalist organizations were not banned as they would have been in Italian Somaliland, nationalists who were considered "dangerously anti-Italian" were often imprisoned or deported, spawning riots that would be severely repressed by the administration.<sup>100</sup> It was after one such riot in Kismayo in August 1952 that a pregnant Timiro Ukash was imprisoned, along with large numbers of SYL members. Fellow female prisoners delivered a daughter she named Augusto.<sup>101</sup>

That same year, with the Somali Youth League developing into an organized political party in preparation for Somalia's coming independence, the Sisters demanded a women's section of the party, threatening to withdraw their support if their institutional participation was

barred.<sup>102</sup> A women's section was established in 1952, led by Halimo Godane and Raha Ayanle.<sup>103</sup> Though women were able to vote for the first time in the municipal elections of 1958, they found themselves once again excluded in 1959, when not a single female delegate was selected to attend the SYL National Congress in 1959.<sup>104</sup> They selected from among themselves Hawa Jibril and Ardo Dirir to address the Congress, who were told by chairman Adan Abdulle Osman that women "lacked education and did not have the necessary political consciousness" for leadership.<sup>105</sup> Jibril replied:

Are you not really arguing as the Italians? Are you not, in fact, supporting their contention, as expressed at the United Nations, that the Somalis are not ready for independence, because they allege that we have not sufficient education or political maturity?<sup>106</sup>

The argument proved convincing, and Raha Ayanle was elected to the Central Committee of the Somali Youth League soon after.<sup>107</sup> When I asked Hawa Jibril to explain her frustration in 1959, she described the educational situation of Italian Somaliland, and pointed out that many of the men who were seated in the Congress had little more than elementary school education themselves.<sup>108</sup> Somali women had committed themselves to the nationalist cause, their poetry both reflecting and producing political consciousness, yet they were now finding themselves outside of the very political and state institutions they fought for, and the histories in which they were critical actors.

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Let alone thanks, I have been forgotten...  
Let alone gifts, I have been ignored...  
Let alone rewards, I have been threatened!  
Kaha Ahmed Sar'ad

The Somali Republic was founded on July 1, 1960, with the unification of the former British and Italian Somalilands "on a wave of popular enthusiasm."<sup>109</sup> The Somali Youth League, now a political party in the new Republic, would bring Somalia's first two presidents into office and dominate elections until the military coup of General Mohamed Siad Barre on October 21, 1969. Not a single woman would enter parliament under the SYL governments, and many would find themselves

barred from government positions for which they were qualified. Hawa Jibril's daughter, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, was the first Somali woman to complete a university degree in 1962, and like many women who followed her soon after, found herself unable to enter the civil service despite a policy of automatic Grade A government positions for men who had diplomas.<sup>110</sup> Hawa Jibril's poem "Sisters" reflects on her daughter's situation in the new Republic, as well as her own frustrations as a SYL Sister denied the rewards of their labour:

Sisters, we were forgotten!  
We did not taste the fruits of success  
Even the lowest positions were not offered  
And our degrees have been cast away like rubbish.  
Sisters, was this what we struggled for?

The women interviewed spoke with resentment and frustration when asked whether they felt their participation was ignored, describing how women had done the brunt of the work to achieve independence, only to be discarded when the goal was realized.<sup>111</sup> Disillusioned by the state's unwillingness to address women's concerns or provide spaces for women's institutional participation, numerous women's groups emerged soon after independence. In 1960, the Somali Women's Association was founded, made up primarily of middle-class women and the wives of political leaders concerned with women's welfare.<sup>112</sup> The most radical women's group Somalia was to know, the Somali Women's Movement, was founded in 1967 with the explicit aim to "unify and strengthen the collective energy of Somali women" and "educate the public in the basic and constitutionally guaranteed rights of complete equality of the sexes."<sup>113</sup> These organizations would come to an abrupt halt with Barre's military government's ban on social and political organizations. Siad Barre's regime marked a new chapter in the discourse about gender and women's status in Somali society. It put an end to the organic politicization and self-awareness experienced and articulated by Somali women during the nationalist period and by the women's groups that emerged during the early independence years, now rendered invisible by the metanarrative of Somali history.

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## Notes

1. This paper is largely based on interviews conducted in June 2010 with the following women activists, members and affiliates of the Somali Youth League: Hawa Jibril, Jamaad Diriyee Ali and her daughter Fadumo, Faduun Haji Diriyee, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays." Jibril and Diriyee Ali are two of what appears to be only three remaining "core" members of the Women's Section of the Somali Youth League. Poetry collected during these interviews, as well as poems by SYL women published by Zainab Mohamed Jama have also proved invaluable. See Zainab Mohamed Jama, "Fighting to be Heard: Somali Women's Poetry," *African Languages and Cultures* 4, no. 1 (1991). The poems used as epigraphs are all produced by SYL women. Jama's article remains the only study of women and nationalism in Somali Studies, while references to women's participation in the already limited body of literature are few.
2. Ali Jimale Ahmed, *Daybreak is Near: Literature, Clans and the Nation-State in Somalia* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1997), p. 4.
3. The January 11, 1948, demonstration is often mistakenly conflated with an event known colloquially as *Dhagaxtur* (The Stone Throwing), which occurred several years later in Mogadishu. Though several scholars reproduce this error, due in part to referencing earlier works referring to the events as one and the same, the women I have interviewed—several having participated in both—confirmed that this is not the case.
4. Erin Rand, "Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 656.
5. Ahmed 1997, p. 4.
6. Raqiya Haji Dualeh et al., "Women's Movements, Organizations and Strategies in a Historical Perspective: Somalia Case Study," research report, Somali Democratic Republic, 1981. Women's organizations that emerged soon after independence were also banned in 1969.
7. The Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO), created to mobilize female support for the Barre regime, is often referred to as the Hooyoyinka (the Mothers).
8. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
9. Anne McClintock, "'No Longer a Future Heaven': Gender, Race and Nationalism," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), p. 90.
10. Susan Geiger, "Engendering and Gendering African Nationalism: Rethinking the Case of Tanganyika (Tanzania)," *Social Identities* 5, no. 3 (1999): 331.
11. Ibid. I. M. Lewis' *A Pastoral Democracy* and *The Modern History of Somaliland* also include detailed accounts of postwar Somali nationalist activity, but discussions of women in his works are mostly limited to chapters dealing with marriage, inheritance, and "spirit possession." There are two mentions of women's voting rights in the 1958 and 1960 elections.
12. Interview with Jamaad Diriyee Ali, 12 June 2010.
13. "Hujuris" refers to people who engage in menial labour.
14. Timiro Ukash composed this poem from prison in Kismayo in 1952, where she gave birth. Poem quoted in Jama 1991, p. 49.



15. Abdi Ismail Samatar, *The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884–1986* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 74.
16. Hess 1966, p. 13.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
19. *Ibid.*
20. The plantation economy in Somalia is briefly mentioned in Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, but includes in a footnote that there is a “crying need for a critical historical study of colonial agrarian political economy in southern Somalia.”
21. Hess 1966, p. 163. Villabruzzi is located approximately 90 kilometres northwest of Mogadishu. Hess writes that SAIS employed 2,400 Shidle (a Gosha clan) families on its plantation.
22. Negash Tekeste, “Italy and its Colonies: Somalia before 1935,” in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires*, edited by Prem Poddar, Rajeev S. Patke, and Lars Jensen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 310.
23. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.
24. Sylvia E. Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland* (London: Watts & Co., 1951), p. 142.
25. Francesca Declich, “‘Gendered Narratives,’ History and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara,” *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 111.
26. Interviews with Jamaad Diriye Ali, Faduun Haji Diriye, and Khadijah Abdullahi “Dalays,” 12 June 2010.
27. Pankhurst 1951, p. 210. *Mistioni* means “mixture” in Italian, and was the term they used to describe Somali-Italian children.
28. See Lidwien Kapteijns, “Women and the Crisis of Communal Identity: The Cultural Construction of Gender in Somali History,” Boston University African Studies Centre, Working Paper No.173 (1993); and “Gender Relations and the Transformation of the Northern Somali Pastoral Tradition,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28 (1995). Kapteijns’ work relies heavily on fieldwork done in Djibouti as well as British colonial records dealing with the British Somaliland Protectorate. Similar studies of Somali women under Italian colonialism have yet to be written, however her work provides important insights into the lives of Somali women that can be applied to Somali territories more generally.
29. The success of concessions rested heavily on investment by the Societa Agricola Italo-Somalia, and while their export crops amounted to one-third of the colony’s exports, too few people benefited from the trade. Attempts to grow peanuts, tobacco, Brazilian rubber, potatoes, barley, oats, pineapples, and sugar beets generally failed. More successful were cotton, sugar cane, bananas, castor beans, durra, maize, sesame, kapok and coconut palms. See Hess 1966.
30. This population would shrink after the Italian defeat to 4,500 by 1943, as women and children were repatriated to Italy. Lewis 1965, p. 118.
31. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.
32. By 1947, nineteen elementary schools had opened, with a total of 1,050 students, 501 of whom were Somali. Of the 501 Somali students, 54 were girls. Pankhurst 1951, p. 168; Lewis 1965, p. 119.

33. "We could not even buy gelato from the cafes." Interview with Faduun Haji Diriye and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12 June 2010.
34. Only one woman is listed on the government payroll of the British Somaliland Protectorate: a prison warden in 1930 of the lowest rank, who was responsible for guarding female prisoners.
35. This is not to suggest that pastoral society was not patriarchal. Women remained excluded from political authority and were not economically independent, though they could accumulate "social capital" by investing in their communities of birth and their children, especially sons. Lidwien Kapteijns 1995, p. 247.
36. Kapteijns 1993, p. 8.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 12.
39. Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997), p. 24.
40. Kapteijns 1993, p. 13.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Kapteijns 1995, p. 257.
44. Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 175.
45. There is extensive literature on the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the Allied East African campaign. See, for instance, Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War: The Italian-Ethiopian Campaign, 1935–1941* (New York, 1984); Frank Hardie, *The Abyssinian Crisis* (Hamden, 1974); and A. J. Barker, *The Civilizing Mission: The Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–36* (London, 1968).
46. I. M. Lewis 1965, p. 116. With the end of Italian colonial rule, the territory became known simply as Somalia.
47. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.
48. Lewis 1965, p. 120.
49. Six of the original thirteen members were teenagers, while the eldest was 33 years old. For more on the Somali middle class' articulation of nationalist politics, see Charles Gesheker, "Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 1 (1985): 1–32.
50. The British encouraged the activities of the SYC because it was "progressive, cooperated with government and was anti-Italian," even making exception for Gendarmerie participation despite official policy against political affiliation. I. M. Lewis writes that the Somali Gendarmerie were among the most highly educated Somalis and played an important role in the growth of Somali nationalism. Lewis 1965, p. 122.
51. Ibid.
52. The question of Italy's former possessions was not explicitly resolved in the 1947 peace treaty, which simply stated that territories should "remain in their present state until their future is decided." The Big Four (United States, France, Britain, Soviet Union) would have a year to find a solution until the treaty came into effect, and if no solution

could be agreed upon, the matter would be decided by the newly established United Nations. Touval 1963, p. 80.

53. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.

54. SYL had offices in all Somali territories except French Somaliland. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.

55. Hawa Osman Taako.

56. Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 56.

57. Various writing systems have been in existence to transcribe the Somali language, including the Osmania script adopted and promoted by the Somali Youth League. With the 1972 Language Commission unable to come to a consensus over 17 competing scripts, Siad Barre selected the Latin based orthography developed by Shire Jama Ahmed. See David Laitin, *Politics, Language and Thought: The Somali Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

58. Dahabo Hasan et al., "Somalia: Poetry as Resistance against Colonialism and Patriarchy," in *Subversive Women: Women's Movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Saskia Wieringa (London: Zed Books, 1995), p. 166.

59. Amina H. Adan, "Women and Words: The Role of Women in Somali Oral Literature," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 16 (1996), p. 82; and Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 56.

60. Jama 1991, p. 43.

61. Hasan et al. 1995, p. 167.

62. Adan 1996, p. 84.

63. Ibid.

64. Lidwien Kapteijns, "Discourse on Moral Womanhood in Somali Popular Songs, 1960–1990," *Journal of African History* 50 (2009): 103.

65. A comprehensive history of Somali women has yet to be written. Several of the women I had interviewed recited poetry from the period, notably those of Hawa Jibril (who was also interviewed) and Raha Ayanle, in response to my questions on women's experiences of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalist movements. These poems are quoted in this section and in epigraphs of previous sections in my paper. Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," one of Somalia's first singers, used a song—whose lyrics strings together important events taking place in October of various years in Somali history—to determine several dates.

66. Interview with Jamaad Diriye Ali, 12 June 2010.

67. Jama 1991, p. 44.

68. Interview with Faduun Haji Diriye, Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," and Jamaad Diriye Ali, 12 June 2010.

69. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.

70. Interviews with Hawa Jibril, Jamaad Diriye Ali, Faduun Haji Diriye, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12–13 June 2010. Several women interviewed had been detained by authorities.

71. Hawa Jibril's poetry has been published and translated by her daughter, Fadumo Ahmed Alim. See Alim, Saa Waxay Tiri, *And Then She Said: The Poetry and Times of Hawa Jibril* (Toronto: Jumblies Press, 2008).
72. Christine Choi Ahmed suggests jewelry history as a possible tool of documenting the history of Somali women. Christine Choi Ahmed, "Finely Etched Chattel: The Invention of a Somali Woman" in *The Invention of Somalia*, edited by Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1995), p. 180.
73. Jama 1991, p. 44.
74. *Gaalo* means "non-Muslim foreigners" in Somali.
75. Jama 1991, p. 44.
76. I. M. Lewis mischaracterizes Somali poetry of the *gabay* form as traditionally "an effective vehicle for clan and lineage-group enmity" and expresses surprise over its use to promote nationalism and Somali unity. More recent scholarship on Somali oral literature like Said Samatar's *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism* (1982) illustrates the historic use of *gabay* to articulate Somali nationalism. The anti-colonial poetry of Sayyid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan is well documented. In privileging the traditionally male *gabay* form, Lewis also ignores the women's poetry widely performed in these meetings, except one mention of mixed meetings in southern Somalia, which he attributes to the "partly Bantu culture" of the region. I. M. Lewis, "Modern Political Movements in Somaliland," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 28, no. 3 (1958): 258.
77. *Shir* means "meeting" in Somali. Somali custom (*xeer*) permitted only the political participation of "adult males of a sound mind." Kapteijns 1995, p. 247.
78. Touval 1963, p. 78.
79. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
80. Touval 1963, p. 96.
81. Interview with Jamaad Diriye Ali, 12 June 2010.
82. *Ibid.*
83. SYL President Haji Mohamed Hussein testified before the Four Power Commission. Having softened their claims to independence, the SYL simply wanted to avoid a return to Italian colonial rule. Though the Commission noted that the SYL proposal commanded the Somali public's support, it would become increasingly apparent that the Bevin Plan, of all Somalilands unified under British trusteeship, could not be implemented. Touval 1963, p. 95.
84. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Ibid.*
87. Interview with Faduun Haji Diriye and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12 June 2010.
88. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010. My summary of what occurred at the SYL headquarters is largely based on Hawa Jibril's account. Hawa Jibril, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, Jamaad Diriye Ali, and Faduun Haji Diriye were all at the demonstration.
89. Lewis 1965, p. 126.
90. *Ibid.*
91. Jama 1991, p. 44.

92. The man became known as Hussein "Ha Noolaato." The event has become a reference point for many Somalis, who will often say they were born "around the time of Ha Noolaato," for example.
93. Interview with Faduun Haji Diriye and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12 June 2010.
94. Lewis 1965, p. 128.
95. Ibid.
96. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.
97. "Somali Stand on Trusteeship; Representative Declares Opposition of Youth League to Italian Control," *New York Times* (19 November 1949).
98. Abdi Ismail Samatar 1989, p. 76.
99. Lewis 1965, p. 141.
100. The Italian Trust Administration in many cases worked with the Somali Youth League in areas like education. Also, Lewis 1965, p. 141.
101. Ukash's husband, also a SYL member, was killed in front of the police station, while she was sentenced to several years in prison. She was denied medical assistance when she was in labour, forcing fellow inmates to deliver her first child, which included cutting with pieces of broken glass. Interviews with Hawa Jibril, Jamaad Diriye Ali, Faduun Haji Diriye, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12–13 June 2010.
102. Dualeh et al. 1981, p. 31.
103. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
104. Ibid.
105. Aden Abdulle Osman would become Somalia's first president in 1960.
106. Dualeh et al. 1981, p. 31.
107. Halima Godane defected from the Somali Youth League that year, joining the Greater Somalia League, founded by dissidents unhappy with the increasingly moderate tone of the SYL. She was nominated by the GSL as their first candidate for Mogadishu's municipal elections.
108. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
109. Kapteijns 2009, p. 103.
110. Interview with Hawa Jibril and Fadumo Ahmed Alim, 13 June 2010.
111. Interviews with Hawa Jibril, Jamaad Diriye Ali, Faduun Haji Diriye, Fadumo Ahmed Alim, and Khadijah Abdullahi "Dalays," 12–13 June 2010.
112. Dualeh et al. 1981, p. 31.
113. Ibid.

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