

The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea, c.1946–48

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ABSTRACT *From 1946 to 1948 the Somali Youth Club (SYC) grew from a small Mogadishu based urban self-help group into a burgeoning nationalist organisation calling for the unification of all the Somali-speaking lands into Greater Somalia, changing its name to the 'Somali Youth League' (SYL) in the process. The reason for this rapid expansion and radicalisation was a conjuncture of several factors, but it is most immediately attributable to the international deliberations over the future of the Italian East African Empire. In 1946 the international community began to address the future of the Italian Empire, and the British raised the possibility of creating a Greater Somalia administration (under British trusteeship) as a basis for future independence. The SYC, which had until then concentrated on a more limited and arguably more achievable political programme for the furtherance of Somali interests in ex-Italian Somalia, became mesmerised by the idea of Greater Somalia. Greater Somalia became a popular rallying call for the expanding nationalist project. However, as this article argues, although the Greater Somalia project galvanised the SYC into a mass nationalist organisation (the SYL), the expansion of its activities into the greater Somalia hinterland, such as the Ethiopian Ogaden region, brought different priorities and perspectives to project. The differing histories of clans and regions dissipated the cohesion, discipline and aims of the SYL at a crucial historical juncture. Ultimately the SYL was unable to create a Greater Somalia, nor prevent the repartition of the Somalilands and the return of former colonial and imperial powers.*

From 1946 to 1948 the Somali Youth Club (SYC) grew from a small Mogadishu based urban self-help organisation into a burgeoning nationalist organisation calling for the unification of all the Somali-speaking lands into Greater Somalia, changing its name to the 'Somali Youth League' (SYL) in the process. The reason for the rapid expansion and radicalisation of the SYC/L was a conjuncture of several factors, but it is most immediately attributable to the international deliberations over the future of the Italian East African Empire. In 1946 the international community began to address the future of the Italian Empire, and the British raised the possibility of creating a Greater Somalia administration (under British trusteeship) as a basis for future independence. The SYC, which hitherto had concentrated on a more limited and arguably more achievable political programme for the furtherance of Somali interests in ex-Italian Somalia, became mesmerised by the idea of Greater Somalia. Once the idea of Greater Somalia gained public currency it became a popular rallying call for the expanding nationalist project.

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However, as this article argues, although the Greater Somalia project galvanised the SYC into a mass nationalist organisation (the SYL), the expansion of its activities into the greater Somalia hinterland, such as the Ethiopian Ogaden region, brought different priorities and perspectives to the project. The differing histories of clans and regions included in the Greater Somalia project dissipated the cohesion, discipline and aims of the SYL at a crucial historical juncture. Ultimately the SYL was unable to create a Greater Somalia, nor prevent the repartition of the Somali-lands and the return of former colonial and imperial powers.

Territorial Divisions in the Somali-lands

The territorial divisions of the Somali inhabited lands of Northeast Africa had been a problem from the outset of colonial administration in the Horn of Africa. In the late nineteenth century, the growing Ethiopian Empire and the Ethiopian defeat of the Italian colonial army at Adwa in 1896 made Ethiopia a direct threat to colonial possessions and spheres of influence in the region. Faced with an armed and aggressive African state, European colonial powers in the Somali-lands were forced to curtail their territorial claims for the sake of greater imperial stratagems.¹ Colonial administrators in British Somaliland saw the territorial concession to Ethiopia as a mistake and the subsequent boundary agreement as unworkable, storing up problems for the future. The boundary with Ethiopia became an obsession upon which the many woes of an economically poor and administratively volatile colony were blamed. A similar case applied to Italian Somalia.² However to the Ethiopians, for whom their independence and sovereign territory became an article of faith, any adjustment to colonial boundaries seemed like a concession to colonial aggrandisement. Soon, however, all the Somali-lands became engulfed in the twenty-year 'Dervish' religious revolt led by Sayyid Maxamad Cabdille Xasan, forcing Ethiopia, Britain and Italy to cooperate, and the differences over the boundaries faded from view.

In the 1920s and 1930s, as 'peaceful' administration returned to the borderland areas between the colonial Somali-lands and the Ethiopian Empire, the unresolved boundary issues came back into view. Throughout the inter-war period there were continual skirmishes on the boundaries between the Somali-lands, not only between the colonial administrations and Ethiopia, but also between the colonial administrations themselves.³ However it was on the boundary with Italian Somalia at the wells of Wal Wal that the issue became altogether more serious. A clash between Italian and Ethiopian border patrols well inside the Ethiopian boundary in the Ogaden region provided the pretext for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Despite the international outcry that the Italian annexation of Ethiopia occasioned, the absorption of the Ethiopian Empire into the Italian empire was quickly recognised by the British whose colonial territories shared the longest boundary with Ethiopia. After the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935–36, the Italian Empire incorporated Eritrea, Ethiopia and Italian Somalia into one regional bloc of semi-autonomous governorships and rationalised some of the old international boundaries. One of the most significant adjustments the Italian Empire made was the creation of a much larger Somali administration by excising the Ogaden region from the Ethiopian governorships and combining it with the coastal colony of Italian Somaliland, creating a 'greater' Italian Somalia.

Britain's initial sympathy and cooperation with the enlarged Italian Empire ended abruptly with the Italian entry into the Second World War, on the 'wrong' side. In 1940, as France capitulated and Italy joined the Axis powers, suddenly the Italian Empire changed from a benign modern administration (the very opposite, it was thought, of the ex-Ethiopian Empire), to a belligerent power in the midst of the British Empire in Africa. After initially successful Italian offensives, including the brief invasion and occupation of the British Somaliland Protectorate, British and Commonwealth forces aided by Ethiopian exiles and internal 'patriot' resistance defeated the Italian forces in East Africa. The collapse of the Italian East African Empire came surprisingly quickly, and the upshot of this rapid victory was the need for a British Military Administration (BMA hereafter) over the Empire's vast area, now designated as Occupied Enemy Territory (since the Italian conquest had been legally recognised by the British in 1938). The occupation of this territory, justified as a military necessity, then became entwined with larger and older imperial questions in northeast Africa, such as frontier rectification and rationalisation.⁴ However, the British maintained territorial adjustments made by the Italians for the duration of the war, and left decisions over the future of the Italian Empire until the projected post-war peace conferences.

For the first year after the Italian defeat in 1941, the former Ethiopian Empire was administered as Occupied Enemy Territory since it was viewed as part of the Italian Empire. However the designation of Ethiopia as Occupied Enemy Territory was complicated by the presence of the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Sellasie, who had returned with the British Army. A formal political relationship between the BMA and the Emperor needed to be established and the result was the 1942 Anglo-Ethiopian agreement,⁵ which handed back a certain amount of administrative control to the Emperor over much of the former Ethiopian Empire, although the Emperor's sovereign power was severely limited. Moreover, under the 1942 agreement (reluctantly agreed to by the Emperor), the BMA retained complete control over the railway line to Addis Ababa, the eastern railway town of Dire Dawa, and the eastern borderlands with French, Italian and British Somali-lands. The north-eastern part of this territory, including the borderlands with British Somaliland, known as the Hawd, and the main market town of Jigjiga (the traditional centre for Ethiopian government of their Somali borderlands), was known as the Reserved Areas (RA hereafter) and had its own small BMA administration. The south-eastern borderlands, the vast plains known as the Ogaden, that the Italians had excised from Ethiopia added to Italian Somalia, continued to be administered from Mogadishu (the capital of Italian Somalia) under a larger separate BMA. It is important to note here that although the British did not deny Ethiopian sovereignty over the RA and the Ogaden, they did not they clearly acknowledge it either. Moreover, as long as significant parts of Ethiopian territory remained under BMA, the British had a certain amount of leverage over the restored Ethiopian government, and retained the possibility of the territorial adjustments that the surrounding British colonies might desire. Plans and arguments for Greater Somalia and territorial adjustments in Northeast Africa constantly figure in the archival record for this period, demonstrating that in the minds of the British the future of the RA and the Ogaden was implicitly bound up with the fate of the ex-Italian Somaliland, to be decided at the end of the war.⁶

Despite the restoration of the Emperor Haile Sellasie to his throne, from 1941 to 1948 a significant proportion of the pre-1936 Ethiopian Empire was directly ruled by Britain as part of a de facto Greater Somalia administration. The restoration Ethiopian government,

in nationalistic mood, balked at the continuing curtailment of its sovereignty, but given the circumstances it could do little. Over the next few years, as the Ethiopian government gained strength and coherence, gradually assuming more territorial sovereignty, the Emperor's officials began to press for the return of the eastern fringes of its Empire still under the BMA. During 1946 the BMA withdrew from Dire Dawa and the railway, but continued to administer a reduced Reserved Area of the Jigjiga district and the Hawd borderlands with British Somaliland. The Ogaden area continued to be ruled under the BMA of Italian Somalia. However, within the stipulations of a further Anglo-Ethiopian agreement of 1944, the Ethiopian government could give the BMA notice to quit Ethiopian territory (i.e. the RA and the Ogaden) within three months. The Ethiopian government did not do so for another two years, but meanwhile Somali nationalist organisations had begun to grow in ex-Italian Somalia, and their influence spread into the Somali inhabited areas of the Ethiopian Empire.⁷

The Somali Youth Club

The first Somali clubs and professional organisations had begun before the war in British and Italian Somali-lands but these were fairly small-scale organisations.⁸ However the social and economic experience of the expanded Italian empire, world war and the promise of a new post-war order under BMA had an encouraging affect on Somali political activity, and the most concrete result was the first recognisably Somali 'nationalist' organisation, the Somali Youth Club. Founded in Mogadishu on 15 May 1943, the club originally acted as an urban self-help organisation mostly restricted to Mogadishu.⁹ It was established against a background of wartime uncertainties, especially high food prices in urban markets dominated by non-Somali Arabs and Indian traders, and a rapidly increased population due to large numbers of demobilised soldiery.¹⁰ Club membership was restricted to Somalis between the ages of 18 and 32, drawn from what a British report described as the newly emerged 'middle class' of Somali, especially private traders and young men from monthly-salaried groups such as government clerks, servants of Europeans, medical dressers, and members of the Somalia *Gendarmerie*. By 1947 approximately 75 per cent of the Somalia *Gendarmerie* stationed in Mogadishu were members of the club.¹¹

By the mid-1940s, from its base in Mogadishu, the SYC began to spread to other urban centres in former Italian Somalia. As the club expanded in range and membership, its initial social welfare role developed into a more ambitious programme for the unification and progress of the Somali people. The club wished to confront and break down the pervasive clan system of Somali society and end divisive clan disputes, and promoted education and social improvement programmes.¹² Although it appears that the club was an indigenous initiative, it was quickly recognised as a useful auxiliary organisation by the young and inexperienced BMA in ex-Italian Somalia, so hastily established after the unexpectedly rapid collapse of the Italian colonial armies in 1941.¹³ There developed a very close relationship between the BMA and the SYC in the early years. Club members appeared to be Anglophiles, and English classes given by teachers from the government schools were an important feature of club life. The British clearly regarded the club favourably; their only concern was an oath taken which bound the members not to reveal clan affiliation, but to admit only to being Somali, a practice that went against the British ideal of indirect rule through clan.¹⁴

In early 1946 the club's expanding horizons widened still further in response to the discussions about the future of the ex-Italian colonies by the Peace Conference powers. It was during these discussions that Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of the British post-war Labour government, proposed the idea of a Greater Somalia, presented as a way of improving the well-being of a nation of poor camel keepers, but clearly also an attempt at the consolidation of British interests in East Africa.¹⁵ The idea of Greater Somalia had been bouncing back and forth in colonial administrative circles for some time, appealing to both imperial strategists, and to a younger idealistic generation of colonial officers.¹⁶ The Greater Somalia idea became as much an obsession among British military and colonial administrators, as it was for the young Somali intellectuals who had come together in the SYC.¹⁷

However Bevin's bold proposal of a Greater Somalia – the unification of all the Somali territories under one administration, preferably British, under United Nations Trusteeship – was immediately opposed by the USA, USSR and France.¹⁸ Furthermore, the implicit inclusion of the Ethiopian Somali-lands into Greater Somalia was particularly contentious, not least because the 1942 and 1944 British agreements with Ethiopia explicitly recognised Ethiopia's sovereignty over the Ogaden and RA. Moreover, when a Four Power Commission was appointed in April 1946 to decide the future of the ex-Italian colonies, its deliberations did not include the Greater Somalia idea, but only the future of ex-Italian Somaliland. Yet despite the overwhelming odds immediately heaped against the Greater Somalia idea, the SYC took up the cause with great vigour, and the British did little to dispel the hope of its attainment.¹⁹ Indeed veteran nationalists remember how British officers of the BMA encouraged Somalis to organise themselves in disciplined peaceful political organisation to achieve Greater Somalia.²⁰ In any case the international debate over the future of the Somali-lands had already been picked up by Somalis who were then, as now, avid consumers of news and current events. The news appeared to prompt a reorganisation of the SYC and the organisation changed its name to the Somali Youth League (SYL).²¹

The club had already expanded significantly by late 1946, as local club branches had sprung up along the new towns found along the Italian roads, and its membership multiplied through the rhizome-like networks of Somali clans. Club branches were found throughout ex-Italian Somalia but also in the Ogaden plains and the Reserved Area of Jigjiga, Ethiopian territory still under BMA. The rapid expansion throughout Italian Somalia and into the Ogaden and RA added thousands of new members to the SYC/L. Local branch meetings were extremely popular, and the speeches poetic songs are still remembered today. The message was clear and exciting – 'Somalis wake up, and join hands, always help the weak one among you!' – and young men sold their father's camels to pay the subscription fees.²² Indeed, although the SYC/L had its origins in urban Mogadishu, the influence of the increasing membership in the hinterland (such as the Ogaden region) on the direction and organisation of the party must have been significant. By 1947 British intelligence reports suggest that the sudden expansion and radicalisation of the SYL had made it difficult for the leadership in Mogadishu to maintain a coherent agenda.²³

One example of regional opinion helping to influence the central committee's policy in Mogadishu was the League's attitude towards Ethiopia. In August 1946 the President of the SYC, Abdulqadir Saqawa Din, had gone to Addis Ababa for an interview with Emperor Haile Sellasie. An interview was granted and the Emperor professed himself in sympathy

with the club and offered them any assistance in his power, adding airily that the flag of Ethiopia was the banner of all Africans.²⁴ Later in the same year a petition was presented to the Chief Military Administrator in Mogadishu requesting union with Ethiopia in a gesture of anti-colonial solidarity.²⁵ However, a veteran nationalist and an original member of the Jigjiga branch of the SYC remembered that the local nationalists in the RA were horrified at the Mogadishu Committee's petition to join with Ethiopia and wrote letters to Mogadishu exclaiming: 'the Ethiopians are colonisers, they are stronger than us, they are barbarous and arrogant, they will consume you, they want to cheat you, to take the land – never allow them [to do this]'.²⁶ A British official in Jigjiga at the time noted that during a 'tea party' in Jigjiga to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the SYC and its transformation into the League in May 1947, a speech made it clear that local League members were against a return to Ethiopian rule. However, 'a SYL inspector' visiting from the headquarters in Mogadishu hastily assured the British that nothing would be done to embarrass the British administration as caretakers for the Ethiopian government.²⁷ Yet in June of the same year a deputation of local SYL supporters went to the British Senior Civil Affairs Officer in Jigjiga and reminded him that the colonial European powers that had administered the neighbouring territories had done so by treaty, but that the Ethiopians occupied the RA and Ogaden by force and against the will of the tribesmen. The delegation also claimed that the Ethiopian government had never made any real attempt to administer the territory and was not at present capable of doing so.²⁸

The Local Politics of Nationalism: The Somali Youth League and Ethiopian Somalis

The historical experiences of Somalis from Mogadishu and 'Ethiopian' Somalis from the RA and Ogaden brought very different perspectives to the SYL, a division in time and space that the nationalist movement could never quite overcome. It is evident, for example, that the particular history of the town of Jigjiga and its environs, along with the Ogaden, could not be easily subsumed into the greater good of pan-Somali nationalism. Jigjiga was one of the first Ethiopian garrisons pushed out into the Somali lowlands in the late nineteenth century. The Jigjiga garrison had collected tribute in livestock from the large Somali herds of the area, and also kept a check on British claims to the rich prairies that spread eastward from the town towards the British Protectorate. It was a typical frontier town, part-garrison, part-market, with a mixed population of Ethiopians, Arabs, Indians, and by the 1930s increasing numbers of 'settled' Somalis. It had been part of Hararghe, the provincial base of *Ras* Tafari Makonnen (the pre-coronation name of Emperor Haile Sellasie) before the war, and had been used as a testing ground for reformed administration. As modern administrative arrangements were implemented in Ethiopia during the 1920s and 1930s, Jigjiga had become an important political centre for Ethiopian Somalis, acting, as it still does, as the unofficial capital of the Ogaden region. Situated by a collection of wells on the edge of a seasonally well-watered and fertile plain, it had also become a significant centre for agriculture as the formally transhumant pastoral Somali clans of the region slowly became sedentary tax-paying farmers. Agriculture and administration was complemented by Jigjiga's role as a nexus of trade routes. Moreover, situated so close to the boundary with the British Somaliland Protectorate, and as the last major town before Italian Somaliland, Jigjiga had developed political and economic relationships with Somalis outside Ethiopian territory. As a town and district it looked towards both Ethiopia and the Somali-lands.

The circumstances of the Italian occupation and the continued BMA made the ambivalent identity of Jigjiga even more pronounced. British administrators noted in the mid-1940s that a middle class of Somalis had emerged in Jigjiga, which had, in one way or another, benefited from the Italian occupation, the war and the continuing British occupation. An increasing number of Somalis were urban based and dependent on wage labour, and were employed as policemen, soldiers, drivers, clerks and servants. There was also significant increase in the number of Somalis involved in trade. The wartime commodity boom and price rises in foodstuffs brought together traders and wage earners, who found that they had common interest against the traditional dominance of trade by Arabs and Indians but also, and most importantly, against the established British Somali traders of the Isxaaq clan family from the British Protectorate. Another important element of post-war Jigjiga society was the emergence of 'agricultural' clans. The 1940s had brought bumper harvests, accompanied by high wartime grain prices, from which great profits could be made in the British administered RA, but free of the Ethiopian taxation of the pre-occupation days.²⁹

The prospects of a return to Ethiopian rule helped coalesce the interests of the new urban wage-earning sector with the less radical agricultural Somali clans who feared claims by former Ethiopian landlords and backdated taxation. These two interest groups found a common home in the SYC/L. However both the urban and rural Somali clans of the RA and Ogaden ultimately belonged to the Darood clan family; Darood clans were heavily represented in the SYC/L. In the context of Jigjiga, the RA and Ogaden the SYC/L was not just a Somali nationalist organisation; it was also an expression by townsmen, traders and farmers of Darood solidarity. The SYC/L enabled local 'Ethiopian' Darood clans to unite against the powerful British 'Isxaaq' clans to the east in the British Somaliland Protectorate, who were dominant economically in trade, and who also were rivals for land that the Darood clans utilised as farms and pasture.³⁰

As the League expanded into new areas, the different context and history made some local SYC/L branches less amenable to British patronage – which had been so important to the original Mogadishu – at least among the rump of its rural support in the RA and Ogaden who were clansmen first and nationalists second. It is likely that the traditional British alliance with certain Isxaaq clans in the neighbouring British Protectorate, made the RA and Ogaden SYL branches more circumspect in their attitudes to the British. This local opinion may have tempered the previously pro-British attitude of the Mogadishu SYL and helped the SYL distance itself from British patronage. This may also explain the SYL's short-lived policy calling for a Greater Somalia under the United Nations Organisation tutelage, rather than under a British mandate.³¹

Indeed when the SYC had first reached the Ogaden region during 1945 and 1946, the British were held in very low esteem by the eponymous Ogaadeen clans who were still reeling from a prolonged and devastating British disarmament campaign. The Ogaadeen had good reason to be suspicious of the British who had always seemed to act in support of their 'protected' Isxaaq clans in disputes over grazing and livestock in the Hawd borderlands between Ethiopia and British Somaliland. Disarmament of the Ogaadeen had always been a priority for the British, keen as the latter were to keep the peace in the British Somaliland Protectorate. It became a priority for the British again, after the Italian defeat, in the face of continued instances of lawlessness and livestock raids by rogue groups of armed Somali irregulars recently disbanded from the defeated Italian colonial army.³²

Disarming the Ogaden, a vast wilderness perfect for lawless groups, was not an easy task. The campaigns could not afford to discriminate too closely between armed clansmen and de-mobbed irregulars from the Italian army since they were often indistinguishable. A blanket disarmament campaign was launched whereby the British army, accompanied by Somali *Gendarmerie*, would scout out large herds of camels; the animals would be seized and driven to a waterhole where a thorn fence would be constructed around them (sometimes containing up to 12,000 camels). Once collected, a meeting would be held where it was announced that the camels would be released for arms handed in. One disarmament campaign from December 1944 to April 1945 records capturing 26,000 camels for a haul of 1505 rifles, 202 grenades, and nearly 86,000 rounds of ammunition.³³ While every attempt was made to make sure the campaigns were disciplined, there were a few instances involving forces from the British Protectorate whose Isxaaq auxiliaries appeared to take special delight in persecuting the Ogaadeen clans.

The amount of arms surrendered vindicated the campaigns in British eyes, but Ogaadeen oral tradition remembers things differently. For Ogaadeen clans the time was *Geel ood* 'camel enclosure', an almost incomprehensible targeting of Ogaadeen camels and men that looked like an act of revenge in the context of a long-standing blood feud rather than civil disarmament. The sight of the clan's camel-wealth dying of thirst before their owner's eyes was torture to any Ogaadeen clansman. The traditional antipathy towards the British was reignited, and the disarmament campaign was seen as yet another British boost to their Isxaaq allies, since disarming the Ogaadeen would leave the clans herds vulnerable to raids by Isxaaq clansmen from the British Protectorate, and unable to defend water and grazing rights in the Hawd.³⁴ Moreover the heavy handed tactics used during the disarmament campaigns, witnessed as it was by many fellow Darood clansmen employed in the British armed forces and *Gendarmerie*, many of whom were SYC members, encouraged the SYC to take a more critical line towards the British.³⁵

The expansion of the SYL into the Somali areas of the former Ethiopian empire brought thousands of new members but members who were traditionally suspicious of British motives. Indeed one of the most famous of the Ogaadeen SYC/L activists, *Garaad Makhtal Daahir*, an Ogaadeen chief who had been part of Ethiopian indirect rule in the Ogaden, was notoriously anti-British. Makhtal's name is mentioned in British reports concerning attempts at formal boundary delimitation between Ethiopia and the British Protectorate in the late 1920s and early 1930s, just before the Wal Wal incident of 1935. Even then the British thought Makhtal 'an appalling liar', and had him down as notoriously anti-Isxaaq and thus anti-British.³⁶ Before the Italian occupation the Ethiopian government gave him guns and horses in return for his collaboration with their government of the Ogaden and an annual tribute of livestock. He suited the Ethiopian government since he was obstructive whenever the British tried to get grazing rights enforced for the Isxaaq clans across the border in Ethiopian territory of the Hawd and Ogaden. The Ethiopian government saw British claims for grazing rights as creeping expansionism, and Makhtal himself alleged that the British offered him a salary if he would support British claims to the Hawd and Ogaden. To Ogaadeen clans, territorial concessions to the British meant territorial concessions to the Isxaaq, for which no amount of British bribes would compensate. Makhtal had been similarly suspicious of Italian expansion, and he became an inadvertent Ethiopian patriot and had strongly resisted Italian rule for a time. At the Ethiopian collapse he tried to escape via the British

Protectorate, but the authorities there were not well disposed to him, and not wanting to offend the new neighbouring Italian colonial regime in Ethiopia, the British handed Makhtal over to the Italians. The Italians took him to Mogadishu where he was imprisoned for three months after which a court there sentenced him to death, but then transferred him to Harar where he was imprisoned but released eight months later. He spent the rest of the war 'quietly' near Dhagaxbuur.³⁷ Makhtal and the British had a long and stormy history.

In 1946 Makhtal established the SYC in Harar with himself as President. It is noteworthy that such an anti-British figure should head an important branch of what had been a very pro-British nationalist organisation. Indeed it seems Makhtal's initial presence in Harar was to complain *against* the British Military Administration and its continuing disarmament campaign in the Ogaden.³⁸ Harar was an important spiritual and political centre for the Ogaadeen Somalis, and it was logical that the Somali political club should have a branch there. When Makhtal first arrived in Harar he was well received by the Ethiopian government, which saw him as an important historical ally in the Ogaden against British and Italian colonialism. Furthermore, in 1946 the SYC still appeared to an ally of Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian government saw that it could even be used to support claims for a greater Ethiopia, including not only the Ogaden but also ex-Italian Somaliland, or at the very least to prevent the restoration of the Italians to their former colonies. British sources report that while he was in Harar the Ethiopian government paid him a healthy monthly allowance.³⁹

However, once in Harar Makhtal's politics began to change. Harar had been under full Ethiopian control since 1942 and like many areas of Muslim Ethiopia the local population did not wholly welcome restored Ethiopian government. Harari townsmen had been given a certain amount of privilege and promotion during the Italian occupation, resulting in a social and economic revival directly linked with the demotion of 'Amhara Christian' political dominance. But three years after the restoration of Harar to Ethiopia, Harari townsmen once again found themselves under the dominance of Ethiopian Christian outsiders, and had lost what social and economic gains they had made under the Italian regime. As a result of these grievances an ethnic Harari association was founded sometime in 1945 or 1946, which is remembered today with two Arabic titles, the *jam'iya al-wataniya* or *jam'iya hurriya al harariya*, translated respectively as 'the nationalist society' or 'the society for Harari freedom'.⁴⁰ However when Makhtal Daahir established the SYC in Harar, the smaller Harari society allied itself and merged with the club, presumably to achieve more political influence. After exposure to the restored Ethiopian government in Harar and the local resentment it had engendered, Makhtal began to see the Ethiopian government as just as detrimental to Ogaadeen and Somali aspirations as he considered the British to be. British sources record that Makhtal's nationalism was further spurred by being kept waiting in Addis Ababa for an audience with the Emperor where he met several Eritrean Muslims who influenced his attitude to the restoration of Ethiopian rule.⁴¹

By mid-1947 and the transformation of the SYC into League, the organisation appeared to grow in self-confidence, distancing itself from the British tutelage, rejecting an alliance with the Ethiopian state, and calling for a Greater Somalia, i.e. the unification of the administration of the Ogaden and RA with ex-Italian Somalia under United Nations trusteeship. However as soon as the SYC/L's stance grew more radical the Ethiopian authorities' previously benign attitude turned hostile. By this time the SYC/L

had spread beyond the Somali plains, to Harar and the railway town of Dire Dawa, presenting a direct challenge to Ethiopia's sovereignty. The religious side to the SYL had latterly become more pronounced, and placards calling on Moslems to unite against their enemies were posted on Ethiopian government buildings in Dire Dawa.⁴² In Harar the Ethiopian authorities forbade open meetings of the SYL and took an increasingly unyielding attitude towards the League.⁴³ In June 1947 several prominent Somalis from Jigjiga and the Ogaden were called to Harar, where pressure was put on them to dissociate from the SYL. Some signed documents in which they agreed to resign from the SYL.⁴⁴

By early September 1947 Makhtal left Harar and returned to the safety of Ogaden, still under British Military Administration where the Ethiopian police had no jurisdiction. However, BMA jurisdiction did not deter the Ethiopian government from flexing its muscles in Jigjiga in the RA where Ethiopian police attempted to arrest the vice-President of the Harar branch of the SYL, Haji Kalile Ahmed, but where large numbers of SYL members prevented him being taken to Harar.⁴⁵ In another symbolic act signalling the Ethiopian sovereignty of the Ogaden, the Ethiopian government granted a concession to the American Sinclair Oil Company to prospect for oil in the Ogaden still under the BMA.⁴⁶ This was a clear sign that the Ethiopian government would now push for the return of the RA and Ogaden. Furthermore, in the face of an increasingly belligerent SYL and in anticipation of regaining control of the RA, the Ethiopians appointed a more vigorous Ethiopian representative in Jigjiga whom the British officials described as 'a senior official of strong anti-British persuasion to check the growth of the SYL in Jigjiga'.⁴⁷ The Ethiopian government, not without foundation, strongly suspected that the British were fostering the growth of the SYL.⁴⁸

As 1947 drew to a close the BMA was squeezed between the historical momentum of the restored Ethiopian regime and burgeoning Somali nationalism, and looked increasingly overstretched. The British feared a widespread Somali uprising that it could not contain; they were always haunted by the history of the pan-Somali Dervish revolt.⁴⁹ However, fortunately for the British, the SYL was also overstretched. Although it had made rapid progress in terms of membership and funds in the Ogaden, it was by no means clear that all Somalis in the RA and Ogaden were anti-Ethiopian and pro-SYL, especially given the traditional Ogaadeen antipathy towards the British, and particularly their Somali allies the Isxaaq. The Ethiopian government were quick to make the most of the ambivalence of Ogaadeen elders. Two important Ogaadeen chiefs employed by the BMA, made it known that they were in favour of the reoccupation of the Ogaden by Ethiopia. In December 1947 the Ethiopians even made attempts to woo Makhtal back into the Ethiopian fold and he visited Jigjiga (as a British protected person) where he had interviews with the Ethiopian Governor of Jigjiga, and Director General of the Harar Province.⁵⁰

The SYL struggled to keep a profile in the RA and Ogaden, even sending the President of the Mogadishu branch of the SYL, Haji Mohamed Hussein to Jigjiga, who was able to travel by car from Mogadishu with the SYL flag flying on the bonnet.⁵¹ Moreover with the Four Power Commission charged with investigating the wishes of the inhabitants of the ex-Italian colonies expected in Somalia in January 1948, the urgency for Somalis to show their political colours increased.⁵² In January 1948 a SYL 'Inspector' from Mogadishu arrived in Jigjiga with the intention of taking representatives of all the RA and Ogaden clans to meet the Four Power Commission in Mogadishu in January, but only a few of the more radical elements (Makhtal included) went to Mogadishu, other chiefs decided it was

inadvisable to compromise themselves so deeply in their support for the SYL at this stage. For their part the Ethiopians dispatched an old Somali ally, *Balambaras* Abdullahi Farah 'Cagoole', to Dhagaxbuur in the Ogaden, liberally provided with funds to propitiate Ogaadeen support.⁵³ One informant remembers that at this time Somalis were pro-Ethiopian during meetings with the Ethiopian representatives in the day, whereas at evening meetings with the British officers they were pro-British and pro-League.⁵⁴

By late 1947 it was clear to the British and Ethiopian governments that British presence in the RA and Ogaden could only encourage a further strengthening of Somali nationalism.⁵⁵ After serious riots in Mogadishu in early January 1948, coinciding with the Four Powers Commission hearings in Mogadishu on the wishes of the population of ex-Italian Somalia, the BMA lost a great deal of prestige. The riots in Mogadishu alerted the British that the SYL was on the verge of becoming unmanageable, and since the majority of the security forces were also members of the SYL, they could not be relied upon to put down any insurrection.⁵⁶ The potential for unrest was underlined by the failure of the BMA to effectively restrain the Ogaadeen clans from harassing representatives of the Sinclair Oil Company in the Ogaden, a failing about which the Ethiopian government became increasingly vocal.⁵⁷

For their part the Ethiopian government, alarmed by events in Mogadishu and increasing lawless acts by the SYL in the RA and Ogaden, continued to clamp down on SYL inspired opposition to Ethiopian rule in Harar, and arrested and imprisoned all suspected SYL members and others besides; many escaped capture by fleeing to Jigjiga.⁵⁸ In February 1948 the local Harar and RA SYL delegation to the Four Power Commission in Mogadishu returned after having failed to get even a hearing. Nevertheless, on their return an SYL flag was paraded about Jigjiga and the BMA quickly received complaints from the Ethiopian authorities.⁵⁹ In March 1948 meetings were held between senior Ethiopian officials and, by now, the far more compliant Somali notables including Makhtal (who unlike many of his Harari SYL supporters remained free). These Somali notables were taken to Harar for interviews with the Vice-Governor, and to Addis Ababa to meet with the Emperor.⁶⁰

Confronted with an increasingly militant SYL, a stronger Ethiopia, and a beleaguered Empire, the British lost interest in Greater Somalia and the SYL. On 18 March 1948 news leaked out, earlier than had been intended, of the early British withdrawal of the British from the RA. The public reversal of the private support for the SYL and Greater Somalia came as shock, as much for the local British official as the SYL members. On 20 March the flying of any flags other than those of Great Britain and Ethiopia was forbidden. The official SYL activists removed their flag and substituted it with a Union Jack but this too was taken down on advice from the BMA. However, on 23 March a party of 'young' Somalis, newly arrived from the Ogaden, took possession of the SYL offices and illegally hoisted the SYL flag contrary to the league's official wishes. The young radical SYL men threatened British officials when they arrived at the scene, as well as threatening a party of senior moderate SYL activists who attempted to lower the flag in compliance with the British authority's orders. Finally, a party of police supported by an armoured car proceeded to the league's offices and removed the flag, which the young Ogaden group resisted. A grenade was thrown, killing one of the RA policemen; fighting ensued and over twenty Somalis were estimated killed, along with two police and several more Somalis wounded.⁶¹ However the Jigjiga disturbance was the only significant resistance the SYL mustered against the restoration of Ethiopian rule. Even when the much larger Ogaden

was returned to Ethiopia later in September 1948 there were only isolated problems, mainly related to the Sinclair Oil Company activity in the far eastern Ogaden. Makhtal Daahir appeared to accept Ethiopian rule for a time, but later in 1949 he rebelled and tried to instigate an uprising against Ethiopian rule; his activities, however, were not widely supported. Ironically it was the British who arrested him, and for the second time delivered him into the hands of his enemies, this time the Ethiopians.⁶²

Conclusion

The fact that the SYL grew so quickly in the Ethiopian Somali-lands of the Ogaden and RA, but managed to achieve very little widespread opposition to the restoration of Ethiopian rule, makes it look singularly unsuccessful, especially when compared with the proto-nationalism of the 'Dervish' movement of Sayyid Cabdille Maxamad Xasan. The British can be accused of giving false hope to the Greater Somalia idea and the SYL, but then withdrawing from the Ogaden and the RA and eventually supporting the Italian bid for a return via trusteeship to the former Italian Somalia.⁶³ However it was also true that the SYL was weakened by inconsistent policies, trying to be all things to all Somalis, rejecting *realpolitik* for the chimera of a pan-Somali state. The archival and oral sources suggest, and given the sketchy nature of the archives it can only be a suggestion,⁶⁴ that the SYL's interest in the vast Ogaden and RA region distracted the core nationalist base in Mogadishu from making real progress towards independence. A Greater Somalia which included the RA and Ogaadeen, as well Harar and Dire Dawa, was not only ideologically attractive, but it also brought in a great deal of money for the SYL coffers. Indeed by 1947 there is evidence that the financial contribution from the Ogaadeen branches made up a considerable part of the SYL's income,⁶⁵ with the future possibility of oil revenue as the presence of the Sinclair Oil Company in the Ogaden promised. Thus the Ogaden and RA became a crucial part of the SYL coalition, but to secure widespread Ogaadeen clan support the SYL needed to distance itself from British tutelage since Ogaadeen clans were suspicious of British motives.⁶⁶ Thus at a crucial historical juncture the SYL tried to go it alone, and lost the discipline and responsibility that the British had so admired. An already nervous Britain did not want more disgruntled nationalists stretching its resources, and the high hopes for a united and Greater Somalia under British trusteeship was progressively abandoned.

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Where possible for Somali words or names I have followed the Somali national orthography. However, I have not amended the orthography of personal names given to me, or when quoting sources. I have used Somali orthography when referring to the Ogaadeen clans, and English convention when referring to the Ogaden region of south-east Ethiopia.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used in the notes below: BMA – British Military Administration; BSP – British Somaliland Protectorate; FO – Foreign Office; PRO – Public Records Office; RA – Reserved Areas; (S)CAO – (Senior) Civil Affairs Officer; WO – War Office.

- ¹ See Marcus, 'The Rodd Mission of 1897'.
- ² For boundary issues between Ethiopia and British Somaliland see especially Silberman, 'Why the Haud was Ceded' and generally Drysdale, *The Somali Dispute*.
- ³ PRO FO 1015/132/30B, 'Note by G. T. Fisher, Military Governor of British Somaliland on the North West Boundary of British Somaliland', G. F. Seel to Coverly Price, Downing St, 5 October 1944.
- ⁴ For example PRO WO 230/5A, Military Governor BSP to Political Officer Ethiopia, Hargeisa BSP, 11 August 1941 and Military Governor BSP to Major General Sir Philip Mitchell, Hargeisa BSP, 9 September 1941.
- ⁵ For an overview see Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States*, 10–12 and for details see Lord Rennell of Rodd, *British Military Administration*, 88–92.
- ⁶ Rodd, *British Military Administration*, 74, 201; see also Drysdale, *The Somali Dispute*, 69. For the Greater Somalia arguments see files in PRO FO 1015/132. For an admirable summary on the complex diplomatic situation see Kelly, 'Britain, the United States, and the End of the Italian Empire'.
- ⁷ PRO FO 1015/90/2A, 'BMA – RA, Annual Report by the CAO for the year ended 31 December 1946'.
- ⁸ Lewis, *Modern History of the Somali*, 111–14.
- ⁹ PRO FO 1015/51/8B, 'Memorandum on Native Clubs in Somalia' [n.d. probably late 1946].
- ¹⁰ Oral informant, Sheikh Abdinassir, Jigjiga, 22/4/02; and see Lewis, *Modern History of Somaliland*, 113.
- ¹¹ PRO FO 1015/51/8B, 'Memorandum on Native Clubs in Somalia' [n.d. probably late 1946].
- ¹² Oral informant, Yassin Mussa Ahmed, Jigjiga, 28/6/98.
- ¹³ For evocative accounts of the makeshift and shoestring British military administration of the ex-Italian Somali land, Gerald Hanley's novel *A Consul at Sunset*, and his *Warriors* – the reprint of the half of his book *Warriors and Strangers* which dealt with Somali-lands – are particularly good reading.
- ¹⁴ PRO FO 1015/51, 'Extract from Brigadier Stafford's Fortnightly Report No. 2', 26 November 1946.
- ¹⁵ Kelly, 'Britain, the United States, and the end of the Italian Empire', 55.
- ¹⁶ PRO FO 1015/132/11A, 'Frontier Rectification in Northeast Africa', Colonel F. R. W. Jameson, SCAO, Hargeisa BSP, 6 August 1943.
- ¹⁷ Oral informant, Yusuf Olat, Dire Dawa, 26/4/02.
- ¹⁸ Kelly, 'Britain, the United States, and the end of the Italian Empire', 55–59.
- ¹⁹ Lewis, *Modern History of Somaliland*, 124–5, and Drysdale, *The Somali Dispute*, 63–69.
- ²⁰ Oral informants: Siyad Xajji, Jigjiga, 20/4/02; Yusuf Olat, Dire Dawa, 26/4/02.
- ²¹ PRO FO 1015/51/2A, [?] Nairobi, 7 March 1947, and PRO FO 1015/51, H.Q. East African Command, Monthly Intelligence Review, April 1947.
- ²² Oral informants: Siyad Xajji, Jigjiga, 20/4/02; Abdullahi Ali Baroud, Jigjiga, 21/4/02.
- ²³ PRO FO 1015/140, Somalia Political Intelligence Report No. 2, Major Goodbody for Chief Administrator, BMA Somalia, 24 May 1947.
- ²⁴ PRO FO 1015/51/8B, 'Memorandum on Native Clubs in Somalia' [n.d. probably late 1946].
- ²⁵ PRO: FO 1015/51/2A, 'Periodical Intelligence Report No. 1', HQ East Africa Command, 1 January 1947; Oral informant, Siyad Xajji, Jigjiga, 20/4/02.
- ²⁶ Oral informant, Dool Ableele, Interview 5, Jigjiga, 19/6/98.
- ²⁷ PRO FO 1015/51, Smith to CAO Middle East Land Forces, Jigjiga, 17 May 1947.
- ²⁸ PRO: FO 1015/41, 'BMA: RA, Monthly Notes for June 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 6 July 1947; PRO FO 1015/49, 'BMA– Annual Report by the CAO on the Administration for the year ended 31 December 1947'.
- ²⁹ PRO FO 1015/41, Smith SCAO, BMA, RA, Ethiopia, 6 August 1947; and PRO: FO 1015/51, Smith SCAO, to HQ, Middle East Land Forces, RA, Ethiopia, 19 June 1947.
- ³⁰ For this context see PRO WO 230/96, 'British Somaliland and the Reserved Area', Major Flowers to CAO Dire Dawa, Jigjiga RA, 30 September 1945. Also Oral informant Sheikh Abdinassir, Jigjiga, 22/4/02.
- ³¹ See PRO FO 1015/51, 'SYL Petition to the Big Four Foreign Ministers and Secretary General of the UN Organisation', Mogadishu, 18 July 1947; Samatar and Samatar, 'Somalis and Africa's First Democrats', 17.
- ³² PRO WO 230/60, [?] BMA Somalia to Chief Political Officer East Africa Command Nairobi, Mogadishu, 20 January 1942.

- ³³ Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Mss Afr.s.1715, 'History of Major Keal MBE Service in Somalia Gendarmerie, 1941–48'.
- ³⁴ Oral informants, Sheikh Abdinassir, Jigjiga, 22/4/02; Abdullahi Ali Baroud, Jigjiga, 21/4/02.
- ³⁵ This is suggested by Samatar and Samatar, 'Somalis and Africa's First Democrats', 11–12.
- ³⁶ PRO FO 371/19156/J7003, [Somaliland] Fortnightly Intelligence Report, Lt. Col. Bennet, Burao [BSP], 30 September 1935.
- ³⁷ Oral informants Cali Adan Maxamad, Interview 15, Jigjiga, 6/7/98; Farah Dhamel Daahir Husen, Interview No. 16, Jigjiga, 4/7/98; and Makhtal Daahir, Interview 14, Addis Ababa, 13/7/98.
- ³⁸ Oral informant, Farah Dhamel Husen, Interview 16, Jigjiga, 4/7/98.
- ³⁹ PRO FO 1015/51, British Legation to Foreign Office, Addis Ababa, 27 September 1947.
- ⁴⁰ For the SYC/L in Harar see Carmichael, 'Political Culture in Ethiopia's Provincial Administration', 195–212.
- ⁴¹ PRO FO 1015/51, British Legation to Foreign Office, Addis Ababa, 27 September 1947; Telegram – British Legation to Foreign Office, Addis Ababa, 25 October 1947.
- ⁴² PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA, Monthly Notes for August, 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 4 September 1947.
- ⁴³ PRO: FO 1015/51, HM Consul to HM Minister, Addis Ababa, 27 August 1947, and see Carmichael, 'Political Culture in Ethiopia's Provincial Administration'.
- ⁴⁴ PRO: FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA, Monthly Notes for June 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 6 July 1947.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 'BMA – RA Monthly Notes for September, 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 7 October 1947.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 'BMA – RA, Monthly Notes for August 1947 SCAO, Jigjiga, 4 September 1947, and see PRO FO 1015/49, 'BMA – RA, Annual Report by the CAO for the year ended 31 December 1947'.
- ⁴⁷ PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA Monthly notes for October 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 1 November 1947.
- ⁴⁸ PRO WO 230/236, Lt. Col. Flowers, SCAO, to CAO Middle East Land Forces, RA Jigjiga, 30 October 1947.
- ⁴⁹ PRO WO 230/236, Brigadier R.H. Smith to Civil Affairs Branch Middle East Land Forces, BMA Somalia, Mogadishu, 31 October 1947.
- ⁵⁰ PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA Monthly notes for October 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 1 November 1947.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 'BMA – RA Monthly Notes for September, 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 7 October 1947.
- ⁵² PRO FO 1015/51, HM Consul, Addis Ababa, 24 November 1947.
- ⁵³ PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA Monthly notes for December 1947', SCAO, Jigjiga, 2 January 1948.
- ⁵⁴ Oral informant, Xassan Xaashi Cilmi, Interview 11, Jigjiga, 25/6/98.
- ⁵⁵ PRO FO 401/40, 'Ethiopia, Annual Report for 1947', Weld-Forester to Bevin, Addis Ababa, 20 July 1948; Lt. Col. Flowers, SCAO, to CAO Middle East Land Forces, Jigjiga, RA, 30 October 1947.
- ⁵⁶ PRO FO 1015/51, 'Memorandum on the SYL with particular reference to the Mogadishu riots', No date/author.
- ⁵⁷ PRO FO 401/41, 'Ethiopia, Annual Review for 1948', Lascelles to Bevin, Addis Ababa, 9 February 1949.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., and PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA, Monthly Report for January 1948', SCAO, Jigjiga, 1 February 1948. For the story in Harar which was far more dramatic than events in Jigjiga see Carmichael, 'Political Culture in Ethiopia's Provincial Administration'.
- ⁵⁹ PRO FO 1015/41, 'BMA – RA Monthly Report for February 1948', SCAO, Jigjiga, 10 March 1948.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Oral informants: Cali Adan Maxamad, Interview 15, Jigjiga, 6/7/98; Farah Dhamel Husen, Interview 16, Jigjiga, 4/7/98, and Makhtal Daahir, Interview 14, Addis Ababa, 13/7/98.
- ⁶³ PRO FO 1015/140, Chief Administrator de Candole to Director of Civil Affairs, Mogadishu, BMA Somalia, 12 August 1948.
- ⁶⁴ The archival record scattered between Foreign Office and War Office archives is sketchy due to the make-shift and temporary arrangements of BMA administration in the Somali-lands from 1941 to 1949.
- ⁶⁵ PRO FO 1015/140, 'Political Intelligence Sitrep No. 10 for period ending 20.7.1948', Major Hartman, Mogadishu, BMA Somalia, 12 July 1948.
- ⁶⁶ Samatar and Samatar, 'Somalis and Africa's First Democrats', 17.

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