

PAN-SOMALISM IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND CRISIS OF THE SOMALI STATE: INTEGRATION AND IRREDENTISM

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Introduction

The collapse of the Somali State in 1991 constitutes one of the most emblematic episodes of state disintegration on the African continent, with the country remaining embroiled in a civil war that is still present in some regions today. In this regard, Somalia in the 1990s can be defined as a “Collapsed State”, that is, an extreme version of “Failed State”. According to Rotberg’s (2003) classification, the State in collapse is characterized by a complete authority vacuum within its borders, resulting in the division of sub-regions under the control of substate actors that privatize the security apparatus, markets, trade and external political-economic relations. These actors became known as Warlords.

The literature on this process (and on the African statehood in general) has been marked by interpretations that privilege identity aspects of the Somali society — the idea that permanent clan fragmentation has made the construction of a modern nation-state impossible (Lewis 1988). Therefore, at times as the cause, at times as the effect, the debates about “Failed States” and “identity disputes” are majorly present on the analysis about the post-colonial states crisis.

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Conversely, this work starts from an idea of broad identity that existed in the region — the *somallitude*³. The existence of both identity forms, though conflicting (fragmented on one side and cohesive on the other), does not explain the matter in itself, and demonstrates the necessity of shifting the analytical focus. Therefore, this article maintains that the state collapse must be understood based on the inherent contradictions of the State-building process in Somalia amid the underdevelopment condition.

In this sense, it is argued that the pan-somalism — understood as the political project of reunification of the territories inhabited by Somali populations in the Horn of Africa — constituted the ideological axis of the formation of the Somali State, simultaneously operating as the national cohesion vector and the structural fragilization factor. The central hypothesis of this article is that pan-somalism assumed a contradictory character throughout the State formation process. If, at its origin, it acted as a nation-building mechanism, by providing a common political horizon and legitimizing the nascent state, its transformation into an irredentist project by the Somali elite shifted the priority from internal construction to external territorial projection. This shift not only exceeded the material capacities of the Somali State, but also reconfigured the very content of the national interest. In this manner, pan-somalism, by binding itself to the territorial reunification agenda, ceased to express a collective project of integration and development, reflecting instead the interests of elite fractions that used nationalism as an instrument of political legitimacy.

The objectives of this article consist, therefore, in analyzing pan-somalism in its dual dimension — as a national integration project and as an irredentist project —, highlighting how the tension between these dimensions contributed, dialectically, to the construction and crisis of the Somali State. To this end, this article examines, firstly, the origins of pan-somalism in Somali politics following the Second World War, emphasising its role in the formation of a relatively cohesive national identity, which oriented the process of unification between the British and Italian Somalilands, from 1960 onwards. Subsequently, it analyzes the external projection of this project, evidenced by the tensions and conflicts with neighboring states, such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, in the context of the irredentist agenda. Finally, it seeks to demonstrate how the prioritization of this expansionist dimension, to the detriment of the internal construction, contributed to the

³ The idea of *somallitude* exemplifies a sense of unity present among the peoples of the region, something as “being Somali”. There was a collective consciousness of belonging that surpassed the fixed territorial limits imposed after (Farah and Eno 2022).

fragilization of the State and its subsequent crisis, as reflected in the Ogaden War and its consequences.

From the methodological point of view, this article adopts a hypothetico-deductive approach, drawing on a historical and materialist analysis, and therefore qualitative. The analysis is structured in three levels — national; regional; and systemic —, which overlap in concentric circles of mutual dependency. It is understood that the articulation of the three levels of analysis (systemic, regional, and national) can contribute to the perception, on the one hand, of the constraints offered by the structure, while simultaneously, on the other, allows for the observation of the states' (and of social forces that compose them) capacity for agency in face of these restrictions (Pereira and Serpa 2024).

In that regard, pan-somalism's development and its implications for Somali politics are understood as products of this interaction: at the regional level, the territorial disputes and power asymmetries in the Horn of Africa imposed limits and intensified its conflictive character; at the systemic level, the Cold War reconfigured alliances and expanded the Somali state's room for maneuver. Thus, pan-somalism's trajectory is situated at the intersection of these dynamics, which conditioned both its possibilities and its destabilizing effects.

The Origins of Pan-Somalism: Identity and Territory

Somalia is a different case from the majority of African States in terms of the presence of a common identity before the colonial divisions. While most of the independent African countries were composed of states created under the colonial regime that fought to become more coherent nations, Somalia, in contrast, was seen as a nation that fought to transform itself into a more stable and integrated state (Ki-Zerbo 1972; Elaigwu and Mazrui 2011).

In fact, even before the consolidation of state borders, there was a collective consciousness of belonging that surpassed the fixed territorial limits later imposed. The so-called "*somallitude*" — anchored in a common ethnolinguistic matrix, in the sunni islamism as the dominant religion, in pastoral sociocultural practices and in similar colonial experiences — configured a potential base for the constitution of a robust national character (Touval 1963; Carrillo 2011; Lewis 2008).

The common language played a fundamental role in the construction of Somali nationalism, with Somalia being one of the rare cases in Africa of a nation with linguistic homogeneity, where about 95% of the population shares the same maternal language, which is therefore not that of the colonizer. Even before the development of an official writing in the 1970s, the oral literature and the poetry were the main foundations of the national identity (Metz 1992; Chonka and Healy 2021). Known as the “land of poets”, the oratory and the poems — exemplified by the artworks of the nationalist leader Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, known throughout the whole territory — were powerful political and cultural instruments for mobilizing different groups and disseminating a sense of unity that clearly differentiated the Somalis from their neighbours (Samatar 1982).

The Islam practice, majorly sunni with Sufi orientation, functions as an unifying bond of universalist character (Carrillo 2011). Traditional religious orders, such as Qadiriyyah and Salihyyah, historically worked hard to eradicate tribal divisions, emphasizing the common religious bond. But Islam goes beyond its religious dimension, projecting itself as a structural pillar of the very social, political and symbolic Somali organization. On the one hand, the Somali national fundamental myth, the common genealogy, which connects the different clan lineages to two mythical ancestors — Samaale and Sab⁴ —, dates back to the Qurayshi, the direct lineage of the Prophet Mohammed (Lewis 2008; Samatar 1988). On the other hand, the sultanates represented the first form of centralized and supraclanic political organization among the Somalis, though without territorial expression. They were organised around cities such as Zeila and Mogadishu, which flourished as commercial and religious centres between the IX and XII centuries, a product of the encounter between local inhabitants and Arab and Persian immigrants⁵ (Fasi and Hrbek 2010; Samatar 1988).

The sense of islamic unity also manifests as a political and military resistance vector among the Somalis. Historical conflicts, such as the cam-

4 According to the traditions, from these common ancestors, the Somali people branches out into two lineage groups: the Sab and the Samaale. However, the social divisions based on lineages are also based on the economic vocation: the Sab are partially sedentary, based on a mixed economy (agriculture and animal husbandry) and live in the South; while the Samaale are nomadic herders predominant in the rest of the territory. Therefore, it becomes evident that there is an interdependence relation between the mode of production and the identity (Samatar 1988).

5 Which gave birth to a coastal elite linked to regional powers such as Yemen and Oman (Samatar 1988).

paigns conducted by the Imam Ahmed Grand⁶ against christian Ethiopia in the XVIth century, illustrate how the islamic faith was mobilized as the organizing principle of war and political cohesion. Such historical experiences consolidated a tradition of struggle against what is perceived as foreign domination and infidelity, simultaneously reinforcing the internal unity and the distinction between the Somalis and their neighbours (Diallo 2021; Carrillo 2011).

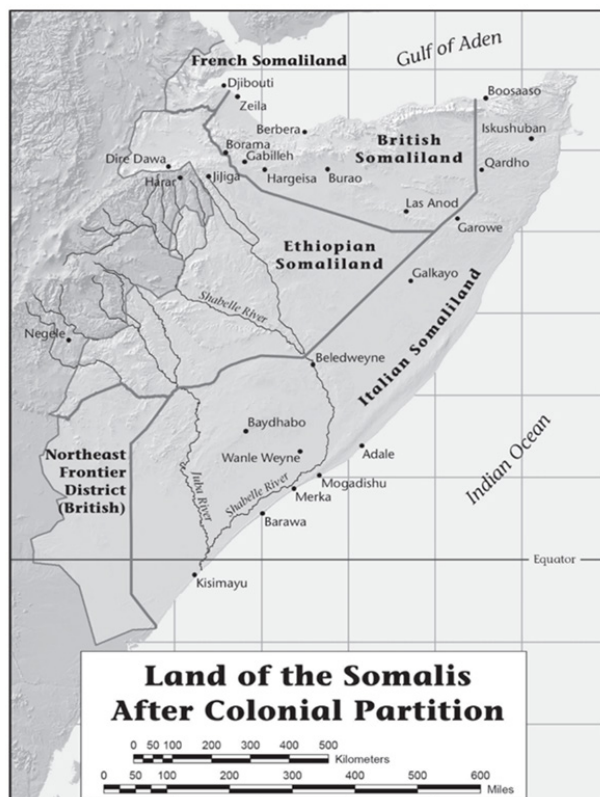
The historical association of the Somali people with the territory of the Horn of Africa is another pillar of their identity, with the region being historically known as the “land where the Somalis live”. This territorial connection is inseparable from the nomadic way of life and the pastoral economy, which are common to the great majority of the population and have molded the occupation of the space throughout the centuries. The arid nature of the region, defined by vast savannas and scarcity of hydric resources, demands constant seasonal migrations for the subsistence of the livestock, which established a profound interdependence between the pastoral mode of production and the identity of the people. These two last aspects were visibly the most affected by the colonial divisions in the XIXth century (Samatar 1988; Cassanelli 1982).

The impact of colonialism over the Somali people represented a profound rupture in their historical trajectory, disrupting their socioeconomic and political reality to serve the interests of imperial powers (Acosta 2011; Wallerstein 2005). Unlike other African regions, where colonization grouped together distinct peoples, in the Horn of Africa it fragmented a pre-colonial identity, dividing it in five territorial jurisdictions: the British Somaliland, the Italian Somaliland, the French Somaliland (Djibouti), the Ogaden (under Ethiopian rule) and the Northern Frontier District (in British Kenya)⁷ (Andrés and Ledesma 2023; Yuusuf 2021; Lewis 1988).

6 The stories of Ahmed as a popular Somali hero were told for generations and would be emphasized in the context of the construction of Somali nationalist movements from the 20th century. He represented the three fundamental pillars of the construction of Somali nationality: i) the common Somali genealogy and the leadership over the different traditional groups; ii) Islam as an unifying force; and iii) the fight against the rival Ethiopia (Carrillo 2011; Touval 1963).

7 The systematic exploitation of the Horn of Africa and the deepening of colonialism in the region were decisively driven by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. By linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, the construction of the canal connected Europe directly to the Indian Ocean, India and the Far East, transforming the Somali coast into an area of extreme geostrategic importance (Pankhurst and Cassanelli 2011).

Figure 1: The five somali territories after the colonial division



Source: Samatar (2019).

Colonialism also promoted a deep transformation in the Somali way of life, particularly by disrupting pastoral nomadism, which constituted the economic base of approximately 80% of the population. The imposition of borders interrupted traditional seasonal migrations in search for water and pastures (Samatar 1988; Cassanelli 1982). Simultaneously, European powers reconfigured the social organization by using typical “divide and rule” strategies: on the one hand, they promoted hierarchization and reification of clan identities previously more fluid, instrumentalizing rivalries to facilitate political control, especially in the context of the British indirect government; on the other hand, they fomented the formation of co-opted local elites and of an urban bureaucratic bourgeoisie responsible for mediating the access to resources and power, which contributed to the deepening of the cleavage between the commercialized urban centres and the predominant nomadic interior (Chazan et al. 1999; Clapham 2023; Visentini et al. 2014).

A singular aspect of colonialism in Somalia was the role of Ethiopia. Under the command of Menelik II, the Ethiopian Empire expanded its borders into the lowlands inhabited by Somalis (Ogaden and Harar) as a defensive strategy to create a “strategic depth” against the Europeans. The Ethiopian victory against Italy at the Battle of Adwa (1896) consolidated Ethiopia as a sovereign state, consequently, it actively participated in the partition of Somali territory through treaties with the British and Italians. For the Somalis, Ethiopia came to be seen as a colonialist power whose territorial claims were based on national myths of an ancient Abyssinian Empire (Clapham 2023; Ki-Zerbo 1972; Andrés and Ledesma 2023).

In the face of European domination and the pressure of the Ethiopian Empire (both linked to Christianity), Islam re-emerged as a patriotic and unifying force of resistance. Religious orders and Muslim authorities became the main opposition poles, utilizing faith to mitigate tribal divisions and to mobilize the population against what they considered a foreign and infidel invasion. The Somali resistance against colonial rule reached its zenith with the Dervish Movement, led by Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, known to the colonizers as “Mad Mullah”, which insurrection, spanning about two decades, went so far as to achieve recognition of a territory of its own under the authority of Mohamed himself (Samatar 1979; Bade 2020; Sheik-Abdi 1977). The Movement’s defeat in 1920, including even the pioneering use of aerial bombardments, secured colonial rule, but did not eliminate the political and symbolic legacy of the resistance (Irons 2013). On the contrary, Hassan’s figure was progressively elevated to the condition of national myth, appropriated and mobilized by the nationalist movements, which would emerge amidst the aftermath of the Second World War as the foundational symbol of the struggle for the creation of a sovereign Somali State (Chonka and Healy 2021; Yuusuf 2021).

Simultaneously, the ideal of a Greater Somalia, based on the unification of the divided Somali territories, gained force amidst the geopolitical dynamics of the Second World War. After the conquest of Ethiopia by the Italians in 1936, the *Africa Orientale Italiana*, a vast territory that grouped together various provinces, was established under fascist regime. In this period, between 1936 and 1941, the Ogaden region was, in the sole instance since the colonial partition, administratively reunited to Somalia by Italian hands. Mussolini utilized pan-somalism sentiments to justify this territorial expansion and part of the Somali nationalist movement allied itself with the Italians, believing that this unification would be the first step towards a future total independence (Sheik-Abdi 1977; Touval 1963).

After the victory over the Italians in 1941, Great Britain established a British Military Administration (BMA) over the Somali territory and the occupied Ethiopian Empire. Under British mandate, the Ogaden region and the “Reserved Areas” (such as the Haud⁸) remained linked to Mogadishu’s administration, and the idea of a “Greater Somalia” became an obsession to the English, who would have an important role in the construction of the pan-somali movement by directly supporting the creation of Somali political parties (Clapham 2023; Ahmed 1995; Yuusuf 2021).

Figure 2: “Greater Somalia” map and its divisions among the current states of the Horn of Africa



Source: Møller (2009).

⁸ The Haud is a region of rich pastures, responsible for sustaining 50% of the total population of the British Somaliland protectorate. In 1897 and in 1954 (after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in the Second World War), the British transferred the Haud to the Ethiopian administration, even under protests of the Somali population (Lewis 1988).

In 1946, amidst the negotiations for the end of the Second World War, the British politician Ernest Bevin proposed what would become known as “Bevin Plan”, which suggested the incorporation of Italian Somaliland and parts of Ethiopia to the British Somaliland, creating a single unity under the trusteeship of the Great Britain. Although the plan aimed to maintain the monopoly of British influence in the region, it was widely celebrated by the Somalis, as it internationally legitimized the objective of the unification of the Somali inhabited territories. However, a commission formed by the four victorious powers of the Second World War — USA, USSR, France and Great Britain — decided, in 1948, for the restoration of the pre-1936 borders, ending the plans of maintaining British rule over the whole region and keeping Somalia divided (Touval 1963; Clapham 2023; Barnes 2007).

In 1950, the territories of the former Italian Somaliland were, once again, placed under Italian trusteeship, though with an independence date guaranteed by the UN for 1960. During these ten years, the Europeans would have to gradually insert Somalis in the administration. Concerning the territories in dispute with Ethiopia, in 1950 the Ogaden returned to Ethiopia. The Haud also did return to Ethiopian sovereignty, but only in 1954, amidst intense protest of the population of the protectorate (Millman 2014; Touval 1963).

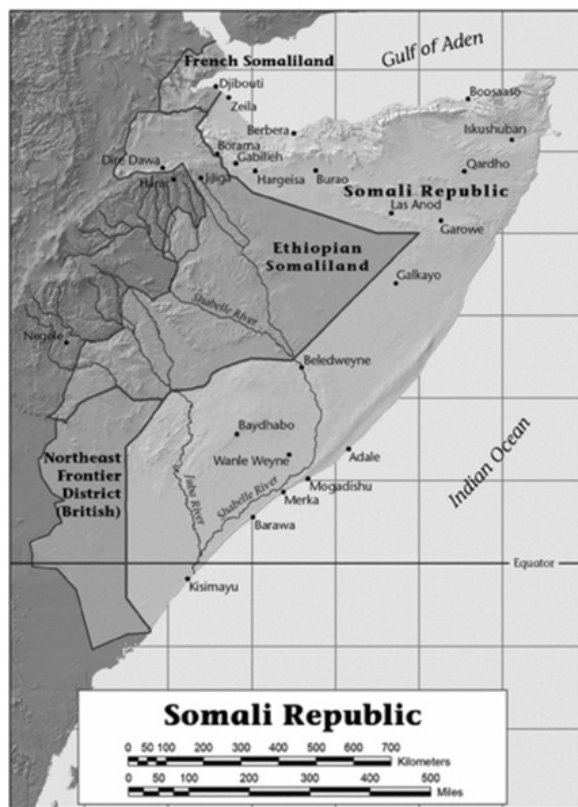
The Union of the Two Somalias: Pan-Somalism as National Integration

The independence and unification of two of the five Somali territories in 1960 was a historic milestone. The creation of a State led by Somalis was being made four decades after Mad Mullah’s resistance. For the Somalis, the victory over colonialism and the division imposed by it was unfolding. The merger of the legislatures of both Somalilands in Mogadishu, on July 1st, 1960, under the principle of “one banner, one president, one parliament and one government” symbolized the political triumph of the pan-somalist project as a national unifying ideology (Samatar 2016).

However, according to Nkrumah (2025), the conquest of the “political reign” and the formal integration of the two territories represented only the first step of a much deeper process of state building and national edification, which, in general, marked the post-colonial African States (Elaigwu and Mazrui 2011; Wallerstein 2005). Despite the existence of a Somali identity prior to colonialism — a central element for the unification —, such identity

was not enough to ensure, by itself, political stability and the institutional consolidation of the new state. In this sense, it becomes necessary to theoretically situate the limits of this previous identity, distinguishing it from the expressive historical form adopted by the nation under capitalism.

Figure 3: Map of the Somali Republic in 1960, showing the union of British and Italian Somaliland



Source: Samatar (2019).

In pre-modern contexts, the collective identity was predominantly associated with cultural, linguistic and ethnic shared elements, approaching what is understood today as “ethnicity” (Rivas 1981; Amin 2006). However, under capitalism, the nation is intrinsically linked to the state, therefore, it starts to constitute itself as not only a society, but also as a delimited territory, an integrated economy, and a centralized political apparatus (Bresser-Pe-

reira 2008; Arrighi 2016; Amin 2006). This process corresponded to the formation of the European modern state, in which the constitution of the nation and the consolidation of the state occurred in a relatively articulated and endogenous manner, resulting in the shaping of the nation-state as a political-territorial unity, a defining key of capitalism⁹ (Tilly 1996; Hobsbawm 2008; Arrighi 2016).

Yet, this trajectory assumes distinct characteristics in the periphery of the system, where the formation of national States was frequently subordinated to colonial expansion and global capitalist dynamics (Amin 2006; Acosta 2011; Wallerstein 2005). In this regard, the Republic of Somalia faced the challenge of consolidating its national identity while fighting to establish a cohesive and functional state, amidst the search for overcoming underdevelopment, and under the geopolitical conditionings of the Cold War. Along these lines, according to Brucan (1983), this process is not something spontaneous or natural, but the result of a deliberate political project, in which the State action acts as a catalyst for the construction of a national consciousness, the definition of common interests and the mobilization of power resources necessary for its affirmation¹⁰.

In the case of Somalia, the unification also brought the concrete challenge of integrating two distinct colonial formations. There were 70 years of British and Italian rule on each Somali territory, creating and accentuating regional differences. Distinct economic, political, and administrative patterns created significant social disparities, primarily among the urban elites. In the institutional plan, divergent administrative systems coexisted, marked by the heritage of the British common law in the north and by juridical Italian forms and customary law in the south (Yuusuf 2021). The very Somali

9 In this process, the nation-state functions as the source of political legitimacy and as an element of social cohesion in the domestic level; while in the international scenario, it acts as an instrument for projecting its own interests, hence, organizing and sustaining the capitalist expansion in international scale (Arrighi 2016; Brucan 1983).

10 Brucan (1983) utilized three concepts to explain this process: national character, national interest, and national power. The first one pertains to the historical production of a common political consciousness, capable of expanding the restricted identity horizons and linking them to the authority and the political community represented by the state. The second one refers to the formulation of strategic objectives which orient state action, being able to express both particularistic interests of the dominant fractions and a collective development and national cohesion project. The third one corresponds to the state's capacity of concentrating and mobilizing material, administrative, coercive and infrastructural resources necessary for the internal integration and external projection. In this perspective, such dimensions do not emerge spontaneously, but are historically produced by political and institutional state action within the process of national formation.

language remained, until 1972, exclusively oral, which compelled the state administration to operate in English and Italian, creating a barrier between the state and its population. Only a few public officials were bilingual, precluding the majority of the administration from communicating in written form (Samatar 1988).

Those difficulties were aggravated by concrete material limitations. The infrastructure inherited from the colonial period was oriented towards the connection to the metropolises, rather than to the internal integration of the territory. Communications between the north and the south were extremely precarious: the land-based connection between Mogadishu and Hargeisa, of approximately 850 km, could take days to traverse and was frequently disrupted during rainy seasons; direct telephonic networks did not exist for months after the unification, and the aerial transportation was limited. On the economic front, commerce between the two regions was practically inexistent, tariffs and currencies were distinct, and the circulation of goods and services remained restricted. The very standardization of salaries, administrative systems and security forces implied elevated political costs, insofar as they could favor one region in detriment of the other (Lewis 1988; Metz 1992).

Integration, thus, was not only an administrative task, but a deep political process in which the control of the state apparatus became the object of dispute between regional elites. In this sense, while collective identity was relatively consolidated among the Somalis, the state authority needed to be built and legitimized in the whole territory¹¹ (Lewis 1988; Samatar 2016; Touval 1963). But the process of independence in Somalia was not unified under a great national party, just as there was not a leadership with unanimous support and representative of all subnational differences — the Wallerstein's so-called integrating institutions¹². Furthermore, the centripetal force of nationalism, initially propelled by the independence process, started to weaken in the face of the persistent socioeconomic disparities and

¹¹ It is precisely this tension that Elaigwu and Mazrui (2011) define as identity and authority “twin crises”: the former has as its primary theatre the nation, that is, the production of a sense of common political belonging; the latter manifests itself above all in the state, to the extent that it seeks to affirm its institutional legitimacy, coordination capacity and monopoly of coercion. In pre-colonial contexts, both tend to reinforce one another: the fragility of national integration weakens state legitimacy, while the institutional weakness of the state compromises the consolidation of a sense of shared political community.

¹² According to Wallerstein (2005), “integrating institutions” are symbolic and political structures through which the new state diffuses norms, produces common loyalties and makes its presence tangible in the everyday life of the population. In the post-colonial African context, above all, the national party and the national hero stand out, both originating from the anticolonial struggle and being central to the construction of political unity.

the incapacity of the state to produce an effective integration (Amin 2006; Wallerstein 1973; Nkrumah 1977).

Therefore, the expansion of the horizontal and vertical belonging character — that is, the incorporation of different groups into a broader and equal political community — did not occur. According to Brucan (1983), the vertical dimension refers to the progressive acceptance of the legitimacy of a central government by the members of a pre-existing entity, by identifying this central government as the symbol of the nation. This process involved not only the acceptance of the coercive authority of the state, but also the symbolic identification with the political community represented by the central government¹³ (Brucan 1983). In turn, the horizontal dimension implies the acceptance of equality between all members of the civic corps, recognizing the rights of all to share a common history, resources, moral values and other state aspects.

This horizontal belonging is even harder to construct, since it is related to the development of the state and its broadening across all sectors of society, a process opposed to the functioning of the capitalist state (Pereira and Xerri 2020). As Amin (2006) and Wallerstein (1973) indicate, the absence of material transformation of life conditions limits the horizontal character of national belonging, making the consolidation of long-lasting national projects difficult.

According to Nkrumah (2025, 120), “every independence movement in a colonial context has two elements: the demand for political liberty and the revolt against poverty and exploration”¹⁴. Therefore, overcoming underdevelopment becomes central to state building in Africa and defines the political positions within the state. Giovanni Arrighi (2006) emphasizes that Africa inherited from the colonial and pre-colonial phases an economic and political structure that left little room for the construction of viable national economies. The economic power remained controlled by the international capital, for the unequal insertion of Africa into the international labour division through colonialism prevented the formation of a strong local bourgeoisie (Amin 2006). The contemporary African elite — the governing class —, thus, is born out of colonial structures, emerging from co-opted elites, and maintains its ties to foreign capital (Nkrumah 1977; Samoff 1982).

13 Secession attempts constituted, thus, challenges to the central government authority and to the sense of common identity (Elaigwu and Mazrui 2011).

14 Our translation. From the original: “*todo movimento de independência em uma situação colonial contém dois elementos: a demanda por liberdade política e a revolta contra a pobreza e a exploração*” (Nkrumah 2025, 120).

Reflecting this logic, Somalia inherited a fragile economy, marked by a strong external dependency and limited capacity. The absence of an autonomous national bourgeoisie and the centrality of foreign capital implied that the economic control remained, to a large extent, beyond the productive reach of the state (Samatar 2016; Samatar 1988). The governing elite, derived from colonial structures — characterized as “bureaucratic bourgeoisie” — found in the control of the state apparatus the main means of reproduction of its own interests. In this sense, the state became not only the national integration instrument, but also a privileged space of dispute and accumulation (Samoff 1982).

As a fraction of the capitalist class, the internal bourgeoisie is part of the class alliance that composes the structure of political-economic domination. This class legitimizes itself as such through its dominance over the state, thus, the national interest in this moment resides in the interests of maintaining the capitalist socioeconomic structures (Brucan 1983).

In this manner, throughout the 1960s the civil governments maintained, to a large extent, the economic structures inherited from colonialism, deepening the dependence on foreign investments and external aid. The capital attraction policy and the maintenance of foreign control over strategic sectors, such as the banana industry, restricted the possibilities for an autonomous development. Furthermore, the few development projects focused on urban areas and depended almost entirely on external aid, while the government marginalized and taxed the nomads. Despite the influx of millions of dollars from various international donors to cover commercial deficits, expenses concentrated in bureaucracy and defense, increasing the external debt to 48 millions dollars by 1968 (Laitin and Samatar 1984; Samatar 1987).

At last, the electoral process in 1969, in which dozens of parties and more than a thousand candidates disputed only 123 seats, exposed the logic of bargaining for public offices as the easiest path to the enrichment of the elite. The perception of the state as a mere object of dispute between competing groups corroded the credibility of institutions and deepened the structural fragility of the post-colonial model. This scenario of exhaustion culminated in rupture in 1968, with the rise to power of Siad Barre through a military coup (Laitin 1976; Samatar 1988).

Inserted in a broader context of crisis in post-colonial states and rise of socialist oriented military regimes in Africa¹⁵, the new regime presented itself as an alternative capable of overcoming the limits of the previous period, articulating a project of political centralization, economic reorganization and ideological mobilization under the banner of “scientific socialism”. The socialist oriented regime in Somalia rose to power, therefore, by a coup d’état (Visentini 2020). In fact, the Armed Forces were one of the few developed institutions in the young states and assumed the role of national unifying entity, above tribal divisions and mindful of the social reality of the country. While a great number of these military leaders had little or no Marxist theoretical formation, they saw in the socialist model a way of centralizing power, asserting national sovereignty and promoting development (Markakis 1986; Visentini 2020). Above all, the USSR was a “model” of development and centralized, sovereign and multinational state (Visentini 2025).

Therefore, the Marxist-Leninist doctrine became appealing to the African states in the 1970s because it offered a series of solutions adapted to the political, economic and social necessities of these countries. In its first years, Mohamed Siad Barre’s regime sought to implement a range of measures to promote what they called self-sufficiency: nationalization of strategic sectors, formulation of development plans and expansion of state presence in the rural areas (Samatar 1988; Laitin 1976). One of the greatest milestones of this period was the alphabetization campaign in 1974, which officialized a latin writing form to the Somali language and mobilized students to promote literacy among nomadic populations, elevating the alphabetization rate from almost zero to more than 50% in a few months, and strengthening the bond between the state and the rural population (Samatar 1988). Simultaneously, the regime sought to utilize nationalism — and, in particular, pan-somalism — as an instrument of cohesion, with the objective to replace subnational loyalties with an identity centered around the state (Ledesma 2018).

However, despite these advances, the structural limitations that marked the formation of the Somali state were not substantially overcome. The economic base remained fragile, external dependency persisted, now linked to the socialist countries, and the administrative capacity of the state showed itself to be insufficient to sustain, in the long term, the proposed

¹⁵The crisis of young African states was amplified by the economic crisis which spread throughout the periphery of the capitalist system (Clapham 1996), triggering social mobilizations propelled by leftist and nationalist forces, strengthening revolutionary movements in the Third World and fueling a wave of anti-imperialist and socialist revolutions (Halliday, 1989). Thus, the balance of power at a global level and the economic crisis affecting the capitalist powers deepened the internal African crisis and inspired socialist responses.

transformation project. Gradually, the initial impulse of the regime was getting contained by these restrictions, and the strategy of centralization and ideological mobilization started to reproduce, in new forms, patterns that were already present in the previous decade (Samatar 1987, 1988).

In this regard, even though the 1970s were marked by relative advances concerning the strengthening of the state apparatus and the attempt to reorganize the economy, such initiatives proved to be, ultimately, limited. The intensification of the state's external projection, articulated with the maintenance of the irredentist pan-somali ideal, by the state elite, led to direct involvement in the conflict against Ethiopia. The magnitude of the Ogaden War, as well as the subsequent defeat, not only acutely exposed the material limits of the Somali state, but also compromised the very advances previously achieved. The rupture with the Soviet Union and the consequent distancing from the socialist project contributed to the disarticulation of the regime's political and ideological bases (Samatar 1987). Hence, the state reconfiguration efforts undertaken throughout the decade ended, to a large extent, buried under Ogaden sands, evidencing the persistence — and the aggravation — of the contradictions embedded since the very formation of the Somali state.

The Lost Territories: Irredentist Pan-Somalism

Pan-somalism's regional projection did not constitute a late outcome of Somali's politics, but an element constitutive of the state itself since independence. The unification of the British and Italian Somalilands, in 1960, represented the first institutional materialization of Somali nationalism, yet it also consolidated the perception that the national project would remain incomplete without the incorporation of the remaining territories inhabited by Somali populations in the Horn of Africa. The five-pointed star present in the national banner precisely expressed this horizon: the two unified colonies, the Ogaden (Ethiopia), the Northern Frontier District (NFD, Kenya) and Djibouti. This irredentist commitment, however, placed the state on a trajectory of geopolitical collision (Chonka and Healy 2021; Lewis 1988).

Since the 1940s, the unification of the Somali territories had already been defended, but the process initiated in April 1960 strengthened this demand by bolstering the defense of self-determination for Somali peoples in the remaining divided regions. The entirety of Somali external policy in these first years was guided by the matter of "missing territories" (Chonka and

Healy 2021; Mohamed 1992). However, as we will see, the Greater Somalia project again did not obtain external support, even within the continent. By defending the expansion of borders over other independent African states, pan-somalism did not converge with the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) pan-africanist project, and even less with the interests of western powers (Lewis 1963; Yuusuf 2021).

Regarding the British, the initial support to pan-somalism did not endure through the period of the independences. Seeking to safeguard its position in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, preserving its "friendship" with former colonies, London opted not to assume any responsibility referring to the concretization of the pan-somali project. However, the matter of the Somalis in Kenya constituted an obstacle (Thompson 2015; Yuusuf 2021).

In the case of Kenya, the political mobilization of the Somalis in the Northern Frontier District resulted in constant demands for secession and integration to Somalia¹⁶. In support of the activities of Somali parties in Kenya, in 1961, the Republic of Somalia concentrated its forces on pan-somalist exigencies from the Kenyan province, with discourses and protests taking place in Mogadishu supporting the secession and unification. The strategy of the Somali government was to hold the British administration accountable for the decision on the future status of NFD, since, until 1963, Kenya was under its colonial control (Yuusuf 2021; Thompson 2015). Several times, London had supported pan-somalism and, although it later changed positions, still represented a more viable alternative than to try to convince a multinational nationalist movement, which claimed independence in the region, to accept the loss of part of its territory. Even though a British commission had largely recognized this desire, Kenyan, Ethiopian and French pressure (hostile to pan-somalism) led to the maintenance of the territory under Kenyan sovereignty in 1963, causing the severing of diplomatic relations between Mogadishu and London until 1967 (Thompson 2015).

As for French Somaliland, the colonial administration deliberately acted to contain the advance of Somali nationalism. In the territory of today's Djibouti, the Somalis inhabited the south, along the border with British Somaliland, while the population was divided almost equally between the Afar people, in the north, and a European urban population concentrated on the coast. With the strengthening of the pan-somali movement in the region,

¹⁶ In 1960, a series of petitions began being sent to the British authorities in Kenya, requesting the secession of NFD and its incorporation into the Republic of Somalia. In the same year, the Northern Province Popular Progressive Party (NPPPP) was created, defending the separation from Kenya and union with the Somalis (Thompson 2015).

in the years prior to independence, Paris would favor the entry of the Afars in the state's bureaucracy with the objective to secure the French influence area outside the Somali integration project¹⁷ (Clapham 2023; Touval 1963).

In the case of the Ogaden, the matter assumed even more complex dimensions. Integrated to the rest of Ethiopia's territory, the region was mostly inhabited by Somalis, but inserted in a multi-ethnic state whose cohesion largely depended on the maintenance of its borders. The Amhara elite controlled a diverse, multi-ethnic Muslim and Christian population that was also impoverished and deprived of rights. The Somalis were a considerable part of these minorities, but there were other peoples in the same conditions within the Ethiopian state. The demands of the Somalis could open a "Pandora box" of micronationalisms within the country. To the Ethiopians, Somali Irredentism was the denial of Ethiopia's right to exist as a multi-ethnic state (Clapham 2023; Woodward 2002).

From the beginning of the 1960s onwards, local rebellions, followed by violent repression, triggered increasingly intense border clashes. Haile Selassie's government employed aerial bombings and brutal punitive expeditions against nomadic Somalis, resulting in sporadic confrontations with the Somali army along the border, until the escalation in 1964. The Somali defeat in this episode evidenced the disparity between the great Ethiopian Imperial Army and the nascent Somali National Army, reinforcing the centrality of the matter of defense in Somali politics, also inserted in the context of the Cold War (Lewis 1988). In the face of the priority conceded by the United States to Ethiopia and Kenya, Somalia drew closer to the Soviet Union, obtaining military and technical support for the expansion of its armed forces. This process, however, contributed to the intensification of the Security Dilemma in the Horn of Africa, stimulating a regional arms race and elevating the potential for conflict escalation (Lefebvre 1991).

At the continental level, the relation between Somalia and pan-africanism proved to be equally contradictory, mainly for its connection to the Ethiopians: for the Somalis, Ethiopia was seen as a colonialist power (Laitin 1979). Although Somalia did seek, independently, to insert its claims into the framework of the African institutions, the creation of the OAU in 1963 crystallized the maintenance of the colonial borders and, thus, legitimized Ethiopia's demand over the Ogaden (Akokpari 2016). Indeed, the defense of pan-somalism clashed with the principle of the intangibility of colonial borders, resulting in a progressive isolation of Mogadishu within inter-A-

¹⁷ Only in 1977, Djibouti became independent through United Nations and OAU's mediation (Woodward 2002).

frican relations. The project of a “Greater Somalia” ceased to be seen as an expression of self-determination and started being interpreted as a threat to regional stability (Zoppi 2015; Mohamed 1992).

Under the regime of Siad Barre, the pan-somali agenda did not receive substantial changes in its content. What changed was the perception, within the Somali political-military elite, that the regional and international conjuncture finally made the irredentist project feasible. The crisis of the Ethiopian state after the revolution of 1974, with the weakening of central power in Addis Ababa amidst the advances of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in the Ogaden, was seen as an opportunity by sectors of the civilian, military and bureaucratic elites in favor of a direct intervention by the Somali government (Woodward 2002; Laitin 1979; Samatar 1987). Added to this was the fact that Somalia had consolidated, over the 1970s, one of the largest and best equipped armies of the African continent, a direct result of the military investments accumulated since the previous decade (Lefebvre 1991).

But the Ethiopian civil war turned into a socialist revolution, altering the dynamics of the region with the superpowers (Halliday and Molineux 1981). From then on, the Horn of Africa emerged as a strategic battlefield of the Cold War, with the United States and the Soviet Union disputing influence (Jackson 2010; Ottaway 1982; Halliday 1977). Initially, the socialist superpower tried to maintain its alliance with the two states of the region and intensively acted to stem a direct conflict, including the deployment of the Cuban president, Fidel Castro, to Africa to broker a negotiation (Valenta 1980; Porter 1984).

However, the increasing willingness of the United States to secure an ally in the Horn of Africa, coupled to the pressure from regional partners, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, reinforced the perception that there was international space to sustain a Somali offensive over the Ogaden. In other words, the decision for war resulted not only from the military opportunity, but also from the conviction that Somalia could realign its systemic supports in favor of its territorial cause, given that the Socialist Bloc refused to endorse Irredentism (Jackson 2010; Mitchell 2016).

Nevertheless, the systemic dimension was decisive for the unfolding of the conflict, given the role of the Socialist Bloc. The Soviet Union and Cuba, from a broad and decisive perspective, started to sustain the war effort of Ethiopia. The Soviet-Cuban support involved armaments, military advice, operational reorganization of the Ethiopian army, and direct presence of 18,000 Cuban soldiers and more than 1,000 Soviet military advisors, profoundly altering the correlation of forces on the ground (Gleijeses 2006; Valenta

1980; Jackson 2010). In contrast, the Somali expectation of compensating this loss through a rapid realignment with the United States and the Capitalist Bloc turned out to be illusory. Washington's support remained superficial, diplomatic, and above all promising, with no immediate material equivalent to the engagement offered by the Socialist Bloc to Ethiopia¹⁸ (Mitchell 2016; Lefebvre 1991). The result was a progressively isolated Somalia on the battlefield, facing an Ethiopia backed by one of the greatest international military support efforts in the African continent in that period. This commitment asymmetry between the Blocs was decisive for the Somali failure (Ottaway 1982).

In this sense, the Ogaden conflict, from 1977 to 1978, must not be understood as a simple product of Siad Barre's will, since it was part of a pan-somalist project constructed even before independence which, in that moment, converged with internal and external pressures, regional opportunity, and strategic calculation (Laitin 1979; Cardoso 2020).

Hence, the Ogaden War represented the highest and lowest points of the pan-somali ideal (Yuusuf 2021). The attempt to territorially concretize pan-somalism proved incompatible with the state's material capacities and with the limits imposed by the regional and systemic order. The defeat, in this regard, had a devastating political and symbolic effect: what indeed was buried under the Ogaden sands were simultaneously the main axis of the regime's national legitimization, the credibility of the armed forces as an instrument of integration, and a substantial part of the advances produced by the socialist project in the 1970s.

Conclusion

The argument developed in the course of this article was that pan-somalism operated simultaneously in two dimensions: as an internal force of national integration and as an external project of territorial reunification. The tension between these two dimensions constituted the contradictory core of the Somali state building process.

¹⁸ The election of Jimmy Carter reinforced a North-American foreign policy approach that, at that moment, prioritized the easing of tensions with the USSR, but that mostly reflected the Vietnam Effect (Jackson 2010). The emphasis on human rights and in peaceful settlement of disputes made so that the relations with the Third World were not linked to the bipolar dispute, and Carter preferred not to jeopardize the *détente* to strongly support the Somali cause (Colucci 2012). Furthermore, the main objective of the North-Americans had already been materialized: distancing Somalia from the Soviets.

In this sense, the analogy between union and Somali unity formulated by Farah and Eno (2022) helps to illustrate the conclusion of this research. Somali unity — rooted in the language, historical memory, and shared political culture — preceded independence and constituted a social and political fact recognized among its people. As for the union, it referred to the political project of state centralization and of territorial reunification under a single sovereign authority. In the Somali case, this passageway proved to be historically more complex because broad sectors of the society had not yet constituted a long-lasting experience of a centralized government in territorial scale based on this unity. Thus, the historical problem was not the absence of unity, but the assumption that the union could emerge almost automatically from this sociocultural base, without the gradual construction of the material, institutional, and political mediations inherent to state authority.

It was precisely in this dislocation that pan-somalism ceased to operate primarily as an integration horizon and started to absorb resources and legitimacy in the direction of Irredentism. The matter of territorial union became stronger than the internal consolidation of effective national unity. The result was the progressive subordination of the development of state capacities to the search for an external solution for a contradiction that remained internal.

There is still a historical-structural element that turned the attempt to convert the Somali unity into a long-lasting state union more complex. The secular predominance of pastoral and nomadic ways of life, associated with decentralized mechanisms of political regulation based on pacts between lineages, meant that broad sectors of the Somali society had not experienced, before colonialism, centralized authority forms in territorial scale comparable to the modern European state. This does not imply any supposed intrinsic incapacity for state building, but indicates that the project of political union after 1960 required not only the integration of distinct colonial territories and the overcoming of peripheral underdevelopment, but also the historical production of new mediations between decentralized social forms and a centralized state apparatus.

In this regard, the setback of Somali national integration was not linked to the essential antagonism between “clan” and “state”, that is, in the existence (or inexistence) of local identities in itself. The challenge, therefore, lies in the absence of political and institutional mechanisms capable of articulating these symbolic forces with a universalist state authority. Consequently, the central authority remained fragile, excessively dependent on leadership, on the coercive apparatus and on external resources.

Thus, when the pan-somali project was defeated in the Ogaden and the developmentalist impulse of the regime disintegrated, the structural void of a political union that had never fully taken root in the social bases of Somali unity was revealed. In this sense, the Ogaden was the condensation point of internal, regional, and systemic contradictions of the Somali state. The defeat in the conflict also represented the simultaneous defeat of both the external “expansionist” project and the internal development project. Likewise, buried under the Ogaden sands were the main instruments of national integration constructed since 1960: the legitimacy of the armed forces, the self-sufficiency promise, the integration between north and south, and the state’s very capacity to act as a universalist authority. The defeat of 1978 must, therefore, be understood as a historical catalyst, and not as an isolated cause, of the later crisis. The defeat rendered visible the structural void that the union project had masked: the absence of an autonomous economic base, the persistence of external dependency, the institutional fragility, and the capture of the state by bureaucratic-military elites.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role of pan-somalism as an ideal and movement in the construction and crisis of the Somali state. It argues that pan-somalism operated in two simultaneous dimensions: as an internal vector of national integration and as an external project of territorial reunification of the Somali peoples in the Horn of Africa. The central hypothesis maintains that this dual function, initially decisive for the legitimization of the post-colonial state, converted itself into a factor of structural fragilization insofar as the agenda of internal integration was subordinated to Irredentism. Based on a historical-materialist approach, qualitative and hypothetical-deductive, organized in national, regional and systemic levels, this article is divided into three sections. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate how Somalia possessed, prior to independence, a relatively cohesive identitary base, but divided among five different colonial territories. These factors ended up influencing the nationalist movements to seek, besides independence, the unification of territories. In this context, the unification of the British and Italian Somalilands, in 1960, represented the initial execution of the pan-somali project, but also inaugurated tensions between internal consolidation and external projection. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the prioritization of the irredentist agenda diverted resources and legitimacy away from state development towards territorial expansion. The Ogaden War (1977–1978) condensed these contradictions by exposing the material limits of the Somali state in the face of the regional and systemic constraints of the Cold War.

KEYWORDS

Somalia. Pan-somalism. State building in Africa.

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