

## A Brief History of Christianity in the Somali Peninsula

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### Prologue

The triple purpose of this paper is to:

1. document the long history of Christianity in the Somali peninsula
2. encourage more research on Christianity among Somali people
3. enrich the literature reservoir of the Somali Church

Unbeknownst to many, Christianity reached “at least the coastal areas of the land Somalis inhabit” by the 7<sup>th</sup> century as attested to ancient graves and other traces.<sup>1</sup> This fact alone should put to rest the famous Somali Muslim mantra that to be a Somali is to be a Muslim. Ali Abdirahman Hersi, a Somali scholar, wrote in 1977 that “it is difficult to conceive of any meaning in the term Somali itself without at the same time implying Islamic identity.”<sup>2</sup> Somalis are about 99% Muslim, and the tiny Christian minority in their midst faces intense persecution because of their Christian faith. Somali Muslims also fight over power, and resources and the collapse of Somalia’s central government in 1991 unleashed carnage and bloodbath. According to the Center for American Progress, up to “1.5 million people have died in Somalia’s conflict or directly due to hunger since 1991.”<sup>3</sup>

While attending a cabinet meeting in 1974, a prominent Somali Christian and a statesman, Michael Mariano Ali, said to Muhammad Siyad Barre, the President of the Republic, that Somalia would never experience peace until it returned to its Christian roots.<sup>4</sup> The Somali government was violently overthrown 16 years later by a consortium of armed groups. Siyad Barre, as he was locally known, knew well the indispensable role Somali Christians played in the struggle for Somalia’s independence. Somali Christians were represented in the cabinets of the two presidents prior to Siyad Barre. For example, Michael once served as the Minister of Economic Planning under the Premiership of Muhammed Haji Ibrahim Egal. Another Somali Christian, Awil Haji Abdillahi, better known as Anthony James, served as the Minister of Finance under the Premiership of Abdirisak Haji Hussein.

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<sup>1</sup> Hussein A. Bulhan, *In-Between Three Civilizations: Archeology of Social Amnesia and Triple Heritage of Somali*. Volume 1. (Bethesda, Maryland: Tayosan International Publishing), 218

<sup>2</sup> Ali Abdirahman Hersi, *The Arab Factor in Somali History: The Origins and the Development of Arab Enterprise and Cultural Influence in the Somali Peninsula*. University of California, Los Angeles: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1977, 109.

<sup>3</sup> John Norris and Bronwyn Bruton, “Twenty Years of Collapse and Counting: The Cost of Failure in Somalia.” Center for American Progress. September 2011, 10  
<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/09/pdf/somalia.pdf>  
(accessed 31 December 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ben I. Aram, “Somalia’s Judeo-Christian Heritage: A Preliminary Survey.” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*. 2003, 7.

Somali Christians also played a disproportionate role in the struggle for independence. The first President and the primary founder of the Somali Youth League (SYL), Abdulkhadir Sheikh Sakhawudeen (d. June 1951), was a Roman Catholic Christian.<sup>5</sup> The SYL was the first Somali political party, and its struggle led to Somalia's independence.

Lewis Clement Salool, a Somali Christian, designed the SYL flag with its cross, crescent, and five stars. He was also a key legal advisor to the SYL. Alex Qolqoole, another Somali Christian, supported the SYL financially and served as its primary policy advisor. The SYL's struggle could have faltered without the selfless support and leadership of Michael, Anthony, Lewis, and Abdulkhadir who is better known as *Sakhawudeen*.

#### Coat of arms of Somalia

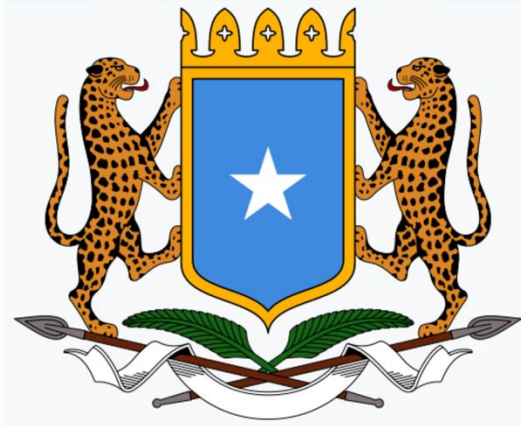


Photo credit: Wikipedia.org

The coat of arms of Somalia portrays three full crosses and two partial ones at the top of the shield. The coat of arms was designed in 1953 by Osman Geedi Raage, one of the key leaders of the Somali Youth League.<sup>6</sup> The coat of arms was adopted on 10 October 1956. The Somali Constitution is silent about the crosses when describing the nation's top symbol:

"The emblem of the Federal Republic of Somalia, as shown in section B of Schedule One, is a blue shield with a gold frame, in the centre of which is a silver-coated, five-pointed star. The shield is surmounted by a decorated emblem with five golden heads, with two lateral ones halved. The shield is borne from the sides by two leopards facing each other under the lower point of the shield, along with two palm leaves, which are interlaced with a white ribbon."<sup>7</sup>

Osman Geedi Raage was a Muslim albeit a secular one. It is possible he chose the cross as a mere decoration. Osman may have also chosen the cross for its spiritual prowess, consciously or subconsciously, as many Somali Muslims still do it today. It is a matter of great significance that a transnational people group that is about 99%

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed A. Gurhan, "The Persecuted Disciples of Jesus Christ: A Research Article on Somali Ecclesiology." Somali Christian Mission, December 2012, 15.

<sup>6</sup> The Somali Youth League (SYL) (Somali: Ururka Dhalinyarada Soomaaliyeed, Italian: Lega dei Giovani Somali or Lega Somala della Gioventù), was initially established as the Somali Youth Club (SYC) to disguise its political ambitions from the Italian colonial authority. The SYL was the first political party in Somalia. It fought for Somalia's independence in the Somali Peninsula and in the international arenas in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The SYL demanded the unification of the five Somali territories in the Somali Peninsula to form the Somali Republic.

<sup>7</sup> "The Federal Republic of Somalia: Provisional Constitution." Adopted 01 August 2012, Mogadishu, Somalia. University of Minnesota, Human Rights Library, n.d., 2  
<http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/Somalia-Constitution2012.pdf> (accessed 09 January 2021)

Muslim uses the cross, the most recognizable Christian symbol, in so many ways, including as a sign of blessing and protection.

### Christian Roots

The Arab and Persian historians, scholars, and geographers who wrote about Christianity in the Somali peninsula include: *Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali al-Mas'udi* (896–956), Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1050), and Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Idrisi al-Qurtubi al-Hasani as-Sabti (1100–1165). Al-Mas'udi, al-Biruni, and al-Idrisi all described the Somali port city of Zeila as a Christian city with a few Muslim merchants.<sup>8</sup> Zeila is near the border with Djibouti in northwestern Somalia. Zeila was at the time ruled by Abyssinian Christians, thus the powerful Christian community in the city.

However, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Musa ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi (1213–1286) described Zeila as a wealthy city in which its inhabitants were completely Muslim around (1214–17). Zeila must have reverted to Muslim control by the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, according to Ibn Sa'id. Zeila's Muslim population, by this time, is also affirmed by the famed Moroccan explorer, geographer, and scholar, Ibn Battuta (1304 –1369).<sup>9</sup> Zeila, once staunchly Christian city, played a significant role in bringing Islam to the Oromos as well as the other Ethiopian ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup>

While the Christianity practiced in the Somali peninsula as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century disappeared; its once prominent presence in northwestern and northeastern regions of Somalia (Somaliland and Puntland) is visible in rich archeology. The British explorer, Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890), visited the Sanaag Region of eastern Somaliland supported by the Royal Geographical Society. Members of the Warsangeli clan explained to him that certain ruins in the area were the remains of a derelict local church.<sup>11</sup> Burton also learnt of similar ruins in what seemed like replicas of the Warsangeli ruins, among the Dhulbahante clan in Sool, the southeastern of Sanaag. The Dhulbahante clan members explained the ruins as the mosques of their forefathers. Burton understood the latter ruins to be a former church converted to a mosque before it became derelict. Burton noted that the Dhulbahante clan, like the Warsangeli, “a *Mala*, or cross of stone or wood covered with plaster, at the head and foot of every tomb.”<sup>12</sup> When asked about the crosses, the Dhulbahante clan members said it was their custom which they learnt from their parents and

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<sup>8</sup> Hersi, *The Arab Factor in Somali History*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Henry A. Rayne, *Sun, Sand and Somals: Leaves from the Note-book of a District Commissioner in British Somaliland*. (London: Witherby, 1921).  
[https://archive.org/stream/sunsandsomalslea00raynuoft/sunsandsomalslea00raynuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/sunsandsomalslea00raynuoft/sunsandsomalslea00raynuoft_djvu.txt) (accessed 27 December 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*. (London & Toronto: Published by J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. & in New York by E. P. Dutton & Co. First Edition 1910. Reprinted 1924, 317

<sup>12</sup> Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, 318.

grandparents.<sup>13</sup> Burton concluded this finding by stating that this “again would argue that a Christian people once inhabited these now benighted lands.”<sup>14</sup>

Burton also reports a ruined structure, converted by the Somalis into a cemetery that resembled “a convent or a monastery.”<sup>15</sup> To the west of this ruin, Burton reports another derelict structure of white mortar from burnt limestone rock, fifty yards away from what appeared a convent or a monastery. The local Somalis described this ruin as “a Christian house of worship.”<sup>16</sup> Burton stated that some of the walls of the derelict Christian building were still ten feet high which “show an extent of civilization now completely beyond the Warsangali.”<sup>17</sup> The local “people assert these ruins to be those of Nazarenes.”<sup>18</sup>

### Socotra Christianity

Socotra Island, while a Yemeni territory, is off the coast of Somalia and has close Somali links. The Island is closer to mainland Somalia than mainland Yemen. There is also a Somali clan, Arab Mohamud Saalah, in Puntland regions of northeastern Somalia, who claim Socotra as their ancestral homeland. Socotra is located between the Arabian Sea and Guardafui Channel. The Island is the largest of the four islands known as the Socotra Archipelago.<sup>19</sup> The Island lies 380 kilometers (240 miles) south of the Arabian Peninsula. While mainland Yemen is in Western Asia, Socotra and the rest of its archipelago are geographically part of Africa.<sup>20</sup> Minority groups in Socotra include south Arabians, Indians, and Somalis.<sup>21</sup>

Church tradition states that Thomas the Apostle, on his way to India, was shipwrecked by the Socotra Island. Thomas used the debris of the shipwreck to build a church. According to the *Endeavors of Saint Thomas*, the Apostle visited a mysterious island on his way to India.<sup>22</sup> G. W. B. Huntingford notes that:

The inhabitants seem always to have been mixed people. Some of them at one period were Christians, converted it was said by St. Thomas in AD 52 while on his way to India. Abu Zaid Hassan, an Arab geographer of the 10th century, said that in his time, most of the inhabitants of Socotra were

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<sup>13</sup> Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, 318.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Nazarene, *Nasaara* in Somalized Arabic, is a positive term Somalis use for all Christians.

<sup>19</sup> A. G. Miller and T. A., Cope. *Flora of the Arabian Peninsula and Socotra*. Volume I Edinburg University Press in association with Royal Botanic Garden Edinburg, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1996, 7,11

<sup>20</sup> “Paradise Has an Address: Socotra – Geography.” <http://www.socotra.cz/about-us-2.html?lang=en> (accessed 28 December 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times: India, 1541–1544*. (Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982), 122.

<sup>22</sup> J. K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 488-454.

Christian... but by the beginning of the 16th century, Christianity had almost disappeared. Leaving little trace but stone crosses at which Alvares said the people worshipped... However, a group of people was found here by St. Francis Xavier in 1542, claiming to be descended from the converts made by St. Thomas....<sup>23</sup>

St. Francis (1506 –1552), a Navarrese Catholic missionary, described the people he met in Socotra:

The natives esteem themselves to be Christians and are very proud of it. They can neither read nor write, possess no books nor other sources of information and are very ignorant. But they have churches, crosses, and ritual lamps, and in each village, there is a *caciz*, who corresponds to a priest among us. Having no bells, they summon the people to services with wooden clappers, such as we have during Lent.<sup>24</sup>

It is hard to tell how much of the ignorance St. Francis, co-founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), attributed to the Christians in Socotra is accurate and how much of it is based on misunderstanding exacerbated by the cultural and language barriers. For example, the famous Venetian explorer, Marco Polo (1254-1324), wrote of the people of Socotra:

The inhabitants [of Socotra] are baptized Christians and have an archbishop...I should explain that the archbishop of Socotra has nothing to do with the Pope at Rome, but is subject to an archbishop who lives at Baghdad. The archbishop of Baghdad sends out the archbishop of this Island.<sup>25</sup>

Douglas Botting wrote of the Christians in Socotra, “On this outpost of the Arab world a race of people impervious to the great tide of Islam, who had retained some remnants of the Christian faith for nearly a thousand years after the birth of Mohamet....They were all strictly monogamous.”<sup>26</sup> Any trace of a visible Christianity disappeared from Socotra by 1680 due to Muslim occupation and lack of support from the nearby Christians in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

While the Christians in Socotra were most likely of the Assyrian confession with a Syriac liturgy, there is a strong probability that the Christians in Socotra were also influenced by the Abyssinian Orthodox Church. Greville Stewart Parker Freeman Grenville (1918 – 2005) wrote of the observation of St. Francis Xavier about the Christians in Socotra. St. Francis observed that their Lenten fasts paralleled those of

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<sup>23</sup> G. W. B. Huntingford, ed. Trans. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (The Hakluyt Society, London, 1980), 103.

<sup>24</sup> S. G. Pothan. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (Asia Publishing Company: New York 1963), 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Latham, Trans. *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Penguin books, London, 1958), 296-298.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958) 215

<sup>27</sup> “The Socotran of Yemen” [http://www.bethany.com/profiles/p\\_code3/891.html](http://www.bethany.com/profiles/p_code3/891.html)



the Abyssinian Orthodox Church, including length and strictness.<sup>28</sup> This is not a surprise since Christian Abyssinia once ruled Yemen. Hussein A. Bulhan, a Somali scholar, writes:

In the early sixth century, Christian Arabs on the opposite side of the Red Sea asked the Axum King to help them fend off religious persecution they experienced from a Jewish Himyar King. In response, the Abyssinians crossed to Arabia and conquered Yemen in about 525 and continued to rule them for fifty years....<sup>29</sup>

Bowersock describes the massacre perpetrated against Yemeni Christians in 516 by a Jewish King, Yousef Asa'ar.<sup>30</sup> This Jewish King of Arabs massacred more than 20,000 Christians in the cities of Zafran and Najran after they had refused to convert to Judaism.<sup>31</sup> The King himself took great joy in describing the atrocities he committed against the Yemeni Christians who chose to die martyrs rather than convert to Judaism.<sup>32</sup> Abyssinians killed the King and liberated the Yemeni Christians. Some of the descendants of the Abyssinians who gave a helping hand to the Yemeni Christians still live in Yemen as a marginalized minority group.

### Western Missionary Effort

The French Catholic Mission (FCM) opened an orphanage in Daymoole village, near Berbera, British Somaliland, in 1881.<sup>33</sup> This orphanage became the target of Sayid Muhammed Abdulle Hassan (7 April 1856 - 21 December 1920); he objected to the efforts of introducing (or reviving to be more accurate) Christianity among the Somali Muslims. One well-known incident reports that the Sayid's "wrath intensified when he met Somali boys converted to Christianity by missionaries who came and collaborated with the colonial administration."<sup>34</sup> The Sayid, whom the British colonial authority called the "Mad Mullah", fought the British and their supporters for twenty years. The Sayid and his dervish warriors were finally defeated with superior military assets, including warplanes.<sup>35</sup>

The British colonial authority was finally forced to expel the FCM in 1910 to appease the Sayid and the local *ulama* supporting him.<sup>36</sup> The twenty-nine years the FCM

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<sup>28</sup> Freeman-Grenville, G.S.P. *The East African Coast: Select Documents From The First to The Early Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 135-137.

<sup>29</sup> Bulhan, *In-Between Three Civilizations*, 218.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Dhu Nuwas, also known as Yousef Asa'ar was a self-styled Jewish king-warlord who ruled several Yemeni tribes AD 517 – 525 and possibly until 527.

<sup>31</sup> Glen Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Ryckmans, "La persécution des chrétiens himyarites au sixième siècle," (Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Inst. in *het Nabije Oosten*, 1956), 1–24.

<sup>33</sup> Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*, (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd. 2015), 121.

<sup>34</sup> Bulhan. *In-Between Three Civilizations*, 263

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 172, 263.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modrick*. (Guardian Books, 2006), 76.

spent around Berbera was not wasted; a significant number of local people became Disciples of Christ. The FCM moved to the Somali town of Jigjiga, Eastern Ethiopia, 367 kilometers from Daymoole.<sup>37</sup> This Catholic mission in Jigjiga, which eventually expanded to other areas in the region, produced some prominent ethnic Somali Catholics who are widely respected among Somali people in the Horn of Africa.

The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) arrived in the southern coastal town of Kismayo in 1896. The mission eventually expanded to Jilib, Jamaame, and Mogambo, all in the Jubaland regions of southern Somalia. In addition to traditional evangelistic ministry, SOLC operated schools and clinics.<sup>38</sup> SOLC facilitated the planting of a number of Somali-led house-churches in southern Somalia. The Italian colonial authority expelled SOLC in 1935.<sup>39</sup>

The Mennonite Mission (MM) entered Somalia in 1953, setting up a base in Mogadishu.<sup>40</sup> The MM also operated schools and clinics. The MM expanded its work to Mahaddaay, Jowhar, Jamaame in addition to two other mission stations. The Somali government eventually expelled the MM in 1976. The MM continued its Somali ministry from Nairobi, Kenya.

The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) entered Somalia in 1954 under the leadership of Warren and Dorothy Modricker.<sup>41</sup> The SIM also ran schools and clinics.<sup>42</sup> The Somali government also expelled the SIM in 1976. The SIM continued the Somali ministry from Nairobi, Kenya.

The RCC, the SOLC, the MM, and the SIM comprise the Magnificent Four because of their ministry success among the Somalis. The progress of the Somali Church is directly linked to the missionary work of the Magnificent Four.

### Somalis and Crosses

Somalis are a transnational ethnic group that lives in their ancestral homes in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Regardless of where Somalis reside, the cross, to this day, has a hallowed place among Somali Muslims.<sup>43</sup> The crosses observed by Richard Burton during his visit to the Sool and the Sanaag regions of

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<sup>37</sup> Miller, *The Hardest Place*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Abdurahman Moallim Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*, (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd. 2015), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Abdurahman Moallim Abdullahi, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)." (PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011), 116.

<sup>40</sup> The Mennonite Mission registered in Somalia as Somalia Mennonite Mission (SMM). See David W. Shenk, "A Study of the Mennonite Presence and Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970." (Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 3.

<sup>41</sup> More about the Modrickers, please see: Helen Miller. *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modricker*, (Guardian Books, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia*. 2015, 21.

<sup>43</sup> The cross very often used by Somali Muslims is a hybrid of the Greek, and the Latin crosses. The Greek cross has arms of equal length while Latin cross has a vertical beam that sticks above the crossbeam.

British Somaliland appear more Greek than Latin.<sup>44</sup> The Abyssinian Church which influenced the most in British Somaliland, uses a variety of crosses including the Greek and the Latin.<sup>45</sup> This Church also has selections of elaborate indigenous crosses.

Sada Mire, a Somali archeologist, describes the annual Aw-Barkhadle Muslim religious celebrations in present-day Somaliland, “People come to the site and paint a cross on their foreheads.”<sup>46</sup> Sada describes in Aw-Barkhadle “where there is at least one burial with stelae decorated with a Christian Orthodox cross in situ.”<sup>47</sup> Sada adds “Other Christian burials also exist across the country.”<sup>48</sup> Aw-Barkhadle is a Muslim shrine near Hargeisa, Somaliland.

Sada Mire, again describes Christian burial sites in Somaliland which demonstrate clear Abyssinian Christianity. This is not a surprise since ancient Abyssinia sometimes included areas currently deep into Somaliland including Hargeisa and Berbera:

There are also megalithic burials where the stones are arranged in a cross. The area of Dhuxun (62), in Saahil region, has many cruciform burials.... There are many isolated, single Christian burials, massive in their design.... Dhubato in the Hargeysa region and the Saahil area have many ancient Christian burials which are aligned as a cross. Sites such as Suuqsade...contain ancient Christian burials. There are also finds of Christian codices in Somaliland.<sup>49</sup>

*Madrassa* students in certain regions in the Somali peninsula traditionally receive a temporary cross on their foreheads or on both cheeks by their teacher as a symbol of blessing. The teacher uses a black ink, the same ink students use to write the Qur'an on their wooden tablets. This practice has been in decline in southern Somalia since the last twenty years because of radical Islam which objects to all practices it considers non-Islamic.

A bad episode of cholera hit Somalia in the early years of the 1970s. Many people lost their lives as the country was not equipped enough to handle such a huge medical emergency. Victims of cholera often died of dehydration. One ominous sign

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<sup>44</sup> Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, 318.

<sup>45</sup> The official name of this Monophysite Church is the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church (Amharic: የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን).

<sup>46</sup> Sada Mire, *Divine Fertility: The Continuity in Transformation of an Ideology of Sacred Kinship in Northeast Africa*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. UCL Institute of Archeology Publication. (Routledge, 2020), 26 - 30

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 26.

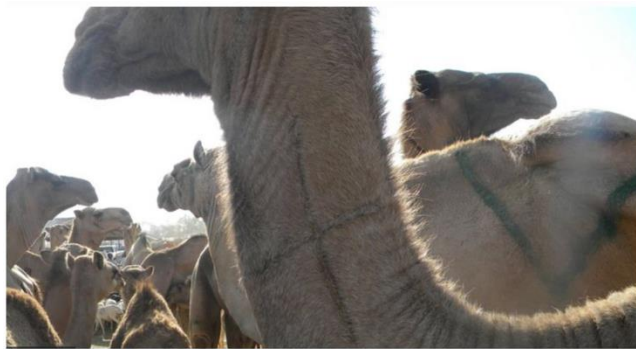
<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Sada Mire, “Mapping the Archaeology of Somaliland: Religion, Art, Script, Time, Urbanism, Trade and Empire.” *Afr Archaeol Rev* 32, 111–136 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-015-9184-9> (accessed 30 December 2020).



that a patient could die was when they developed pruned feet (*cago miin* in Somali). Muslim traditional healers would then burn a cruciform on the soles of the feet as that was believed to have a medicinal value. Many Somali Muslims who survived the cholera epidemic walk around today with cruciform on the sole of their feet. The era of this deadly cholera is known in Somalia as *Daacuunkii* (the cholera era) or *salaan diid* (the no handshake era).

It was very common in pre-civil war Somalia for metal gates to have crosses embedded in them for decoration. Another common practice in the Somali peninsula is that people who cannot read use a cross symbol to mark any possession they own so they can claim theirs when mixed with others. Crosses are therefore used for five different purposes: decoration, blessing, protection, healing, and identification. Identification crosses are like signatures; everyone has a unique way to draw their own cross. Sometimes what makes the difference is where the cross is placed or how many crosses are placed on one's possession like a sack of millet.



A Somali camel with a cruciform branding  
Photo credit: BBC Somali/Dr. Jaamac

Some Somali Muslim clans brand their livestock, especially camels and cattle, using the cross symbol. These clans include: The Hawiye sub clans of Murusade, Harti Abgaal, Isaaq Daa'uud, Sheekhaal, and Gaal Je'el. The Isaaq sub-clans of Ciida Gale, Habar Yonis, and Habar Je'lo, especially the sub-clans on the Haud Reserve area of the Somaliland-Ethiopia border. Some members of

the Abdalla and Mohammed Subeyr of the Ogaden sub-clan and few members of the Marehan sub clan, all of whom belong to the Darod clan, brand their camels and cattle using a cruciform.

## Epilogue

Christianity is not a stranger in the Somali peninsula. While Somali Muslims may have forgotten their Christian heritage, they still cling to Christian symbolisms in which the cross is of paramount importance. Somalis seem to have a subconscious awareness of their Christian roots and this may explain their excessive use of the cross for decoration, blessing, healing and identification purposes. The cross, the most recognizable symbol of the Christian faith, has shown resilience among Somali Muslims. Archeology has also demonstrated time and again that Christianity was once widely practiced in much of Somaliland, the only area in the Somali peninsula in which its archeology has been studied to some extent.

While Abyssinian Christianity left indelible footprints in the Somali peninsula, there are hardly any Somalis today who identify themselves as belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the biggest Christian denomination in Africa. Somali Christians have traditionally been either Roman Catholic or Protestant. The most prominent ethnic Somali Christians have historically been Roman Catholic. Why this is the case

is open to debate. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had only fifteen years of a head start before the first Protestant mission arrived. This negligible head start cannot explain the enviable fruits of the RCC in the Somali peninsula.

The Western missionary effort in the Somali peninsula revived the long-dormant Christianity among Somalis. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant mission organizations led many Somalis to the Lord, thus breaching the perceived hegemony of Islam on the Somalis. Four ministries will forever be remembered for their courage and sacrifice in bringing the Gospel to the Somali peninsula. These giants are: The Roman Catholic Church, Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church, the Mennonite Mission, and the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) which comprise the Magnificent Four in the Somali peninsula.

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### About the author

Aweis A. Ali, PhD, is a missiologist and an authority on the persecuted church in the Muslim world with special expertise on the Somali Church. Aweis was a co-pastor of a house church in Mogadishu, Somalia, in mid 1990s when 12 of its 14 members were martyred for their faith. Aweis, an ordained elder, has been ministering in the Muslim world since 1993; he has lived and served in world areas that include the Horn of Africa, East Africa, West Africa and the United States. Aweis earned a B.Th. degree from the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa; an M.Div. degree from Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri; and a PhD from Africa Nazarene University in Nairobi. Aweis' PhD thesis is titled, "Persecution of Christians and its Effect on Church Growth in Somalia." Aweis is the author, editor or translator of 8 books and a dozen articles. He is the founder and the Series Editor of the annual *Maansada Masiixa* (Anthology of Somali Christian Poetry.) Dr. Aweis can be reached at [amazingwisdom@gmail.com](mailto:amazingwisdom@gmail.com).