

The Proliferation of Traditional Leaders in Somaliland: Past and Present Situations

Abdi Abokor Yusuf

ABSTRACT

This study examines the proliferation of the traditional leaders and the political, social and economic changes this brings to Somaliland people. It analyzes the historical and the changing roles of the traditional leaders in the contemporary era. The study argues that the role of the traditional leaders takes a new style of leadership and the new forms of governance such as democracy, elections and multi-party systems influence their decisions. Although, the traditional leaders still keep their traditional delivery of maintaining peace and conflict resolution among the community, but by taking more political roles they need careful collaboration and demarcation in their borderlines with the government. They should respect the rule of law; respect the right of the individuals to vote freely during elections. They need to support the government in the development endeavors, security and peace building initiatives. And above all, they need to understand not working as a gerontocracy form of governance that undermines the role of the state and the government.

INTRODUCTION

Somaliland traditional leaders have historically had an immense importance in shaping Somaliland's political and social life. There is a growing trend of the size of the traditional leaders in Somaliland, the number of recognized Sultans was not more than ten before 1993 and in 2018 they are more than hundred. The constitution that the traditional leaders practice is the Somali customary law (*Xeer Soomaali*). The *Xeer Soomaali* invented in the old days to manage the social, economic and political life of Somali tribes are still in practice, not only in the pastoral settings, but also in the urban dwellings. The Somali traditional system operates under the customary laws – known as *Xeer* in Somali – through which members of a Diya-paying group are obliged to support each other in political and jural responsibilities.¹ It is the responsibility of the elders to oversee that the terms of the *Xeer* are honored.² The Somali traditional leaders used a customary law as guiding regulation for the governance of their clan members.

The practice of customary law is popular and is currently exercised in dispute settlement and arbitration between clan disputes and hostilities. In the urban areas, the modern judiciary system is operated through the courts, but the customs and Sharia laws work in parallel with the formal judiciary system of the state and informally sort out a greater volume of the disputes. Though the formal judicial institutions are operating and provide services to the citizens, on the other hand, 80% of Somaliland disputes are settled through customary and Sharia laws channels.³ Indeed,

¹ I.M. Lewis (2002). *A Modern History of the Somali, Revised, Updated and Expanded, 4th edition*. United Kingdom: Long House Publishing Services.

² Gundel, Joakim (2006). *The role of traditional structures in security, rights, law and development in Somalia*. Nairobi: Danish Refugee Council & Novib/Oxfam.

³ A senior officer at the Somaliland justice system argues that 80% of the disputes that entered into the judiciary system are settled through traditional mechanisms with the engagement of the traditional leaders.

customary laws are affiliated with the political institutions of the Somalis, which is based on kinship, with economic activity, culture, individual and collective rights and economic security, all are mediated through clan and sub-clan units. Entitlement to resources, divisions of labor and authority were underpinned by a system of social contract or *Xeer* between and amongst the clans.⁴

In the past, the primary functions of the Somali traditional leaders were conflict resolution, mediation, and peace building among other roles. In the modern era, they sometimes play a political role, for instance, during the British Somaliland Protectorate, when “*Haud and Reserved Area*” were annexed to Ethiopia in 1954, two influential Sultans and popular politicians were organized; Sultan Abdilahi Sultan Diriye, Sultan Abdirahman Sultan Diriye, Michael Mariano, Abdirahman Ali (Dubbe Ali Yare) were sent to the United Kingdom and followed by Bihi Fooley from Ogaden in another tour to the United Nations headquarters. The point of taking the traditional leaders was to support politicians and give the issue its weight to those levels for discussion. This is a clear indication that the role of the traditional leaders was not excluded from the politics, though the existing Somaliland Constitution confines the role of the Guurti⁵ to peace building, conflict resolution and mediation.

Indeed, the role of the traditional leaders prior to the arrival of the colonial powers and post-colonial state was imperative and deserves appreciation. The proliferation and Balkanization of the traditional system of Somaliland is quite discouraging. There is a considerable increase in number since 1991, for instance, the number of the *Sultans* was less than 15 in 1991 and the list of the Sultans is above one hundred in 2016,⁶ which is regularly increasing and nearly 72.5%⁷ of survey respondents, which is 39 of the 60 interviewed stated that their clans celebrated traditional Sultans since 2000, while 17.5% said No, 10% informed that they are not sure and 5 respondents out of the 60 declined to answer. According to some comments of the survey respondents, including intellectuals, university students and other knowledgeable people among the community, this drastic increase could be attributed to an increase of population. But, there are other viable reasons, such as political motivation, the position of Sultans which became a source of power, pride and wealth generation which lead clans compete over establishing their own traditional leader.

There is a change in lifestyle for the traditional leaders who are key players in the formation, keeping and sustaining of peace both in the past and in the present. However, the changing lifestyle of the Somaliland people who mainly lived in the rural areas are nowadays moving to the urban centers which greatly influence their lifestyle. This change leads the traditional leaders exercise more political role rather than sticking to the traditional norms and conflict resolution, political decisions are now involved, such as the case of Guurti occupying Somaliland’s Upper Chamber; they endorse all laws in the country. The socio-political transformations have trickled

⁴Keble, Steve & Walls, Michael (2009). *Tradition and Modernity in Somaliland Beyond Polarity: Negotiating a Hybrid State*, a paper presented at the Leeds University Centre of Africa Studies, UK.

⁵ The Upper House of Somaliland is called the House of Guurti, the members exist in clan representation.

⁶ A survey conducted by Abdi Abokor Yusuf on 2016 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master’s Degree of Arts in Governance and Leadership submitted to the University of Hargeisa School of Graduate Studies.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

down into the traditional structures and social bases, leading to politically motivated proliferation of traditional kings and leaders and politically instigated inter-clan disputes. The engagement of the traditional leadership in urban politics made them no more “neutral” to their clan constituencies. This kind of practice weakened and eroded their traditional statuses and legitimacy as super clan authorities.⁸

The proliferation of elders makes it increasingly unclear as to who are the legitimate elders, is a symptom of this crisis. Furthermore, the elders can hardly cope with the demand in terms of the amount of issues they are expected to address, because they lack resources, and knowledge about how modern governance and business sectors work, as well as the rapid social changes that Somalis is undergoing (urbanization, youth bulge, changing culture, and a deepening globalization).⁹ As the consideration of criterion is absent, the number of the traditional leaders increases. This growing increase puts their legitimacy into question. The swift change in the Somaliland’s pastoral livelihood in new urban settings brings challenges to those opting to traditional role positions, who not only lacks the resource to govern, but also deprives the respect and prestige that the old days *Sultans* enjoyed.

The central objective of this study is to examine a way of finding a solution for the greatly increasing number of traditional leaders in Somaliland. It identifies the advantages and disadvantages of traditional leaders’ increase to the community; and the reasons for the increase in numbers, and how this increase impacts on the community. It further highlights the historical evolution of the traditional leaders and how their role and functions changed over the past quarter of a century. This study argues that though the traditional leaders are important active members in Somaliland people and play an active leadership role in their communities, on the other hand, in most recent years the number of traditional leaders, particularly the *Sultans*¹⁰ are increasing disproportionately; without proper matching to the size of population increase; each sub-clan is making a number of traditional leaders with no restriction, even when the number of the sub-clan is small.

This quantitative increase should be linked to the absence of proper criteria for the formation of this prominent position. Since 1993, the increase is estimated to be more than tenfold. The increase results are poor traditional leadership and dilution of the respect and reputation that people ushered in this traditional leadership position. Therefore, there is a need to develop a criterion for the selection of the *Sultans* as the criteria that they were formed in the past are no longer effective, particularly in the urban settings, where the core political activities are orchestrated and gives motivation and legitimacy to the creation process.

⁸ Ahmed Mohamed Hashi (2005). *The implication of traditional leadership, ‘Guurti’ and other non-state actors in local governance in Somaliland*. Study Report for the Traditional Structures and Local Governance (TSLG) Project of the Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion Program (CESI) of the World Bank Institute. Available at <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/153068/somaliafinal.pdf>, accessed on August 25, 2017.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ Sultan, Garad, Boqor, Ugaas are interchangeable and are equal in rank, but different clans use one title, while others mix up nowadays.

CONCEPTUAL CLARITY: THE TRADITIONAL LEADER

Traditional leaders are the Somali elders with recognized influence and traditional authority to represent their clansmen; for instance, the *Caaqil*, *Aqil* or *Akil*, *Sultans*, head of the villages or locality and nominees from clan or sub-clan with a formal mandate to represent them in conferences and problem-solving issues.. *Sultan*, *Boqor*, *Ugaas*, *Garad* are the titles named to those figures. The latter is the most greatly expanding group, as they have a broader mandate, they were few before quarter of a century. This high level traditional position claim the leadership of the overall clan they want to represent, but many of them do not have the mandate of the clan they want to represent as they lack the power and wealth to rule.

Due to the resources needed, the traditional leaders always rely on the support of the government, which the leader either exchanges his allegiance as well as that of his clan. The *Aqil* officially recognized by the Ministry of Interior, and paid by the Ministry, while the *Aqil* is accountable to his constituency, which is the Diya-paying group. There are other traditional elders that do not have an official title, but assist the *Aqil* in carrying out his duties. Though the *Aqil* is influential in their sub-clans, there are also some very influential individuals who have sub-*Aqil* titles such as *Jawaab Daar*, *Beel-daajiye*, *Nabadoon* and others. Due to the patriarchal culture of Somalis, the traditional leaders are always men. Women are not directly part of the dispute resolution, but they informally pass their ideas through men.

In Somaliland prior to the colonial period, the people were mainly pastoral and with few agropastoral. The type of lifestyle was totally traditional nomadic society, clans fighting over water points and animal resources was the primary life supporting source of livelihood. The stronger clans survived and led the rest as the survival of the fittest were the rule of the day. The colonial imposition of artificial boundaries, European judicial systems and centralized government disrupted traditional grazing patterns and authority structures, and consequently the equilibrium of clans and the management of resources.¹¹

The Somaliland traditional leaders supported the colonial administrative system, and the *Aqils* become a fundamental institution of the colonial state. That is why they are still part of the Somaliland's governance system and they are registered in the Ministry of Interior and are paid by the government. In the colonial period, they were the main source of local power and assisted the colonial administration in peace building and conflict resolution. A local authority's ordinance enacted in 1950 empowered the governor to appoint selected *Aqils* – the salaried headmen who provided a link between District Commissioners and their people.¹² The system paid 15 pounds of the monthly salary that went with the title.

During the colonial administration, the *Sultans* were very few and they were respected and received a special privilege for their leadership, for instance, the *Sultans* had a great discipline of keeping their dignity; and due to the self-esteem of their position they never ate and drank in public teashops. People shook hands with *Sultans*, by taking their arm with *Cumaama* (men head scarf), showing a sign of respect in the earlier days. Indeed, the number of *Sultans* in Somaliland

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² Ibid., 1.

quadrupled as each sub-clan crowned their own traditional leader. This is extremely different from the old days, for instance, during the colonial period, Hargeisa had only three Sultans: Sultan Abdilahi Sultan Diriye, Sultan Abdirahman Sultan Diriye and Sultan Mohamed Sultan Farah¹³. The number of the *Sultans* in other regions such as Togdheer was equal in number to the figures in Hargeisa.

CROWNING TRADITIONAL LEADERS: A GLIMPSE FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Traditionally, both the *Sultans* and *Aqils* were elected through the clan selection process. The process of identification for the potential candidate was mainly informal and the candidate went through a rigorous selection process; the men of wisdom in the sub-clan identified and selected the nominee. A coronation ceremony was made for the selected traditional leader. During celebration, he was given and showered with milk. To make the elected candidate economically secure, the sub-clan collects and provides financial resources, including camels and horses to the crowned traditional leader. In the survey, the greatest weakness of the traditional leaders were attributed that they are not financially independent 75.8% supported that they are either in a weaker financial position or lacks secure financial support, which lowers their status, 13.8% supported that they are elected by few, while 6.9% stated that they are in favor of their financial supporters among the clan and 3.4% declined to answer.

The new political environment shapes that some new traditional leaders make a self-nomination, pay the crowning ceremony and organize events that they buy the titles by themselves paying everything that were traditionally done by the sub-clan, which results that the process and the title come through self-appointed. This unauthentic process discredits the title and the status of traditional leaders, which some people question and nickname Mr. X is not a genuine traditional leader (Sultan), but is “*Daba-qalooc*”¹⁴ in Somali or “*Curved tail*” demeaning the title.

The formation of the traditional leaders of the *Diya-paying group*¹⁵ (*Aqils*):

The selection of traditional *Aqils* has changed over the years. In the colonial period, the formation of *Aqils* was based on the number of male heads in the sub-clan, those who reach a certain limit claim to select an *Aqil* and the colonial administrators granted the permission after ensuring that the claim of the sub-clan is valid. The *Aqils* were officially paid by the colonial administration. They worked with the government on security issues and supported the government if one of their sub-clan members or *Diya-paying group* commits a crime. They were the first point of access to give the information of the offender, and the first source to inform his whereabouts as he can receive this information from his clansmen. In Somaliland, they are registered at the Ministry of Interior. They sort out 80% of local conflicts.¹⁶

¹³Hussein Ali Duale (2016). *Raad-Raaca Taariikh Soomaaliyeed*. Hargeysa: Sagaljet Publishing.

¹⁴Daba-qalooc is the name of money note printed after the collapse of Siad Barre government, which its signature was not the one originally recognized by the people, they gave this note by this name to show that it is not the originally recognized note.

¹⁵ A sub-clan that collectively pay together the compensation, in case of death or injury is called a *dia paying group*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

The criteria for the selection of the *Aqils* were determined by the influential members of the sub-clan. Firstly, they make a proper assessment of the nominee, which is based on his judgment, eloquence, decision making, courage and generosity. The sub-clan or Diya-paying group¹⁷ was very proud of selecting *Aqil* as those who have *Aqils* were the numerous group, those who cannot reach the number should join their closest to kinship. Although a clear formula does not exist for the formation of this traditional leadership. However, it comes through inheritance and traditionally it was never solicited by the nominee. It was the choice of the sub-clan who granted the title and recognized the position, which always came through their observation and sometimes somebody who is outside the assembly of the clan were selected.¹⁸

The Ministry of Interior grants the permission of the traditional leaders' coronation ceremony. The political influence of the politicians from the sub-clan are always respected taking into account the security implications of the action as it can create conflict among the sub-clan if they do not agree the decision of the selection. The qualities that were respected in the past by the clan members are currently compromised or basically never taken into account. In contrary, the virtuous qualities in the past and good leadership qualities are not the basic criteria of selection. In certain scenarios, self-nomination is common and the use of money and bribing influential persons in the sub-clan to get their support has become the talk of the day and the “*Daba-qalooc*” traditional leaders are increasing in number and now exist in greater representation.

Haji Abdikarim Hussein Yusuf, also known as Haji Abdi Warabe, is an influential elder and currently a member of the executive committee of the Somaliland Upper House of Guurti. Haji Abdi is known for his eloquence and unwavering voice in communicating his decisions to address conflicts and create peace among conflicting groups. He was one of the traditional leaders that organized the popular Borama Conference in 1993. Haji Abdi stated that he inherited this traditional leadership from his elder brother in 1940, after his brother passed away. Haji Abdi is a traditional chief or “*Aqil*” of his sub-clan. In an interview with the Academy for Peace and Development he explains how he became the *Aqil* of his sub-clan, and cites it as follows: “My elder brother passed away in 1940 and I was nominated by our clan as his successor. This followed the Somali tradition that when either your father or your elder brother passes away, you will be nominated as his successor by clan elders. I initially refused the offer and only accepted once the clan agreed to abide by three conditions: a) to protect and keep the peace, b) to accept the government's rulings; and, c) not to be envious or jealous of what other clans have. I was consequently inaugurated as the chief (*Aqil*) of my sub-clan”.¹⁹

According to an interview with the director general of the Ministry of Interior by one of the local media ²⁰on August 19, 2016 stated that the existing number of *Aqils* recorded by the Ministry of Interior is as high as 2138, in which 1138 of them are paid and the rest in the waiting list. Indeed,

¹⁷A sub-clan that collectively pay together the compensation, in case of death or injury is called a dia paying group

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹A Conversation with Haji Abdi Husein Yusuf, available at http://www.c-r.org/downloads/accord%2021_18The%20role%20of%20Somaliland%20elders%20in%20making%20and%20keppi%20peace_2010_ENG.pdf, accessed on August 25, 2017.

²⁰ Wargane (2016). *Wasaaradda Arrimaha Gudaha oo Shaacisay Tirada Rasmiga ee Cugaasha Dalka ka diiwaan-gashan*, available at <https://wargane.com/2016/08/19/somaliland-wasaaradda-arrimaha-gudaha-oo-shaacisay-tirada-rasmiga-ah-ee-cuqaasha-dalka-ka-diiwaangashan.html>, accessed on August 25, 2017.

the role of the traditional leaders is getting more politicized. In connection to this, Somaliland experiments a new form of modern governance and conduct elections with a multi-party system. Still, this popular democratization process relies on the influence of the traditional leaders. During the elections the traditional leaders work as bandwagon for the support of the competing candidates. The support given to the Kulmiye Party by two popular *Sultans* of certain clans in 2017 Somaliland presidential election in Burao on October 2017 to support the party's candidate Mr. Muse Bihi Abdi is good indication of this involvement²¹ The role of the traditional leaders is not declining in the face of the modern democratization process and is anticipated that it will not shrink in the foreseeable future. In contrary, the proliferation of *Sultans*, *Boqors*, and *Garads* solely crowned for politically motivated intentions became the norm of the day.

Due to the importance of the seat of the traditional elder in the eyes of the politicians and the public, it is believed that the *Sultans* could link support and sympathy during elections. In recent times, the tough competition between the clans and support to political parties for the top seat partly stimulate the crowning of the traditional leaders, which is often a politically motivated agenda. In a survey²² conducted in 2016 for 60 interviewees, the reasons of the growing traditional leaders, 18.9% supported that the post of the traditional leadership became a position of prestige, which brings fame and wealth, so it attracts many people to run for it, while 9.4% attributed the issue to the demand of the growing population. However, the involvement of the traditional leaders in the government affairs and politics undermines their integrity.²³

The increasing number of traditional leaders clearly indicates that the status of the traditional leader is gradually getting more politicized. Many people in Somaliland believe that the proliferation of traditional leaders, particularly the *Sultans* is continuously defaming the respect and honor the wider communities ushered on that seat in the past. Moreover, if the trend goes on, as it is today, the role of the supreme traditional *Sultans* will be discounted to positions as low as *Aqils* – the head of the Diya-paying group; the members of the same clan who collectively pay compensation together. In the survey, answering on the disadvantages of traditional *Sultans*, 77.6% of the respondents informed that they become politicized and sometimes act as mediocre rather than peace makers.

Traditionally, the selection and identification of the one who is going to be a traditional *Sultan* were very strict. The men of wisdom among the clan chose the candidate in his absence, without his prior knowledge that he will be crowned for the *Sultan*. It was shame if one appoints himself and runs for the seat, and was never being granted in that mechanism compared to what happens in modern days. In the past, to shortlist the potential candidates, the sub-clan leaders participated an assembly and those possessing the right characteristics, including generosity, patience, courage, and justice were shortlisted. During the coronation ceremony, the guest speakers at the event, reminded the new traditional leader the factors that loses his authority as poor decision

²¹ Suldaan Xasan Suldaan Cabdilaahi oo ka hadlay Qodobada Shirkaa Burco ee (2017), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CQLDz3FOLw>, accessed on October 10, 2017.

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Gundel, Joakim (2006). *The predicament of the 'Oday': The role of traditional structures in security, rights, law and development in Somalia*. Nairobi: Danish Refugee Council & Novib/Oxfam.

making, unjust, and being stingy. Translated in Somali as: “*Saddex baa madaxnimo kaa qaada: a) guddoon jilicsan, b) gar weecsan, iyo, c) gacan gudhan*”.²⁴

The traditional leaders historically enjoyed great respect and privilege and some people believe that the urbanization and change in the Somali nomadic lifestyle compel the traditional leaders to change with the tide. 77.6% of the survey respondents stated that the Sultans become politicized and sometimes act as mediocre rather than peace makers, while 20.7% of the respondents supported that some *Sultans* are spoilers, but still a great majority of the clan members love them, not only those who elected them.

PROSPECTS FOR STABLE TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP

The increasing number of the traditional leaders will be likely to continue in the near future due to the absence of regulations to manage the formation of the traditional leader in this modern era. The situation needs to be carefully assessed on a case by case basis. There is a great assignment for the government in power to reconstitute the creation of the traditional leadership. Particularly, the continuation of the existing trend will demean the position of traditional leaders, which is a useful leadership position in the community. The government needs to reassess its policy on this issue and to bring new criteria respecting population increase and the need for this position to keep the dignity of the community leadership positions.

Somaliland’s future success in negotiating the very significant challenges ahead is likely to require the continuation of the hybrid of tradition and political ‘modernity’ that has been evolving to the present time.²⁵ This is not necessarily important to have a proliferation of traditional leaders taking the existing upward trend, but to have a reasonable increase in the number of traditional leaders.

CONCLUSION

In the view of the public, there is a concern in the proliferation of the traditional leaders; particularly *Sultans*, which risks the authenticity of their traditional leadership status. There is a great need to exercise a concerted effort to find a solution to the selection of the modern traditional leaders. The existing anarchy on a selection of traditional leaders results in unacceptable self-nominations by greedy and politicized candidates that want to grasp the title of traditional leadership through unfair means. The creation of common criteria to select the traditional leaders and reviewing the existing one is highly desired.

The government is trying to restrict the process, but the absence of regulation on the subject and close to anarchy system currently in place brings excessive freedom that abuses and manipulates the smooth flow of the traditional leadership development. There is great need to bring

²⁴ This Somali proverb is always pronounced in the coronation ceremonies, the last one that I participated was the coronation of Sultan Yusuf Abdi Awed in Burao. Sultan Mohamed Sultan Abdulqadir pronounced those same words in the event.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

regulations for the establishment of the modern traditional leaders (proper criteria) to restrict “*Daba-qaloo*” *Sultans* who takes advantage of the weak governance systems and institutions.