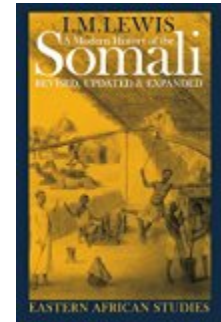


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I. M. Lewis. *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. vii + 347 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1495-8.

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A Paradoxical Gift

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Professor I. M. Lewis's fifty-year-long observation of Somali society has left us with a bequest that is at once informative and insightful yet misleadingly stereotypical. This brief review points out the values of this problematic offering to those interested in the evolution of Somalia and, most importantly, the Somalis themselves.

By sheer seniority and quantity of production, there is a consensus among scholars of Somali society that Lewis, along with the late and acutely missed B. W. Andrzejewski, is a founding and durable member of Somali studies in the English-speaking world. This volume, perhaps more than any of his other works, captures his crucial contribution and influence, as well as underscores the severe limitations of his *oeuvre*. Given the constraints of space, it is not possible to be comprehensive on either of the two accounts. Consequently, I will simply identify a few choice points that capture some of the credit and the liabilities. I will end with a comment on a sharp and accusatory assertion Lewis makes in the preface of his volume.

First, *A Modern History of the Somali* is laid out in eleven chapters that start with the landscape and the structures of social life; it concludes with the demise of the national state, the current time of dissolution, and the search for a new and workable post-Siyaad Barre existence. With the convenience of a portable volume, the work is typified by a highly compressed historical narrative.

Second, guided by the perspective of a social anthropologist, the framework that conditions, if not determines, the flow of analysis and, subsequently, the task of making meaning out of Somali lifeworlds is identity formation in the form of clan-belonging. This approach equips the reader with a seductive simplicity that ostensibly cuts quickly to the heart of what is at stake, no matter what other complexities might transpire. In short, to decipher any Somali context, a stranger need only ask the clan affiliations of the protagonists.

Third, *A Modern History of the Somali* gives particular attention to the evolution of the state and politics. This includes the formation of the post-colonial state, key individuals, and various regimes and their policies. Fourth, Lewis presents pithy observations on the personality of the longest-serving (over two decades) president of the Somali Republic, General Mohammed Siyaad Barre. Fifth, Lewis puts forth an unequivocal indictment of the incompetence of the United Nations's intervention in the early 1990s and the resultant waste of international resources. On the latter, he writes:

"Of the U.S. \$1.6 billion allocated for UNOSOM's military operations up to the end of 1993, a mere 4 percent was estimated to enter the Somali economy, mostly to the benefit of warlords and other operators and entrepreneurs. Thus, this inequitable distribution of indirect foreign 'foreign aid' was doubly destructive in the boost it gave to warlord activity. An even more disgraceful legacy of UNOSOM was the number of instances which later came to light of torture and human rights

abuses by the U.N. contingent forces.” (p. 280)

In terms of liabilities, the volume suffers from avoidable factual errors. For instance, the number of “Somali-speaking peoples” is at least twice the “four and a half million” that Lewis states in the first sentence of chapter 1. Despite the 2002 updating, this estimate is way off the mark. The Ogaden War with Ethiopia did not take place in 1974 (p. 300), but in 1977-78. The BBC Somali Service ceased to appoint a non-Somali speaker to monitor the “neutral news reporting” as early as the 1970s. Such a termination had little to do with saving money, and more with a growing professional integrity and competence of the Somali broadcasting staff. If there is a degeneration in this area, it is primarily part of the ramifications of the spread of the politics of decay in the late 1980s and subsequent civil strife. The May 31, 2001, “National Referendum” to “confirm Somaliland’s independence” was not “carefully prepared nor widely publicized” (p. 302). To the contrary, there was hardly any time and room for debate. More to the point, the process was intimidating and hurriedly arranged to the extent that a large and politically significant zone of the population (particularly in the East) refused to participate in both the referendum and the 2003 “presidential elections.”

Second, Lewis has always castigated non-anthropologists, with more venom towards fellow anthropologists with different approaches than his, for transgressing into what he deems to be his preserve. If that be the case, one must ask why Lewis has undertaken this project, an assignment, according to his rules of scholarly ownership, that must solely belong to historians. Moreover, Lewis’s history completely underplays the crueler and costlier colonial conquests, yet he goes out of his way to lambast, and rightly so, the corruption and ineptitude of the United Nations or Somali regimes.

Third, Lewis’s epistemology is monistic as well as static. This major deficiency amounts to one controlling factor, i.e., clan—and an extravagant essentialization of the coexistence of primordiality and violence in Somali history (pp. 263 and 308). For a work that sets for itself the task of mapping the contours of “A Modern History,” there is little attention paid to change. The exception is the appearance and departure of individuals in admittedly intriguing but episodic happenings. Those who care to avoid this liability may want to acquaint themselves with the useful and portable methodological instructions of Fernand Braudel.

Fourth, the volume makes no attempt to link up with the Africanist scholarly literature on such relevant topics

as decolonization, state formation, and communal strife. In this context, Rwanda, Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone come to mind. Furthermore, African Studies is also rich in analysis on forms of personal rule and its implications for governance and the ordering of social existence.

Fifth, Lewis’s interpretations are curiously partisan. Here, for example, Siyaad Barre is excoriated for his dictatorial appetite, while Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, known across the Somali territory for his unmatched malfeasance and animus towards anyone more educated or competent, is handled with a soft touch, if not outright affirmation (p. 284). In addition, Lewis is so sold on the “Somaliland” project that he maligns those Northerners who continue to hold on to their nationalist credo as cohorts driven by self-interest. On the other hand, chauvinistic regionalists bent on dismembering the Somali Republic are portrayed as honorable, and with the right cause to boot. But it was not always like this with Lewis’s work. Well into Siyaad Barre’s rule, Lewis produced essays that celebrated the new order and what he thought it portended. What is one to make of these drastically shifting optics?

Sixth, a volume as ambitious in scope and transdisciplinary as this cannot afford to avoid engaging, and hopefully constructively, the growing literature in Somali Studies. The works of Lee Cassanelli, Abdi Ismail Samatar, Lidwien Kapteijns, Ali Jimale Ahmed, Peter Little, and Catherine Besteman, among others, are absent. This point is important when some of these writings starkly challenge the ontological (units of reality) assumptions, epistemological operation and evidence, and societal implications of Lewis’s own thinking. Here, one might opine that one effect of these scholarly interventions is the possible loss of a significant part of unopposed profundity that characterized Lewis’s work for the better part of three decades.

Seventh, Lewis states in his preface: “Those who would impose their distorting Eurocentric ideological view of the world on Somali social phenomena, thus depriving them of originality and vitality are, in my view, engaged in an endeavor akin to racism” (p. viii). On the surface, this assertion conveys the impression of a scholar protective of the autonomy of people he cares about. Moreover, there is always the present danger of a perspective hatched in one cultural time imperiously landing on a different other. On this account, the indictment is noted. But there is another, perhaps even more pernicious approach—that is, one that at once denies Somalis access to the experience and wisdom of the rest of

the human race and, therefore, freezes Somalis into an exotic reality available only from the insights of a self-chosen guru.

To conclude, Somali society is enveloped by a complex contemporaneity whose pitiless coordinates seem to be perverted and crumbling traditions and institutions. This state of post-colonial rot is exemplified, and then

compounded, by the death of the national state and the collateral pursuit of feral personal utilities—all in a context of generalized maldevelopment and diminished reality. Consequently, Lewis's exclusive focus on a single and ostensibly eternal factor is incongruent with the methods and theories of social and historical studies. This volume, then, at its best, offers partial discernment; and, at its lowest, betrays superficiality and obsolescence.

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