

The Cost of the Dervish War in British Somaliland on Environment and Non-combatants (1899-1920)

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I. Introduction

Northeastern Africa, generally known as the “Horn of Africa”, particularly the region inhabited by Somalis, experienced during the early part of twentieth century one of the most painful times in recorded history. The area witnessed violent conflicts, droughts, human suffering, famines, and the ‘Spanish Flu’^{1,2} – one of the most devastating plagues in the history of mankind, all together believed to have been a cause for a drastic reduction in human populations. Worldwide, approximately 500 million or one-third of world population became infected with the resulting in the death of at least 50 million.³

In the wars between the Dervish movement of Sayyid Muhammad Abdulla Hassan and colonial Britain at the turn of 20th Century, it is estimated 200,000 deaths occurred over twenty years.⁴ Jardine estimates one-third of the male population perished in the resulting years of bloodshed.⁵ Similar to all wars, almost all the literature on the Anglo-Somali war is confined to the glories and defeats of the opposing forces, attacks and counter-attacks, the spoils of the war, diplomacy, and political and religious propaganda in winning the hearts of the populace. However, the impact of those violent and bloody movements on the environment and civilian non-combatants is rarely discussed in those records.⁶ There is a historical vacuum in this area that needs to be filled. Regrettably, this will not be an easy task due to the fact that already a century has passed since the end of the con-

flict in 1920. There is a paucity of information relating to the issue and absence of literature that may shed some light on the tumultuous events of that period.

This article attempts to illustrate how far the Dervish War,⁷ which continued for almost a quarter of a century, damaged the ecological landscape of the region and how those conflicts and changes affected the lives of the people. Critically, environmental damage has implications for people and ecosystems upon which they depend. Therefore, in describing a scenario of acute environmental damage, something will be lacking from the narrative without reporting its impact on those who depend on it.

II. The State of Environment During the Turn of the 20th Century

Looking at the physical map of the northeastern corner of the Horn of Africa, particularly the region inhabited by Somalis, overall, the area is characterized by semi-arid climate. An exception is the inter-riverine forest belt of Jubba and Shebelle in the South, and some montane forest batches in the highest sections of Golis Mountain Range. The area is within the Somali-Masai regional centre of endemism, which is dry and rainfall rarely exceeds 500mm a year, but at the same time characterized by high degree of endemic flora and faunal species.⁸ Earlier travelers visiting the region from the North had formed that general impression about the country which is derived mainly from the narrow coastal strip, dubbed as "*Guban*" (burnt) due to being hot, arid and almost devoid of vegetation. The interior, however, depicted a different picture as noted by Douglas Jardine:

From the Golis one passes to the vast undulating plateau that slopes very gradually southwards to the Webbi Shebeli. Here you find almost every variety of scenery. Mountains like the Bur dab (Buur Dhaab) range, that suddenly and unexpectedly rise straight out of the plain; large strips of rolling open pasture-land with grass that stands as high as a man's waist, great areas of dense bush.⁹

Major H. G. C. Swayne, who crisscrossed most of the present-day Somaliland and made trips to Webi Shabeelle, almost two decades before Jardine's time, vividly described the prolificacy of flora and fauna in the region. Returning from his second trip to Webi Shabeelle,

on his way to Berbera, he observantly describes in one sentence the extent of vegetation between Webi Shabeelle and Adadlay: "...the whole of the country passed over having been one continuous sea of dense bush, dotted over with red ant-hills, of the spires being twenty-five feet high."¹⁰

The prolificacy of wildlife in the Somali region in the past can also be read in the records of the European travellers and big game hunters. Major Swayne stated that the whole country was "one of the best and most accessible of hunting grounds to be found at present anywhere in the world."¹¹ Brochmann (1912) also described the beauty of the inland, the Golis and plateau teeming with wildlife. He mentioned about that "the quaint horn bills, the brilliant starlings and babblers, and the larks, enliven the bush and plains respectively with their chattering and their songs; while the moonlit nights on the banks of the larger rivers where there are tall trees are cheered by the sweet notes of the Somali nightingale." He concludes his description with, "if this is a desert it is a very pleasant one."¹²

III. Impact of war on environment

Flora

One of the predominant causes of land degradation in pastoral areas is overgrazing. The seasonal movement of pastoralists with their stock in response to the availability of water and grazing over the different ecological zones protected the rangeland from overgrazing and deforestation. However, this does not mean that there was no change and decline in the distant past in land cover and wildlife prolificacy. Petrographs in many areas of the Golis Mountain range, dating back to several millenniums depicting humpless cows, are living testimony of erstwhile climatic profile of higher rainfall periods and lushness of vegetation. Yet, such past changes were slow, enabling communities to better adapt to new situations without triggering shocks to humans and other living things including flora.

The long-standing conflict of the early 1900s negatively impacted the environment in many different ways. One of the immediate effects was the long interruption in the seasonal movements of pastoralists across different ecological zones. Stock concentration in some areas,

because of fear of the raiding parties, became the norm. Thus, the resulting overgrazing contributed to widespread decline in pasture leading to high numbers of livestock deaths. The environment was badly damaged as people congregated in the plateau and avoided the Haud in the rainy seasons, as the Sayyid held control of the Haud.¹³ The result was that the plateau become overgrazed and trees torn down, paving the way for erosion processes.¹⁴ The damage was long-lasting and in some cases irreversible as disclosed in one colonial report: "Serious damage was also caused in the grazing areas, because seasonal migrations of people and stock where disorganized and overgrazing in certain areas led to soil erosion on a large scale from which they never fully recovered."¹⁵ As the internally displaced persons converged upon towns, felling of trees for charcoal production began.¹⁶ A 1905 colonial report contained the emergence of a "small industry" (charcoal production) whereby the product was sold in the local coffee shops.¹⁷

Looting of large numbers of stocks, mainly camels and cattle, often changing hands required the establishment of *zariba* (fortifications of thorn trees) to hold stock during the nights. This necessitated the axing of a large number of trees – a process that has to be repeated at each overnight stop to the destination point. Frequent camping and temporary sojourn of the two opposing forces (the British and the Dervishes) in a particular location necessitated the establishment of *zeribas* made secure by thorn bushes cut and circled around camps. In some areas, the British cut down trees around their temporary camps to deny the Dervishes cover for ambush.¹⁸ Those practices contributed to the thinning of the vegetation.

The non-combatant pastoral households who, in such violent periods of anarchy, used to group themselves in small hamlets (*garangar*) for common defense strategy, lest they be robbed, killed or overrun by an organized enemy, used to erect more than one circle of thorn bushes—one after the other—sometimes as high as four meters (*musdambeed*). Hence, the fencing material used in such temporary camps for such a society in perpetual transhumance in search of better pasture, water, and security, in most cases, must have been considerable.

The impact of camel footpads, which support a minimum of 300 kg per individual, naturally exert pressure on soil and may cause soil

compaction. However, there is a relationship between soil erosion and stocking rate and the subsequent soil compaction. The impact will be less in productive grazing lands, while it will be severe in degraded pastures.¹⁹ The damaging camel footpad effect on soil increases in times of camel rustling when a large number, tightly packed together, runs over the soil. This is more likely to have significantly reduced seed germination.

Fauna

The prolificacy of fauna in British Somaliland during the turn of the twentieth century has been documented in the different works of European travelers and big game hunters. The acquisition of firearms and ammunition by Sayyid Muhammad Abdulla Hassan came from various sources, using his different networks, through Bosaso and Makhir coast ports.^{20,21} Aw Jaamac Cumar Ciise, the Somali historian, mentions in his book, *Taariikhda Daraawiishta*, one consignment of twenty guns which the Sayyid exchanged for ten camels for each piece from two men from Bosaso.²² The source of the guns was Djibouti. Jardine wrote that the Somali tribes found no difficulty in obtaining cheap French rifles and ammunition from Abyssinia through Djibouti wherewith to carry on their insensate struggle."²³ The picture of Richard Corfield distributing guns in Burao to "friendly"²⁴ tribes who sought British protection against the Dervishes is another testimony of how the country became awash with firearms.

In addition, the Somali region has its share of big-game hunting in Africa by Europeans, mainly for trophies which sharply rose in popularity during the Victorian era²⁵ and peaked during the 20th century. This has dented the prolificacy of wildlife in the region. British colonial administrators travelled widely and military officers and others from Aden visited Somaliland for big-game hunting.²⁶ However, as the region became flooded with guns and ammunition as a result of the incessant armed campaigns which involved large number of combatants who relied on limited food supplies, it was inevitable for many to hunt down the wildlife. One of the antelopes that have been extirpated from the region is Swayne's hartebeest (*Siig*) due to combination of poaching, hunting and rinderpest outbreaks (*daba-ka-ruub*).²⁷ One could only find now place names of that beautiful animal. Other mammalian species wiped out during the early part of the 20th century

include Black Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros bicornis*, and the Northern Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*).²⁸

Displacement and Destitution

Human displacement is a common characteristic of most conflicts. The African proverb “If two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers” sums the fate of the powerless in times of conflict. The main driver of the sorry state of affairs that prevailed in the region was the long-standing conflict between the Dervishes of Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan and the British. The raiding and looting of the tribes who theoretically relied on British protection by the dervishes, the retaliatory actions by the former,²⁹ and equally the organized similar Ethiopian incursions in the Haud areas,³⁰ turned a big portion of the population into paupers. Charles Gesheker, citing Said Sheikh Samatar, estimated the tribute exacted by Ras Mokannen’s well-armed raiding hordes on Somalis between 1890 and 1897 to 100,000 head of cattle, 200,000 head of camels and about 600,000 sheep and goats from the Ogaden Somalis.³¹

The conflict triggered the uprooting of thousands of people from their areas, many of them seeking refuge in the coastal areas such as Berbera, as well as other coastal towns on the seaboard. Toward the end of the conflict, as the balance of power was tipped off by the use of air bombings, Dervish sympathizers vacated their traditional livestock grazing areas and moved south across the border to avoid the vengeance of the British and their ‘friendly’ tribes. Significant numbers of the war destitute even fled to Aden across the Gulf of Aden which was under Britain occupation, swelling its Somali population. Edward Alpers suggests that the census on Somali population of Aden during 1839-1955 shows that the year 1911 marked the highest number of male population (4,630 individuals).³² No wonder that the northern Somali country became, during the few years that preceded and also followed this period, a sinister theatre for avenge-seeking parties, characterized by looting and killing sprees, looting which reduced thousands of pastoralists into a state of destitution. In fact, the condition in the interior was so bad to such an extent that the war-displaced had to move in droves to safer areas. Douglas Jardine describing this situation writes the following:

Around the town, mile after mile of canvas met the eye where before there was nothing to break the drab monotony of sand and straggling thorn bush. Thousands of refugees from the interior flocked to the town to beg for alms. For the distress resulting from the Mullah's depredations had now reached most alarming proportions (94).

Many of those who were forced to leave their dwelling places did not stop at the coastal towns of both sides of the Gulf of Aden, but even travelled further to distant places. The author of this paper met a Bedouin man of mixed descent in 1978 in a desert near Abqaiq town in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, who proudly displayed his Somali roots. His father was among those men forced by circumstances to flee their dwelling places in British Somaliland.

Droughts

The environmental degradation exacerbated the cyclical drought situations and their impacts during the conflict years and their aftermath. *Xaaraama-cune*³³ (1910-1913) was a true testimony which highlighted the nexus between conflict, environmental degradation and drought. This was followed by a series of drought episodes in 1918, 1924, 1927-1930, 1933-1934, which not only worsened soil erosion and the overall deterioration of the environment,³⁴ but also increased inter-tribal frictions emanating from shortage of grazing and water resources.

Water

The availability of water sources played an important role in the acquisition of victory and defeat of the parties involved in the conflict. Whoever controlled the water sources commanded the war. As part of the war strategy, denying access of this precious liquid in such a dry country would mean a certain hardship and eventually death for an opposing force. This would also mean an increased suffering to non-combatant pastoralists who may not be affiliated to a force occupying a water point. No one knows how many humans and livestock perished for want of water.

How, then, did the combatants cope with the shortage of water during their long marches across the length and breadth of the waterless country? The camel was the answer. However, this required a pre-

cise logistical arrangement. Camels carried water on their backs, and if necessity dictates, the water in their stomach served as a reserve,³⁵ while the milk of she-camels also provided highly needed nutrition. Even the British officers, being aware of the fact that camel milk is rich in nutrition have often alone relied on it for their sustenance over long periods.³⁶ The Sayyid's *Daraawiish* (dervishes) understood that the British expeditions against them will be short-lived since the water they bring with them will not last long. That knowledge has allowed them to conduct their guerilla war in an elusive and effective manner.

The presence of an enemy at a water point can cause an imbalance in the grazing patterns, as well as exerting grazing pressure on certain areas. This may have contributed to the complex situations characterized by famine and droughts which had taken its toll, mainly on non-combatants.

IV. Conclusion

Like many conflicts around the world, environmental damages can be disastrous, depending on the means of war and the conditions of the environment and ecosystem. This is particularly true in the tropical arid and semi-arid zones.

In the case of the Dervish War, whereby Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan waged a war of resistance against the British, the impact of the longstanding conflict degraded the integrity of the environment. The worst hit geographic areas were the Sool plateau/Nugaal valley, Sanaag and Togdheer regions. A major driver of the environmental degradation was the breakdown of the traditional transhumance. Movement of pastoralists and their stock across ranges and different tribal boundaries in search of water and grazing was restricted by the war. Avoiding the raiding parties who targeted their stocks was a priority. Livestock concentrations in confined areas contributed to overgrazing. This resulted in the decline in stock numbers due to emaciation leading to a high number of deaths. The common practice of establishing zaribas by raiding and/or moving forces to temporarily shelter looted livestock in transit camps lead to the escalation of deforestation processes. The inflow of firearms and ammunition during those years reached unprecedented levels causing a sharp decline of game animals in terms of diversity and quantity. It is believed that the

Somali wildebeest has been wiped out during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The environmental degradation also exacerbated the cyclical drought situations producing years of conflict. *Xaaraama-cune - the time of filth-eating* (1909-1912) was a true testimony which highlighted the nexus between social disharmony, environmental degradation and drought.

Although none could gainsay that the years that followed this eventful period may have precipitated some post-crisis environmental recovery, the damage was long-lasting and perhaps irreversible. However, despite the fact that the country has seen less turbulence, it was long-lasting and irreversible. Thus, the situation also eventually compounded the recurrent drought conditions that followed.

Notes

1. The universal influenza pandemic (1918-1919) is believed to have killed person's 1.8 m persons, while 2% of Africa's population was erased from the face of the earth. (Sowards W., 2015, cited in, Yeyehyirad K. & Mirgissa K., 2018).
2. Sayyid Muhammad Abdulla Hassan is believed to have succumbed to the pandemic on the 23 November, 1920, (Jardine, 1923:307)
3. Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention. Remembering the 1918 Influenza Pandemic.
Available online: <https://www.cdc.gov/features/1918-flu-pandemic/index.html> ((accessed on 17 June 2021).
4. John P. Slight, John P. (2011), *British and Somali Views of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan's 'Jihad,' 1899-1920*, (quoting Said S. Samatar)
5. Jardine vividly illustrates the situation born from the 'indescribable disorder' and 'the orgy of internecine warfare' in the following sentences: '*In this holocaust, in which it is estimated that not less than one-third of the male population of Somaliland perished, there was no tribe that did not suffer either from internal schisms or from attacks by their neighbours. Ousted from their ancestral grazing grounds by the Mullah's advance and bereft of all their stock, the remnants wandered like veritable Ishmaelites in the Ishaak country, deprived of asylum and almost of access to the coast, owing to the inveterate hatred which the Ishaak harbour for the Darod.*' (Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* (1923), p.198
6. I would like to single out a 33-page paper, *The Political Ecology of Colonial Somaliland* (2004), authored by Jama Mohamed, which gives a good overview on how colonial politics of establishing boundaries and the wars that followed affected the environment.
7. The Dervish War (1899-1920), also known as The Somaliland Campaign, the Anglo-Somali War, and the Somali Dervish Movement (*Halgankii Daraawiishta*).
8. Bally, P.R.O., & Melville, R., *Report on the Vegetation of the Somali Democratic Republic with Recommendations for its Restoration and Conservation*. (Dec. 1972)
9. Jardine, D., *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, (p. 17)

10. Swayne, H.G.C., *Seventeen Trips Through Somaliland and a Visit to Abyssinia*, (1903), London, Rowland Ward Ltd (p.276)
11. Ibid. (P. xi)
12. Drake-Brochmann, *British Somaliland* (p.238)
13. Jama Mohamed, *Construction of Colonial Hegemony in the Somaliland Protectorate, 1941-1960*. (Ph. D, thesis), P.79.
14. Ibid. (p.80)
15. Ibid. (p.80)
16. Ibid. (P. 80)
17. Ibid. (P. 80)
18. This is not uncommon in war strategies. The Vietnam War is a good example whereby the American sprayed herbicides, bulldozed and applied forest fire to destroy canopy cover around camps, under which the enemy could hide.
19. José C.B. Dubeux Jr., Lynn E. Sollenberger, in *Management Strategies for Sustainable Cattle Production in Southern Pastures*, 2020, Science Digest.
20. Jardine, D., *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, p.231. Jardine writes: 'It was, moreover, well known that French rifles and ammunition in any quantity could readily be obtained in Abyssinia for their cash equivalent, and that Arabs and others at Mokalla were constantly dispatching ammunition to the Mullah through the Makhir coast ports.'
21. The sources of these rifles and ammunition were from Djibouti and Mokalla in Yemen.
22. Aw Jaamac Cumar Ciise, *Taariikhda Daraawiishta iyo Sayiid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan*, Akaademiya Dhaqanka, Mogadishu, 1976., P. 43
23. (ibid. p. 198)
24. *The Soldier's Burden: Somaliland 1905-1913*. Military Activities in the Somaliland Protectorate from 1905-1907; <http://www.kaiserscross.com/188001/504522.html>
25. Thompsell A. (2015) *Real Men/Savage Nature: The Rise of African Big Game Hunting, 1870-1914*. In: *Hunting Africa. Britain and the World*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
26. Mallon, D.P. and Jama A.A. 2015. *Current status of antelopes in Somaliland*. IUCN/SSC Antelope Specialist Group and Nature Somaliland.
27. U. Funaioli & A. M. Simonetta (1966) *The Mammalian Fauna of the Somali Republic: Status and Conservation Problems*, *Monitore Zoologico Italiano*. Supplemento, 1:1, 285347, DOI: [10.1080/03749444.1966.10736746](https://doi.org/10.1080/03749444.1966.10736746)
28. Tomas Mazuch et. al., *A checklist of terrestrial mammals of Somaliland* (2021)
29. In an offensive against the dervishes in Halin village in 1902, a British force drove "about 12,000 camels, 35,000 sheep, besides cattle"; an estimated 25,000 camels were captured during the 1902 summer campaign (Great Britain War Office, Official History, 81; 100; 108).
30. Mohamed, J. quoting Captain R. B. Cobbold, who accompanied the first Ethiopian expeditionary force against the Sayiid in 1901, noted the 'horrible looting of the friendly tribes'- in one raid the expeditionary force carried off at the least 2,000 camels, and reduced a whole tribe to destitution (Cobbold 1901).
31. Geshekte, Charles, *The Missionary Factor in Somali Dervish History, 1890-1910*
32. Alpers, E., *The Somali Community at Aden in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (1986), pp. 143-168).
33. *Xaarama-cune*: Literally 'a period where the profane was made as holy and legal' as no looting became the order of the day.

34. Jama Mohamed, *Construction of Colonial Hegemony in the Somaliland Protectorate, 1941-1960*. (Ph. D, thesis), P.80.
35. In such circumstances, camels are slaughtered with the aim of drawing water from its stomach. It was removed from the body and hung from a tree, and then containers are placed below to collect water dripping from small perforations made on the stomach. This process is known as *uusmiir* (literally, filtering the cud).
36. Jardine, D., (1923:59)

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