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# Women and the Somali pastoral tradition : Corporate Kinship and capitalist transformation in Northern Somalia

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**WOMEN AND THE SOMALI PASTORAL  
TRADITION: CORPORATE KINSHIP AND  
CAPITALIST TRANSFORMATION IN  
NORTHERN SOMALIA**

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This essay was first presented at the Walter Rodney Seminar of Boston University's African Studies Center on October 15, 1990. A "working paper" in the truest sense of the word, it has not yet fully incorporated the valuable critique offered by participants in the seminar and by colleagues such as Jay O'Brien, Ahmed I. Samatar, and Marcia Wright.

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WOMEN AND THE SOMALI PASTORAL TRADITION:  
CORPORATE KINSHIP AND CAPITALIST TRANSFORMATION  
IN NORTHERN SOMALIA

By Lidwien Kapteijns

This paper deals with the role of the ideology of corporate kinship in precapitalist pastoral Somali society and the demise of this ideology as a result of the social transformations wrought by commercial capital and the colonial state. Gaining an understanding of the history of gender relations is a central objective of this essay; it is pursued by analyzing gender inequality in the context of other relationships of inequality, such as those based on age and class. It is one of the insights of recent women's history.<sup>1</sup> that locating gender in the precapitalist social formation and analyzing the impact on gender of capitalist transformation are indispensable to an understanding of present-day gender relations. This paper focuses on the first two themes; the latter will be the burden of another effort.

One of the emotionally most charged exchanges of my field work<sup>2</sup> in Djibouti in 1989 was the one in which young, urban, working women angrily attacked me for studying women's roles in traditional society and culture (*hiddiyo dhaqan*). While most Somalis, men and women, find pride and reassurance in the wisdom and beauty of their oral literature, these women regard both it and those who glorify it as obstacles to their efforts to gain increased autonomy in their relations with men.<sup>3</sup> For them *hiddiyo dhaqan* constitutes an ideological bludgeon, wielded by both men and women to deprive them of the fruits of their considerable social and economic contributions to the day-to-day survival of their nuclear and extended families. In their view, this ideological weapon is rarely used to shield them from harsh political and socio-economic realities but is readily brought out to restrict their social freedom or economic choices. It is therefore the objective of this paper to contribute to the reconquest of the past by and for Somali women and men. Analyzing the continuities and discontinuities between the past and the present is neither a dispassionate nor an irrelevant exercise. Nor does it prescribe the choices Somali women and men will make as they reproduce and transform their society in the crucibles of their war-torn homeland or life in exile.

The processes which made Somali pastoral society dependent on the capitalist world economy (see below) date back to at least the eighteenth century, accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century, and had reached a point of no return by World War II. The model of precapitalist pastoral society presented here is largely based on data about

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the last three essays in Kathy and Pandell Glavanis, eds., *The Rural Middle East: Peasant Lives and Modes of Production* (London, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>I conducted oral history research in Djibouti from September to December 1989; I did preliminary fieldwork in Mogadishu and Djibouti in the summer of 1987. I am grateful to the American Philosophical Society, the Social Science Research Council, and Wellesley College for their financial support. This research would not have been possible without the assistance and friendship of Ismail Teni (secretary-general of the Ministry of Information and Culture), Mohammed Abdillahi Rirash, Omar Ma'allin, Ali Mousa Iye, Yasmin Aadan Muuse, and Mariam Omar Ali.

<sup>3</sup>In using "autonomy," I follow Karin Willemsse, "De Fur in Soedan: Autonomie en de Vrouwen in Jabel Marra," *De Derde Wereld*, 8, 4 (January 1990), 31. Autonomy thus does not mean a withdrawal and independence from social relationships, but the power not to have to experience the power of others in social relationships as compelling.

the early and middle colonial periods, an era which is still remembered in oral literature and life-stories and is documented in travel accounts and colonial records.

### **Precapitalist Pastoral Society: A Model**

Precapitalist pastoral society was largely subsistence oriented and self-sufficient.<sup>4</sup> Apart from labor, its most important factors of production were grazing land, water, and livestock (camels, sheep, goats, cows, and donkeys). As in many other state-less, small-scale societies, age and gender were the two major axes of inequality around which the relations of production were structured. These axes were central to the ideology of corporate kinship, which was the idiom in which social reality was largely expressed.

What this paper calls corporate kinship was an ideology, a system of ideas. As such, it fulfilled four crucial functions: it structured access to the factors of production (land, water, and livestock); the division of labor; the exercise of power and political authority; and the basic moral values that shaped gender and age-group relations. Marriage was the junction of these two major relations of inequality. It was the locus in which the biological and social reproduction of society was institutionalized, and the point at which, and means by which, conformity to gender and age-group relations was enforced.<sup>5</sup> Let us review each of these functions of corporate kinship in turn.

*Corporate Kinship and Access to the Means of Production.* Corporate kinship structured access to the means of production in the sense that rights of ownership and use of land, wells, camels, and other livestock were claimed by groups who defined themselves in terms of common descent (clans, sub-clans, major sections, minor sections and so forth). As in other nomadic societies, the ways in which Somali pastoralists activated kinship ties were flexible. The descent group that regarded its ownership of wells or camels as common property might be smaller than that claiming grazing rights and land. For the purpose of inheritance, a group would be defined much more narrowly than it would be for the purpose of finding refuge in a time of drought. Thus a variety of political and socio-economic circumstances caused a redefinition (still in terms of common descent and affinity) of the group.

*Corporate Kinship and the Division of Labor.* Corporate kinship, in particular age and gender, also structured the division of labor.<sup>6</sup> Each gender and each (informal) age group had its own specific labor tasks assigned to it. This allowed for some degree of specialization and the acquisition of considerable skills. While in practice there was some flexibility in the division of labor — for example, if no maiden was available, the flocks of sheep and goats might be herded by a young man, and camels might be loaded by men if no women were present — the categories of what was the appropriate labor of each age and gender group were clearly established. The smallest children, both male and female, took care of the newly born livestock, usually within view of the adults in the camp. As boys and girls approached their teens, it was social preference that girls herded the flocks and helped their mothers, while boys joined the camel camp, which often brought together the

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<sup>4</sup>For precapitalist pastoral society see also: I.M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. (Oxford, 1967); Lee V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600-1900* (Philadelphia, 1982), 38-83; and Abdi I. Samatar, *The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884-1986* (Madison, 1989), 22-29.

<sup>5</sup>This analysis derives crucial insights from Jane Fishburne Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford, 1988), 71-141.

<sup>6</sup>One excellent source is Abdi Gaileh Mirreh, *Die Sozialökonomischen Verhältnisse der Nomadischen Bevölkerung im Norden der Demokratischen Republik Somalia*. (Berlin, 1978). I have also drawn on my field work.

camels of a wider kin group than represented in the base-camp and which was, in the dry season, often far removed from both the base-camp and the wells. Taking the camels to their dry season pastures and the very heavy labor of driving them to the wells and watering them was the specialty of the unmarried young men, assisted, as need arose, by other men. Married men supervised the activities of their own nuclear family and the camp as a whole, the latter a task in which the most senior in age among them (*odaygii reerkii*) played the role of *primus inter pares*. Married men were responsible for the many tasks involved in the nomadic migrations of their camp: weather forecasting, divination, reconnoitering for good and safe pastures and wells, and so forth.

After her marriage, a woman continued to be responsible for the flocks of sheep and goats (her own and those of her husband), assisted by unmarried daughters or other female relatives. Childbirth and child care fell into her domain, as well as the preparation and processing of food, and the manufacturing and maintenance of both the collapsible house and all those household utensils that were woven; carving wooden objects was men's work. As they grew older, some men and women were increasingly relieved from physical labor, as grown-up children and their spouses took on much of the physical labor. However, wives always continued to serve their husbands. No man was ever too old to remarry, that is to say, to constitute a new productive unit, but a widow or divorcee past the age of child-bearing could only join the household or camp of her own or her ex-husband's kin. In spite of strong ideological imperatives to maintain them, old women were among the first victims of harsh economic circumstances and political turmoil and — as travel accounts suggest — the most likely to be abandoned in the wild.<sup>7</sup>

Successful male elders had considerable leisure from productive labor. In women's memories, they certainly did little else than "sit under a tree and order everyone around." These were the men, therefore, who were particularly well situated to devote themselves to the exercise of political authority.

*Corporate Kinship and the Exercise of Political Power*. The ideology of corporate kinship, including age-group and gender relations, also provided the rationales for the exercise of political authority. The idiom of discourse through which Somali pastoral society defined correct and incorrect social behavior, and the body of principles and procedures through which wrongs could be righted, was called the *xeer*. It was an informal code of customary law that set standards for social behavior — standards that varied in detail both from region to region and over time. The idioms of corporate kinship and that of the *xeer* were not separate from, or in competition with each other, nor was the latter simply complementary to the former. The *xeer* activated and deactivated the rights and duties entailed in the ideology of corporate kinship. For example, in response to and interacting with the prevailing power relations and depending on the specific political and socio-economic context, the *xeer* structured the composition of the group or groups to be involved as each issue came up, whether this issue concerned marriage, the maintenance of wells, or warfare. In the very flexible kinship ideology of the nomads, the *xeer* was the instrument through which the relevant rights and duties of kinship were activated or bestowed.<sup>8</sup> The *xeer* had a similar relationship to Islamic law; in some aspects (such as inheritance) the *xeer* would deactivate the *shari'a*.

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<sup>7</sup>For example, Eduard Grafen von Wickenburg, *Wanderungen in Ost-Afrika* (Vienna, 1899), 94, 132; A Donaldson Smith, *Through Unknown African Country: The First Expedition from Somaliland to Lake Lamu*. (New York, 1967; (1897)), 24; and C.J. Melliss, *Lion-Hunting in Somaliland*. (London, 1895), 11.

<sup>8</sup>Lewis, *Pastoral Democracy*, 161-95, speaks in this context in very similar terms of "clanship and contract."

Two principles of the *xeer* were crucial.<sup>9</sup> First, only men who owned camels, that is to say, who were autonomous producers, could exercise political authority. Someone who was fully dependent on others for his livelihood (for example, because he repeatedly squandered the means of production put at his disposal by his kin) could not be trusted to exercise sound and impartial judgement. In other words, in precapitalist society the community that upheld the *xeer* and defined rights and duties in the idiom of corporate kinship was a community of producers. Second, women, who could never head a productive unit, were excluded from the exercise of political authority. Women were certainly protected by the *xeer* and bound to uphold it, but they were almost always represented by men: fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, cousins and so forth. By way of very limited exception, in the area that was to become Djibouti women were autonomous legal persons only when testifying to their own rape.<sup>10</sup>

Corporate kinship as applied in the *xeer* offered the interpretive machinery both for the internal governance of a community and for its relations with other Somali communities. In dealing with communities of non-Somalis, the *xeer* did not normally apply. Such relations were believed to take place in uncharted social terrain, in which warfare was perhaps not inevitable but was certainly likely.

Some of the major areas in which men exercised political authority can be derived from the categories of the *xeer*. In the area of what was to become Djibouti these were:<sup>11</sup>

- (i) the law of bloodshed (*xeerka dhiigga*), dealing with cases in which someone was killed or wounded;
- (ii) the law of property (*xeerka dhaqaaqil*) dealing with offenses against property;
- (iii) family law (*xeerka dheerta*), dealing with inheritance, marriage, illicit intercourse, and so forth;
- (iv) land law (*xeerka dhulka*), which regulated matters such as access to wells and grazing;
- (v) the law of procedure (*xeerka dhaqanka*), regulating issues involving the *xeer* itself, such as the constitution of courts and other matters of procedure, and
- (vi) the law of external relations (*xeerka dhiblaha*), governing what was concerned as the problem area of relations with (Somali and sometimes non-Somali) outsiders.

All adult males of sound mind and some means could participate in the exercise of political authority. No decision was reached without the input of the parties involved (or their close male relatives), but special influence lay with those men who had a reputation for integrity and impartiality; knowledge of the law, religious prescriptions, and the history of inter-group relations; the oratorical skills to express and apply this knowledge, and to persuade the parties and public opinion; and enough influence and prestige to carry weight with the present and absent members of the group(s).

Age and married status were not explicit criteria for the exercise of political authority. However, only after men had established their own units of production (households) — through marriage — and only as they, by giving support to others, accumulated social capital in the form of prestige and influence, did they acquire the qualifications for leadership. Moreover, impartiality was an ideological imperative for the older, married men, and not for the passionate younger bloods. In other words, age as well as gender informed the processes by which political authority was acquired and exercised.

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<sup>9</sup>The following derives from the excellent new study of Ali Moussa Iye, *Le Verdict de l'Arbre.: Le Xeer Issa, Etude d'une democratie pastorale* (Djibouti, 1990). See also Omar Ma'allin interviewed for the BBC World Service (Somali Branch) by Zeynab Mohammed Jama in the July 1987; and Omar Ma'allin, interviewed by myself in Djibouti in September-December 1990.

<sup>10</sup>Ali Moussa Iye. *Le Verdict de l'Arbre*, 197.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 163-95; also Omar Ma'allin interviewed for the BBC World Service.

In relations between groups, the regulation of access to resources in a highly competitive context of scarcity and the regulation of the interactions between the members of each group were paramount. Competition for resources often led to warfare and raiding, but cooperation and accommodation were equally important for the survival of each group. Intermarriage was one important indicator and instrument of the creation of political harmony and mutual economic support. Exogamy, prescribed for groups of varying but considerable size, was the rule in precapitalist pastoral society.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of the group (in contrast to that of the individual men and women involved), the explicit aim of exogamy was to increase the likelihood of peaceful conflict resolution and resource sharing by extending the idiom of corporate kinship to some members of the other group (and through them to the group as a whole). By exchanging women with men of another marriage community and excluding them from formal inheritance in their communities of birth, a group maintained its boundaries and property yet created reciprocal cooperative links with another group to be activated if need arose. Even if women sometimes exercised real power in this context, the authority to choose marriage partners was in the hands of men (the groom and his father and the father of the bride); such a choice affected, as well as was affected by, the general political relations between the two groups. As a result of the rules of exogamy, each married woman was therefore the bearer of social capital, in that she represented both to her own community and that of her husband the rights and duties of reciprocal sharing. However, women were categorically excluded from political authority and economic autonomy. Whatever their power or economic productivity, the ideology of corporate kinship acknowledged their rights and duties only as mediated by men.

While corporate kinship and *xeer* acknowledged the potential equality of all adult males, with the exception of those considered low caste,<sup>13</sup> it sanctioned a division of labor in which older men tended to have more leisure from physical labor and more wealth than other men and underwrote a value system that ascribed to, and prescribed for elders those qualities that were required for the exercise of political authority.

One road to authority and power was therefore the long and slow one of trying to become a dispassionate, impartial, and prestigious elder. In precapitalist pastoral society wealth was stored in the form of camels. Compared to money in the bank, such a store of wealth was not only perishable but also required continuous labor for its maintenance and growth. Wealth was therefore continuously reinvested in people in the form of livestock. Thus a wealthy man reinvested his wealth in the community, through gifts of livestock or their usufruct, through material support to young men in need of bridewealth, by establishing new households himself, or by giving out his own daughters as wives. Thus he accumulated social capital for himself in the form of claims to the future labor and other services of those who accepted his gifts.

However, there was another road that led to the acquisition of wealth and power by individual men, a short-cut that created opportunities for quick individual advancement and could dramatically change the fortunes of the groups involved: this consisted of raiding and warfare. Young men who were not yet socially and economically established (often unmarried men) could, under the leadership of a charismatic and fearless entrepreneur/leader (the *abbaanduule*) decide to intensify their labor efforts and make an ambitious bid for quick wealth through raiding or warfare. Oral literature is full of references to the clash of interests between the defenders of the status quo, the peace party (often the dispassionate and established elders), and the ambitious movers and shakers, the war party, supported by

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<sup>12</sup>For exogamy, see for example I.M. Lewis, *Marriage and the Family in Northern Somaliland*. (Kampala, 1962), 5, 140, and 180; and Mirreh, *Die Sozialökonomischen Verhältnisse*, 146.

<sup>13</sup>The relations of inequality based on low caste urgently require further study. Are comparisons with the "artificial kinsmen" described for other precapitalist African societies relevant, or were so-called low-caste people rarely subject to individuals?

the angry young men.<sup>14</sup> The ideology of corporate kinship offered rationales for both positions and sanctioned and encouraged both strategies for gaining individual wealth and power, one a track for elders and the other a track for the age-group of young adult men. It was the task of the specialists and orators to bring these rationales to bear on the dangers and opportunities of each raid or each act of warfare. Thus age as well as gender structured the ways in which pastoral society sanctioned the individual accumulation of power and wealth.

*Corporate Kinship and Gender Ideology*. It is the contention of this paper that marriage, as the junction of the two crucial axes of inequality (age and gender) was one of the central institutions of precapitalist pastoral society and the locus in which the relations between gender and age groups were enforced. It was through marriage that men and women established new productive and reproductive units; the values that each gender brought to marriage bore the stamp of the ideology of corporate kinship.

For a girl, preparation for marriage began at birth. One of the lullabies her mother would sing to her was as follows:

Daughter, the wealth that comes by night [the bridewealth]  
 belongs to the girl who is quiet.  
 Saado, Saado hoowaa  
 in a place where there is no girl,  
 no camels will be milked  
 and no bridewealth received.  
 There is a marriageable young man in the house,  
 and men pass by our dwelling.  
 Lest the bridewealth camels must be returned,  
 don't weep so loudly!<sup>15</sup>

Oral literature is explicit about what constitutes a good little girl and a proper (*fariid*) wife, according to the ideology of corporate kinship.<sup>16</sup> A girl was to be quiet and obedient. As soon as she learned to walk and talk, she was to acquire the skills of women's work and to imitate, even in play, the child care, mat-weaving, butter-making, and cooking tasks of the women of her household and camp. From such a young age too a young girl learned about the central value of her sexual organs and the need to hide and protect them; the genital operation which she underwent before she was nine or ten years old drove these points home. By the time a girl reached puberty and became nubile, she should have mastered women's work skills. While guarding her virginity now became an even more central commandment, she was at this age also allowed and encouraged to play up her sexuality (in particular by participating in the folk dances, a formal occasion for courtship) and attract a husband. She was taught that men need sex more than women; she was therefore to downplay her own sexual needs and not to give them what they wanted until she had secured her niche as a wife in a new productive and reproductive unit: the household.

<sup>14</sup>See also Ali Jimale Ahmed, "Of Poets and Sheikhs: Somali Literature," in Kenneth W. Harrow, ed., *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (Portsmouth, 1991), 79-90; and the interview with Ahmed Aadan Cadcadleh, Djibouti, 6 October 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Khadiija Suuge, Djibouti, 2 October 1990, and Khadiija Muusa, interviewed on Djibouti television by M.A. Rirash (1988). The Somali text is as follows: Hooyo, gunnadi habeen guurtay gagaabsi gabadh baaleh. Saadooy, Saadooy hoowaa. Geeyaan baa guriga joogaa. Rag baa goonyaha marayaa. Garoon ay gabadhi joogin, geel lagu ma maalo, gabbaati la qaadan maayo. Yaanan geelaaga noqonin, hooyo, noo gaagaabi hadalka.

<sup>16</sup>This section is based on interviews and oral literature collected in Djibouti. These will be translated and published in another publication.



After marriage, obedience, sex and labor in the service of her husband's interests constituted marital duties. The ideology of corporate kinship taught a woman not to trust or show emotional dependence on her husband. While she should try to prevent divorce by being *raalliyo*, the perfectly obedient wife, she was to prepare as well as she could for the eventuality of divorce. A woman therefore was to invest as much as possible in her children, particularly her sons, for, according to the ideology of corporate kinship, only the latter could be counted on to give her economic and emotional support in the future, either within or outside the framework of her marriage. Women were therefore encouraged to forge strong emotional ties with their sons.

For a young woman marriage meant separation from her community of birth and an increase and intensification of her productive and reproductive labor in the service of her husband. However, marriage also represented for her an opportunity to accumulate social capital of her own, as she could now, within the limits set by her husband, invest in her own community of birth and, even more importantly, in her own children.

A boy's socialization was very different.<sup>17</sup> The lullabies sung for him said:

Bile, you who have increased [the number of] your patriliney  
 Son, your kin are setting out to fight tonight.  
 Son, they are fighting right now.  
 Son, won't you go and get some looted animals [yourself]?<sup>18</sup>  
 Son, may you become wise and accomplished  
 Son, may you grow a long beard  
 Son, may you grow up to be white-haired  
 Son, may you become wise and accomplished  
 Son, yesterday I saw [in my dream]  
     you, walking,  
     you, on the back of a bay horse,  
     you, wearing two wraps and a shirt,  
     you, son, travelling along the coast,  
     you, son, with whitened clothes,  
 you, son, with the elaborate hairdo [of a young man]  
 Son, the eye that will see you is lucky,  
 but, son, I am old; I will not reach that day.<sup>19</sup>

The boy was to be active, indefatigable, and fearless, a go-getter who must excel in men's work and be able to put up a good fight. He was expected to challenge the commands of his female relatives and to disdain doing their work. Yet he should be obedient to, perhaps even be afraid of his father and senior male kinsmen, and identify with their interests. As he reached puberty, a young man was to learn to be physically and emotionally tough, and to expect that hard physical labor was the share of his age-group.

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Interview with the women weaving mats in Djibouti's city center, next to the supermarket called *Semiramis*. Also (with some variation) the interview with Khadiija Suuge, Djibouti, 2 October 1990. The Somali text is as follows:

War Bilow, tolkay biirayow hoowaa. Hooyo, tolkaa caawa duulayaa. Hooyo, haddana wuu dirirayaa. Hooyo dannabaa soo doonan maysid.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Casha Maxmuud Liibaan, Djibouti, 10 September 1990. The Somali text is as follows:

Hooyo, gartow gabangaabsadow hoowaa. Hooyo, gadh weyn kaa soo baxay. Hooyo, cirrada gashaysayoo, hooyo, gartow gabangaabsadow.

Hooyo, xalay waxaan arkayay, hooyo, adoo xalxaleefinayeh, hooyo, adoo xamar faras ku joogaa, adoo laba go' iyo shaadhieh; hooyo, adigoo xeebaha gudbaayeh; hooyo, adigoo bifeeyey marada; hooyo, adigoo geeydeyay timaha. Hooyo, ishii aragtaa ayaan leh. Hooyo, gaboobay, ku gaadhi maayo.

*Ragga dhibaato waa loo talagalay*, Somali folk wisdom has it: "Men are expected to have to confront difficulties." Only at marriage, when a young man set up his own household, would this begin to change.

According to the ideology of corporate kinship, young men (in contrast to women) were allowed to acknowledge their sexual needs. However, only through increased labor efforts in the service of his father and other close male kin could a young man eventually hope to attain the physical comforts of marriage. Oral literature, in particular the watering songs (*shubaal*) and the nomadic blues (*guux*),<sup>20</sup> abound with examples of young men complaining about their lot in life: sexual frustration and hard physical labor. Since the bridewealth a young man must pay to his wife's relatives was higher than what he could accumulate on his own, his marrying depended on the good will and material support of his family and kin group. Thus during the stage of life in which a young man was performing the heaviest labor tasks, he had no stake in the status quo, and was therefore a potential threat to the existing order. This was also the time at which his obedience to and labor for the group were the condition *sine qua non* of his attaining the physical comforts and economic autonomy of marriage. Thus the institution of marriage was the instrument through which his conformity to the rules of corporate kinship was enforced.

At marriage a young man established his own unit of production and reproduction. At this point he could begin to accumulate wealth and power in his own right and, using the resources of his wife and children, set out on the road toward becoming a successful and powerful elder. A newly married man had therefore a clear stake in the status quo, for the rules of corporate kinship now secured his authority over his wife and children. Marriage was the high point of a man's investments in that particular household. From now on he was to try to accumulate more social capital by either investing in additional wives and households or in supporting other weaker or younger kin.

Newly married husbands and wives therefore confronted a serious conflict of interests. The wife tried to channel as many resources as possible towards herself, her children, and her community of birth, while the husband tried to channel resources outside the nuclear family. This helps explain why, according to the ideology of corporate kinship a married man too should avoid showing emotional dependence on his wife, lest he be deflected from pursuing his own interests and those of his kin group.

For a young woman there were few, if any, alternatives to marriage. Although her community of birth was indeed obliged to take care of her in any circumstances, if she left her present husband, there would be enormous pressure on her to enter a new marriage that was structurally similar to the one she left behind. By placing her hopes for security and power in her sons (rather than her daughters, who would come under the authority of another marriage community), a mother would begin to reproduce a gender education that was similar to that experienced by herself and her husband and conformed to the status quo.

Thus marriage was the institution through which society was biologically and socially reproduced and in which men's and woman's conformity to gender and age inequalities was enforced. Marriage was therefore a central institution of precapitalist pastoral society.

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<sup>20</sup>See for example Mohammed Abdillaahi Rirash, "Camel Herding and its Effects on Somali Literature," paper presented to the workshop on "The Case of African Drylands and Balanced Camel Production," Turndal, Sweden, October 20-22, 1987. My own collection contains several examples of *guux*.

## The Transformation of Somali Pastoralist Society

Before the middle of the nineteenth century Somali pastoral society was largely subsistence-oriented, although there existed relations with the commercial entrepôts and towns of the coast and the grain producing areas in the west and south. This orientation began to change with the British conquest of Aden in 1839 and the opening of the Suez canal in 1856, when Somali pastoralists began to export vast amounts of skins and livestock (sheep and goats) to Arabia (Aden). By 1937 British Somaliland, with an estimated population of 344,700, exported 1,301,419 skins and 104,633 sheep and goats.<sup>21</sup>

In the precolonial and early colonial periods, the pastoralists were generally able to exercise choice about their participation in the export trade (except perhaps at times of great drought); when prices were unfavorable, for example, they might withhold their animals from the market.<sup>22</sup> However, in the period leading up to, and following World War II, they gradually became permanently and inextricably involved in, and dependent on, market exchange for the reproduction of their society.

The alterations in the way in which pastoral society was linked to the outside world gradually began to first transform and then destroy that society.<sup>23</sup> In the decades following World War II, Somali pastoral society lost hegemony to the non-productive sectors of society: an expanded and increasingly Somali middle class of traders and the colonial (and post-colonial) state; both hegemonic interests were intimately involved with, and dependent on, the capitalist world economy. The wealth derived from the import-export trade allowed for the expansion of a Somali middle class which derived its livelihood from the return on capital invested in exchange activities. Its way of life, the commercial capitalist way of life, gradually gained hegemony, as it received the backing of the colonial state, and as wealth and power accumulated among its representatives at the expense of an increasingly intensely exploited pastoral sector.

The processes by which commercial capital, as represented by the urban merchants and backed by the state, transformed and destroyed pastoral society can be summarized as follows:<sup>24</sup>

1) Commercial capital began transforming pastoral society first of all through the creation of new needs for food, clothes, mildly addictive and socially prestigious luxury items such as tea, sugar, and qaat and guns.

2) Second, from the beginning capitalist exchange in Somali society was unequal exchange, for the goods the pastoralists received in exchange for their livestock were either goods for consumption or means of destruction, and rarely included instruments for producing wealth. Moreover, as oral testimony and travel accounts testify, the pastoralists were often simply cheated either through deceptive weighing or measuring practices or through the exploitation of their ignorance of the market value of imports and exports. Merchants also manipulated the pastoralists so as to prevent them from offering their

<sup>21</sup>*Annual Colonial Reports*, No. 1880 (Somaliland, 1937; London, 1938). For a graphic presentation of the growth of the colonial livestock and skin exports, see Samatar, *The State*, 50-51, 62.

<sup>22</sup>See for example *Annual Colonial Reports*, No. 508 (Somaliland, 1905-1906) and No. 649 (Somaliland, 1909-1910).

<sup>23</sup>For this transformation, also see Samatar, *The State*, 29-81; Ahmed I. Samatar, *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality* (London, 1988), 43-59; Charles L. Gesheker, "Entrepreneurs, Livestock, and Politics: British Somaliland, 1920-1950," in C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, ed., *Entreprises et Entrepreneurs en Afrique: XIXe et XXe Siècle*. (Paris, 1983), 265-83; Jeremy Swift, "The Development of Livestock Trading in a Pastoral Economy: The Somali Case," in *Pastoral Production and Society: Proceedings of the international meeting on nomadic pastoralism*, Paris, 1-3 December 1976 (London, 1977), 447-65; and Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "Class Formation and Gender in Precolonial Somali Society: A Research Agenda," in *Northeast African Studies* (1989), 19-38.

<sup>24</sup>For details and references, see Kapteijns and Spaulding, "Class Formation and Gender."

products in a free and competitive market. The manipulation of kinship ties was a way to achieve this; Zeila merchants in Burton's days (1855) sent their 'Lisa wives into the interior to buy livestock from their kinsmen. At that time pastoralists who came to Zeila were obliged to dispose of their goods and buy imports through one broker, who did business on their behalf but on his initiative, and whose services they could not discontinue, on penalty of the city's governor. By providing pastoralists with import goods on credit — especially hard to resist in times of drought — merchants also made pastoralists dependent on them and created liens on their future production.<sup>25</sup> At the same time the merchants built protective walls around their rights and property by adopting an alternative legal system of Islamic and colonial courts, in which debtors could be sued and forced to pay up. Thus pastoral producers gradually lost the initiative to the merchant and state class.

3) As pastoral producers became increasingly tied into market exchange, commercial capital began to impinge on the productive processes of pastoral society. First, while increased livestock production (particularly sheep and goats) and population growth taxed the natural resources of pastoral society to their limits, only a fraction of profits was reinvested in pastoral society; as a result these natural resources were inexorably and often irreversibly impoverished.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, those few investments that the commercial capitalist sector did make benefited only individuals with capital and increased pressure on the resources of traditional producers. The latter now had to compete with town-based capitalists who initiated the commoditization of part of the factors of production. The latter began to build permanent water-holes or wells and enclosed them for private use. They hired labor for wages, and they invested in trucks to bring water to livestock grazed on distant dry-season pasture.<sup>27</sup> As exports soared and the process of livestock marketing became increasingly complex, moreover, the roles and choices of the traditional producers in the marketing process were reduced.<sup>28</sup>

The state also interfered with the productive base and processes of pastoral society. The colonial state created townships, it created reserved areas closed to grazing, it gave private entrepreneurs concessions and licenses for using pastoral land, it interfered in the inter-group relations of the pastoralists, and, last but not least, divided pastoral lands up between four state powers: Italy, Britain, France, and Ethiopia. If production in the pastoral sector continued to a large extent without large inputs of capital, commercial capital and colonial state authority seriously interfered with and weakened the precapitalist pastoral way of life.

4) The state and commercial capital also affected the exercise of power and political authority in pastoral society. As new forms of wealth and power accumulated in the commercial and state sectors and penetrated the pastoral sector, that sector lost control over access to the factors of pastoral production and over those of its members who had a stake in the urban economy and the state. The latter two, even when they tried to avoid active political interference in pastoral inter-group relations, were nevertheless parties to each rural dispute, as pastoralists in dealing with each other jockeyed for their support. The state made raiding — one important strategy for the accumulation of individual and group power

<sup>25</sup>For credit practices leading to dependence, see *Ibid.*; also C.J. Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn Tribe of Somalies, Inhabiting the District Forming the North-East Point of Africa," *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, VII (May 1844-December 1846), 121. Cruttenden reports that the Banyan traders of this coast, in trading dates for gum, had a return of 15 dollars for every one and a quarter dollar invested. He also states: "As the season draws on, the Bedouin finds that his gums are finished, and he is fain to purchase food to last him through the hot weather before the setting in of the grass, on credit; and thus a running account is carried on from year to year, which of course the wary creditor takes care never to settle." See also *Annual Colonial Reports* No. 649 (Somaliland, 1909-1910).

<sup>26</sup>Samatar, *The State*, 66; Mirreh, *Die Sozialökonomischen Verhältnisse*, 20-24.

<sup>27</sup>Mirreh, *Die Sozialökonomischen Verhältnisse*, 75-77; Samatar, *The State*, 63-66.

<sup>28</sup>Abdi Samatar, L. Salisbury, and J. Bascom, "The Political Economy of Livestock Marketing in Northern Somalia," *African Economic History*, 17 (1988), 81-98.

— increasingly unattractive, so that drawing in the state and profiting from access to the urban market became crucial objectives in inter-group politics. Those individuals who had their economic base in the towns found protection against the claims of traditional society in the legal institutions and the military resources of the state. Even when the colonial state resorted to collective punishment for the political offenses of pastoralists against its own authority, it could not put together with one hand in the pastoral sector what it had taken apart with the other hand by supporting the capitalist sector. Every "traditional" pastoral leader the state recognized or supported became *ipso facto* a "new" man, whose power and authority (or lack of such) derived from state support. It can be argued that what the British in the first decade of the twentieth century referred to as the inveterate and in-born Somali propensities to raiding and warfare represented in reality a fierce fight among different groups about who was to benefit from state power.<sup>29</sup>

5) The social relations of pastoral society were also transformed as a result of the impact of commercial capital and state power. Social relations in the towns were very different from those of pastoral society. In the towns livestock, labor, and bridewealth were commoditized, and accumulated wealth was stored, as money, in bank accounts, often in another country. As a result, an individual's group (or groups) as defined by corporate kinship ideology became less relevant to maintaining and increasing capital. The fact that labor was obtained through the payment of wages, and not by calling on the reciprocal rights and duties vested in kinship, set the townsman further apart from his pastoralist kin. By embracing Islamic law rather than the *xeer*, a member of the middle class could moreover bequeath his assets to his nuclear family to the exclusion of his lateral male relatives, and at their expense.

When such a person ignored the rules of exogamy, his marriages could help consolidate his capital within a small group rather than create reciprocal rights and duties with another group. Since wives could now be paid for in money, the acquisition of which was not dependent on the approval or assistance of close kin, relations with the latter became optional and were no longer an economic necessity. As fewer and fewer people had a stake in a townsman's marriages, urban marriage became more and more a relationship between two individuals and their nuclear families; as a result, a wife was no longer as valuable a repository of social capital and as significant a bearer of reciprocal rights and duties as she had been in pastoral society. Apart from their reproductive labor, which continued to be crucial in capitalist society, women's most important contributions lay in their roles as consumers of middle class wealth and in their creation and maintenance of a distinct middle class lifestyle. Urban women embroidered, wove, sewed, and in many other ways beautified their houses. They spared neither time nor wealth in beautifying themselves — for they were consumers as well as consumer goods — and mastered the skills of a fine urban cuisine. The parallels with processes of housewifization described for the bourgeoisies of other parts of the world are evident.<sup>30</sup>

This townsman's way of life did not totally replace social relations in pastoral society; it did, however, have a great impact on them. First of all, individual pastoralists began to opt out of pastoral society. These included those young men whose labor had been crucial to the various units of production, particularly those ambitious and dynamic individuals who in the past might have sought power through raiding and warfare; the demise of the latter, one important strategy by which groups could reconstitute their productive base after a devastating drought, had a permanent impact on pastoral society. With the strategies for the accumulation of individual and group power dramatically

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<sup>29</sup>See Public Records Office, Colonial Office files, Volumes 1-27, in particular those files dealing with the British withdrawal to the coast. The same suggestion is made by Charles Lee Geshekter, "British Imperialism in the Horn of Africa and the Somali Response, 1884-1899" (Ph.D. dissertation (History), University of California, Los Angeles, 1972), 174

<sup>30</sup>For housewifization, see Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. (London, 1987), 100-103.

changed, age became an increasingly less important criterion for stratification and basis of inequality than before. It was replaced by wealth and by the ability to draw on the resources of town and state; in other words, age was replaced by class affiliation. As young men now could obtain wealth outside their kin group, marriage in pastoral society no longer offered the same opportunities for asserting group authority over the individual and for enforcing conformity to the existing age-group and gender relations. This created enough confusion and conflict that British Somaliland in 1928 introduced a law that set limits to the free market competition for brides. According to the "Natives' Betrothal and Marriage Ordinance," young men should respect "tribal custom," refrain from betrothing or marrying a girl who already was betrothed, and respect kin group authority over divorced women and widows. Only if the woman in question went to the British magistrate of her district and declared her earlier betrothal to be void or the authority exercised by her kin undesired, could "tribal custom" be ignored.<sup>31</sup> In creating a legal loophole that allowed individuals (women and men manipulating women) to bypass customary law (*xeer*), the state cautiously supported the urban trend towards individual bourgeois marriage.

The success of the capitalist sector of society and the growing dependence and decreasing flexibility of the pastoral economy set into motion the migration of large numbers of impoverished people. Some may have chosen the uncertainties of life in town over the social burdens of the existing social relations, while others — as a result of drought, military defeat, or personal disaster — had fallen out the bottom of a pastoral economy that had lost hegemony to the towns. The new poor, or *masaakiin*, as they were called in Berbera, were often, but certainly not exclusively, women and children; they came to form the new urban underclass that would come to constitute an ever-growing proportion of the population in the decades to come.

Lower-class urban women engaged in petty commodity production (such as selling *laxoox* (a kind of pancake) to individuals and small restaurants) and in exchange, hired out their labor (to sort bananas, coffee, or gum, for example), or lived on the charity of fellow Muslims, kinsfolk, and the state. In spite of its apparent support of women's individual decisions with regard to betrothal and marriage, the colonial state never placed women's interests high on the colonial agenda. Partly, it did not want to rock the boat and allow social change to threaten law and order. Partly, it was used to thinking of women and children as the wards of men. The colonial state did not open niches for women in the state bureaucracy; in the 1930s, almost fifty years after the establishment of the Protectorate in northern Somalia, there was only one woman listed on the government's payroll published in the Blue Books — a female prison police officer of the lowest rank (that of constable or fourth rank warder), to be called a wardress.<sup>32</sup> Lower-class women were not allowed to be a threat to the social order. If, in a township, a District Court felt that there was "a reasonable possibility" that a young woman who seemed less than twenty-five years old might become a prostitute, she was to be handed over to her kin and, if she repeated her offense, to be imprisoned and fined.<sup>33</sup> Thus the state once again dealt with social change through political action and suppression.

Thus class became a central basis for inequality in the decades following World War II. It is true that the droughts and the contracting export markets of the mid-1970s were hard blows to the pastoral economy, but pastoral society had already been seriously

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<sup>31</sup>Somaliland Protectorate, *The Laws of the Somaliland Protectorate, Containing the Ordinances of Somaliland in force on the 30th Day of June 1930*, prepared by Major A.S. Lawrance (London, 1931), 614-15.

<sup>32</sup>Somaliland Protectorate, *Blue Book for 1934* (Hargeisa, 1935). See also, Somaliland Protectorate, *Somaliland Protectorate: Notices, Proclamations, Regulations and Rules in Force on the 30th Day of June 1930*, prepared by Major A.S. Lawrance (London, 1931), II, 13.

<sup>33</sup>Somaliland Protectorate, *The Laws of the Somaliland Protectorate, Containing the Ordinances, Orders in Council and Orders of the Secretary of State in Force on the 1st Day of January, 1950*, prepared by Sir Henry Webb in 3 volumes (London, 1950; revised edition), III, 671.

weakened as a result of the processes outlined above. While there was still a pastoral sector, pastoral society was dying. From this point on, the fates of all Somalis, pastoralist and townsman, were bound together as they interacted with the wider world.

## Postscript

Corporate kinship was an ideology which, using the idiom of kinship, governed a community of largely subsistence-oriented and self-sufficient producers, in which age and gender were the major axes of inequality and in which marriage was the institution in which these inequalities were reproduced. Since the middle of the nineteenth century a middle class of traders and state servants had gradually gained hegemony over and transformed and weakened the economic, political, and social bases of that community. As a result the system of ideas that I called corporate kinship has ceased to be; it has gone with the community that structured and interpreted social reality in its idiom.<sup>34</sup>

When, at independence, the middle class whose rise to prominence has been analyzed above inherited the state, they invented the ideology of clannism, for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this paper but center on consolidating their personal power and smoothing over their class base in their dealings with impoverished followers. Corporate kinship was the ideology of a community of producers in which reciprocity (in the context of gender and age-group inequalities) was a central concept. Clannism is the ideology of a community of parasites situated at the periphery of the capitalist economy. Its central concepts are debt and dependence in a context of class inequality. In the new ideology names may date back to precolonial times, but the social, economic, and political realities that it interprets, justifies, and manipulates do not. In the ideology of clannism, groups are still defined in terms of common descent. However, not only do these groups represent completely new political, social, and economic realities, they also lack the flexibility and inclusiveness of the pastoral tradition. As a consequence the ideology of clannism does not recognize and threatens the group which calls itself Somali. A fuller study of its many functions in today's Somali society will be the burden of another effort.<sup>35</sup>

While age has become less significant, gender continues to be a major determinant of inequality in Somali society, and it interacts with class and clannism in shaping the lives of Somali women. The ideology of corporate kinship, the *hiddiyo dhaqan* that this paper has tried to analyze, is not the enemy of Somali women; present-day ideological appeals to it disguise a new sexism shaped by underdevelopment, class differentiation, and the ideology called clannism. Whether the latter three can be eliminated while sexism is maintained is a question that Somali men and women must seriously address. My demonstration that the inequality of women was a central and not a coincidental feature of precapitalist society may suggest that sexism, while not the only bane of the present, is an integral part of the ideologies that help perpetuate the crucible of Somali society.

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<sup>34</sup>Abdi Samatar has in this context spoken of "the death of the Somali [pastoral] tradition." Compare Samatar, *The State*, 80-81.

<sup>35</sup>This research, now in progress, is to result in a book entitled "The Somali Crucible: The Articulation of Class, Clan and Gender," by Lidwien Kapteijns, Abdi Samatar, and Ahmed I. Samatar.