



## An interview with Ali M. Ahad

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**Editor's note:** *Ali Mumin Ahad is a Somali scholar with multifaceted interests and a personal life story that brought him from Somalia to Italy, and now to Australia. Ali obtained his undergraduate degree in Economics at the Somali National University, and then moved to Italy where he earned his master's degree in agribusiness at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, in Milan. His doctorate was awarded by La Trobe University in Australia, while he now holds a position as Honorary Research Fellow at Melbourne University, Faculty of Arts. In his works, Ali focuses on Somali history, including colonialism, on literature, and on questions of migration and integration. He is the author of the book "Somali Oral Poetry and the Failed She-Camel Nation State: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Deelley Poetry Debate (1979-1980)", published in 2015. Ali is also an eminent voice of Italian post-colonial studies: his "I peccati storici del colonialismo" is a must-read for those interested in understanding the legacy of Italian colonialism in Somalia. Marco Zoppi has conducted this interview for WardheerNews.com, and wishes to thank Ali M. Ahad for his kind availability.*

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**Marco Zoppi:** Thanks for accepting our invitation, Ali M. Ahad. To kick off this interview, I would like to ask you a comment about the political situation in Somalia: the establishment of the Federal Government; the election of President Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" Mohamed; the attempt to rebuild a national army. What is your impression over the current developments in the Somali political context?

**Ali M. Ahad:** First of all it must be said that post-colonial State in Somalia was born with major flaws and in circumstances which have constrained its functioning. Some of these flaws are the inconsistency between the institutional model (derived from the modern nation State) and a society with an archaic social structure; the inadequacy and lack of preparation of a bureaucracy capable not only to administer the State, but also, and above all, loyal only to the State; the unpreparedness of a political class able to transform the tribal political culture into a culture of citizenship of the modern State; the low level of schooling of Somalis who have been practically denied education during the Italian colonial period, with all the imaginable consequences that ensued it; last but not least, the economic, financial and



political circumstances in which the new Italy (admittedly anti-fascist) assumed the Trusteeship Administration in the former Italian colony and without providing a real change of the administrative staff of the previous colonial period. Therefore, the post-colonial State is born with these defects that, taken together, have scuppered the first post-colonial Republic. Not only had that, but they then justified the rise to power of the military with the coup of 1969, since the tribal politics had prevailed over the State, transforming the multiparty system in sheer farce.

The next two decades saw the Somali military taking control of the State. Sometimes with laudable goals like transforming the Somali tribal society into a more civil society, according to the dictates of the modern State. The increase in schooling was one of the major achievements during the military regime. This and other accomplishments in the social and health sectors have elevated the image of Somalia in the world. However, the economic policy approach of nationalization of the economy and the pro-Soviet ideological address, drove the military regime toward dictatorship and a single party system. The dissatisfaction of the population towards the military regime began to manifest itself through a return to tribalism. Tribal politics, the same main factor that was one of the cause of the fall of the first parliamentary system, would also be the first cause of the fall of the military regime in 1991 and the civil war in Somalia.

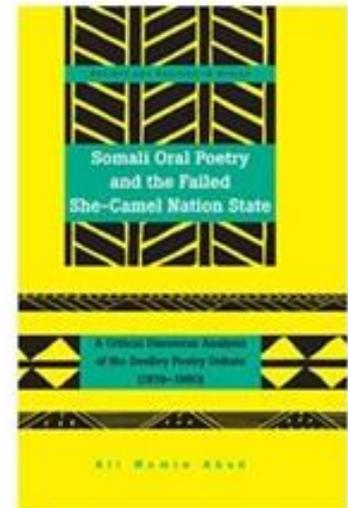
Having made this long circumstantial preamble over the birth and the collapse of the post-colonial State institutions, I now turn to federalism and the present state of affairs in Somalia. After the civil war, the main political ideology in Somalia is that of the tribal system for which the subject clan assumes overt political agency. In fact, Somali society, in the absence of a political culture based on nationality and citizenship, has self-managed its affairs according to rules and institutions of its colonial past (institutionalization of the tribal system) and pre-colonial past (traditional tribal norms and agreements, *xeer*). This absence of a political culture of citizenship, produced an understanding of federalism as that of tribal entities in which clans function as political parties. Despite this, the institutional framework must be reconstituted on new basis, albeit the current constitutive base of the Federal Parliament Assembly, in which the tribal system works as the main institutional component. The problem, however, remains that of reconciliation between, on the one hand, an institutional model based on nationality and on political party and, on the other hand, a social-institutional model founded on membership of blood (fictional or not). Just think of the power-sharing 4.5 criterion, which embodies the ideology of the tribal system, and for which social justice becomes mere aspiration (the civil and political consequences of that power-sharing criterion, I had already made it clear in 2000).

Although MPs were appointed each by members of their clan, the President of the Republic was elected by this tribal-national Assembly and gave people hope to establish a functioning government, because of his non-involvement in the civil war as well as his education and experience out of the country. However, he and his Federal Government (led by a prime minister with a new style of governance respect to his predecessors) have to face many difficulties such as providing basic public services, starting with public schools, justice in the court system, not only in the capital city, but extending to the regional states. That would develop people's trust and confidence in the State. At the same time, guaranteeing general security against an ideologically opposed movement that is difficult to uproot. Another important challenge his government has to overcome is the rebuilding of the national army which is not yet ready to completely replace the African contingents that have guaranteed the defence of the Government until now. From the point of view of training, the national army is not unified since different external States contribute to its

training. In addition, units are often formed by former militiamen from different clans, making it difficult to remove the clan tutelage, on the one hand and, the clan loyalty, on the other hand.

**Thanks for this insightful overview. You have often underlined the key complementary role of intellectuals for building national consciousness, reminding that Somali thinkers have been too silent in addressing issues of social interests. What are the most important socio-political questions that Somali intellectuals have not addressed properly in the past?**

**Ali M. Ahad:** The term intellectual has depreciated in the Somali language and is now used when referring to practically anyone. In the use I make of the word, I refer only to he or she who feels the responsibility for all, not for a particular group of people. I am thinking, above all, of those who make their ideas clear in writing; I refer to those who are able to read the ideas of others and respect them. Given this premise, I have to say that the Somali intellectual is overwhelmed by the orality that he undergoes uncritically. In doing so, he gives up his role, which consists in questioning everything; questions for which he is the first to seek answers. With his resignation from asking questions, the Somali intellectual becomes subservient to the various particular traditions, oral traditions that often are vehicles of myths and legends. Who nourishes himself from these myths, then unknowingly transmits them when he happens to speak. This happens almost all the time.



When the Somali intellectual is saved from the myth of orality, he is mesmerized and delivers himself to the myth of modernity into which he remains captive and blind to reality that surrounds him and for which it is expected that he should enlighten. When he has to express ideas regarding Somalia and how to fix its problems, it is only to refer to America and to Europe, to the Western democracies that he assumes can be transplanted, as they are, in Somalia, without taking into account differences, inconsistencies and incompatibilities. Even forgetting the centuries of history that were required to bring the Western democratic system that he refers to, to its current functioning.

Between these two extremes, the uncritical acceptance of the myths of local traditions and the blind submission to Western democracy, I think that the Somali intellectual must find a middle ground, and at least he must have the sense to see the reality before his eyes: a society that is writhing in the tribal cage with only clan-vision and clan interest. Although in his discovering of this more realistic path, the Somali intellectual must escape from both being organic to the clan and to the trap of tribal politics. Very often the silence of the Somali intellectual on serious matters of Somalia (social and political injustices, group discrimination, and corruption practices) is motivated by this organic unity to the clan or tribal group. In other cases, the silence is caused by individual circumstances of necessity that do not allow him to deal with public affairs.

**Are Somali intellectuals still silent today?**

**Ali M. Ahad:** Right now, there are some Somali intellectuals who have broken the silence. Most of them are in academia, out of the country, but their ideas and their analysis of Somali society and its problems are followed in Somalia and in the diaspora. If I were to name some names, I would start

by Ali Jimale Ahmed, who had edited that seminal volume which is *The Invention of Somalia*, back in 1995, in which a large number of Somali intellectuals had contributed. I would mention the sociological analysis of Abdi Mohamed Kusow, the important work of the brothers Mohamed Abdulkadir Eno and Omar Abdulkadir Eno on discrimination (a subject long taboo in Somalia), the work of Abdalla Omar Mansur on Somali genealogy fabrication (already in the 1980s), Mohamed Haji Mukhtar whose work revealed to the world the plight suffered by the mostly agriculturalist Southerners during the civil war, and my own contributions since 1993 on the role of colonialism in the creation of racial discrimination in Somalia. This is to say that there are Somali intellectuals who are engaged in rectifications of historical and anthropological “errors” to which colonialism had greatly contributed. Among them, a young generation of historians like Mohamed Haji Ingiriis who are contributing to these efforts. In addition, it is important to not forget intellectuals like Afyare Elmi and Abukar Arman that, with their political analyses of current events in Somalia, help the public to better understand the national policy.

**In the light of what you have just said, one thing that both Somali and non-Somali thinkers have pointed out many times in the last decades, is that Somali territories need an institutional and governance model that can suit better their socio-economic contexts. That is to say, the nation-state modelled after European experiences is not working effectively in Somalia, as in many parts of Africa. Do you think that national and international actors involved in Somalia have been receptive to this argument?**

**Ali M. Ahad:** As in my answer on the role of Somali intellectuals, only a few of them are asking themselves the question of how to better institutionalize the Somali state. My hope is that some of them are involved in the present process of Somali institution building. The majority, in my opinion, are receptive to the modern state institution framework, that is, the balance and check of three powers as the universal model. The International community also sees this framework kindly and this is what was put in place in Mogadishu. A bicameral Parliament, a Government and a Judiciary system (still not completed). Only that the Parliament is representative of tribal unities (clan), the choice of the President to be elected takes place according to a Somali *Cencelli Manual*\* as well as the Prime Minister designated by him. The Cabinet of Ministers is nominated on the basis of a negotiation between the clans and the President elected by Parliament (with the lion share attributed to the major or influential clans). It is probable that the absence of political parties makes this state of affairs necessary. However, it would also be questionable if the future Somali political parties will be organized in a way that is different from the clan based policy. Will importance be attributed to the people who manage them or to the programs? The case of Somaliland is eloquent. In Somalia, legislation for the formation of political parties was approved by Parliament. Now we only have to see when the political parties will make their appearance.

\* (ed. an Italian expression that goes under the name of its supposed initiator, referring to the political practice of distributing positions among factions according to the influence they are able to exert)

**Now, let us look at another important means through which politics becomes manifest. It is known that oral communication is essential and prevalent among the Somalis, who are particularly fond of poetry Intellectuals too, use poetry to articulate and convey thoughts and ideas within the society. You have recently published a book titled [Somali Oral Poetry and the Failed She-Camel Nation State](#), where you engage in the analysis of the Deelley poetry debate**

## **in 1979-80: what was most surprising for you to find out about Somali poetry and its socio-political function?**

**Ali M. Ahad:** Poetry is all about feelings. Human feelings that are usually expressed and conveyed through words. Every human being is capable of creating poetry as it is capable of feeling emotions. The difference between a person and the other lies in more or less the ability to communicate with others through adequate words. Said in another way, the ability to forge the words that better contain the feelings that they should convey. Human feelings are linked to the most various circumstances, conditions and moods. Usually these are beyond our control, apart from the circumstances that we can help to create.

In the case of Somalis, the historical and environmental conditions have created provisions and moods that make it easier to modulate their feelings through words, creating poetry. Adverse conditions and harsh environments create, in their interaction, a variety of feelings like distress, wonder, scarcity, abundance, pride, challenge, conflict, grievance, rivalry, vengeance, argumentation, peace, reflection and love, etc. The *topoi* of Somali poetry are always these. Now, in the specific case of the poems of Deelley, they are arguments among poets in a form similar to debate, an exchange of ideas among poets on problems concerning tribalism (the ideology of the tribal system), the Government of the country, leadership, national politics and whether or not a replacement of the leadership of the country has to be enacted.

The most astounding thing, for he who deeply analyses the interaction between participants through the poetic language, is not just the actual controversy among poets, but the link between the current poetic debate and disputes between the respective groups to which the poets would belong. This fact implies, peculiarly, the formation of a discourse that covertly circumscribes being Somali only to those who practice nomadic herding. This is a hegemonic articulation of identity (which also is not apparent to the individual participants of the poetic debate) at the expense of other important components of the Somali national society that the book unveils. Moreover, that in the Deelley poems, “through discursive practice, both tribal and national identities are ideologically created, stimulated and recreated.”

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*Marco Zoppi is wardheerNews contributor, and a PhD Fellow at [Roskilde University](#), Denmark. Marco's research interest focuses on the questions of social security and practices of welfare among the Somalis living in Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway.)*